Looking at chimp's future, seeing man's

June 14 2013, by Alvin Powell

“The threats to chimpanzees are, of course, enormous. The loss of forest is too fast to estimate well,” said Harvard Professor Richard Wrangham. He and Elizabeth Ross, founder and executive director of the Kasiisi Project in Uganda, described in a Harvard talk the difficult present for chimpanzees in Uganda’s Kibale National Park, their potentially bleak future, and the sources of hope. Credit: Jon Chase/Harvard Staff Photographer

When researcher Richard Wrangham looks at the future of chimpanzees, he sees people.

Though scientists like him have invested decades in understanding the apes, and Western conservationists and activists have raised money and agitated to safeguard them, it is clear that it will be the people who live closest to the chimps—in ever-increasing numbers—who will determine the animal's future.

Wrangham, the Ruth B. Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology, and Elizabeth Ross, founder and executive director of the Kasiisi Project in Uganda, last Thursday described the difficult present for chimpanzees in Uganda's Kibale National Park, their potentially bleak future, and the sources of hope.

With half of the people younger than 15, Uganda's already dense rural population is set to explode. The nation, which had just 5 million people in 1950, is estimated to have 33 million now, and projections say it will have nearly 100 million by 2050.

As the numbers skyrocket, so will the demand for resources like meat and firewood from forests such as that at Kibale. In addition, Wrangham said, the recent discovery of oil near Lake Albert on the Ugandan border could prompt an influx of money and influence that may make demands for the forests' resources difficult to ignore.

"The threats to chimpanzees are, of course, enormous. The loss of forest is too fast to estimate well," Wrangham said.

Wrangham and Ross, who are married and co-masters of Currier House, spoke at Harvard's Geological Lecture Hall at an event sponsored by the Harvard Museum of Natural History and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, both part of the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture.

Wrangham has studied chimpanzees in Kibale for decades. He has

followed a population of about 50, out of the forest's estimated population of more than 1,000, publishing findings on chimpanzee aggression, culture, and the implications such findings have for their human cousins, such as the importance of cooking in early human evolution.

"We can now get extraordinarily intimate with them," Wrangham said.

In addition to its studies, the Kibale Chimpanzee Project has begun several initiatives to help conserve and protect the animals and to help the people who live around the park. They've encouraged ecotourism as a way to bring income to the local people, and have a snare removal team, which sometimes takes 20 to 30 snares a day from the forest.

Poaching is a major threat to the forest's chimpanzee population, Wrangham said. Though the people around the park don't eat chimpanzee meat, they do hunt in the park for antelope and set snares around their farms to catch marauding pigs. Chimpanzees caught in the snares are often strong enough to pull them up and escape, but the snares dig deep into their flesh and wires can remain there, often costing the animal a hand or a foot, sometimes after months or even years of pain. Wrangham's slideshow included images of chimps that had been snared multiple times, including several that had lost hands and one that had lost both feet.

Forest researchers are sometimes able to tranquilize snared chimps and remove the wire, which can spark dramatic recovery. Wrangham said the snares often catch juvenile chimps, because mothers are careful to avoid the snares and young chimps follow in their mothers' footsteps. When the chimps get older, though, they range in front of their mothers, often falling victim to the snares.

Wrangham held up the Kasiisi Project, begun by Ross in 1997, as a

hopeful way forward. The project provides a wide array of assistance to schools within 3 miles of the park, with the aim of improving education, raising awareness of the forest and of chimpanzees, and instilling a conservation ethic within a generation that may determine the future of the forest and the chimpanzees to which it is home.

The project, which serves 14 primary schools with nearly 10,000 children, provides a variety of resources. In addition to conservation education, it also constructs school buildings, supports teachers, pays for school lunches, provides scholarships and health education, supports girls' education, and provides laptops through the nonprofit program One Laptop per Child.

Kasiisi has ongoing demonstration projects for sustainable agriculture and waste management, including a bio-gas digester to provide an alternative fuel to firewood for cooking school lunches.

"Anything that you can do in a primary school, we will do it," Ross said.

Though much has been done, studies of children's attitudes toward chimpanzees show that more work remains. One study of 350 children said that about half of them viewed the animals negatively, and half positively. A further examination of the negative attitudes shows that children's biggest concern about the animals is aggression, followed by chimps' raids on crops.

A small number, 7 percent, view the animals as a hunting target or a source for food. That last result puzzles Ross, because the people around Kibale don't consider primates a food source. She speculated that the result might reflect an influx of people from the Congo, where people do eat primates.

Ross and Wrangham emphasized that the involvement of local partners

has been critical to the project's success and will be even more critical to its future. The schools involved with the project have outperformed other area schools, Ross said, with some students going on to a university education. When they return, their leadership will be a critical factor in the future of the chimpanzee and their forest home.

"You can see individual successes and reason for hope, but the big picture is alarming," Wrangham said. "We are an extremely lucky species to be on Earth at the same time as the great apes."

This story is published courtesy of the Harvard Gazette*, Harvard University's official newspaper. For additional university news, visit* Harvard.edu.

Provided by Harvard University

Citation: Looking at chimp's future, seeing man's (2013, June 14) retrieved 28 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-06-chimp-future.html