

# Cross River gorillas to benefit from new protected area in Cameroon

14 October 2014, by Sarah Rakowski



To tackle the many threats to the Cross River gorilla and reverse its precipitous decline, experts met in 2006 to develop a conservation action plan.

One of the priority actions identified in the plan was the need for better habitat protection – particularly in Cameroon, where the majority of Cross River gorillas were living outside protected areas.

Since then, the Government of Cameroon has declared two other gorilla reserves: Kagwene Gorilla Sanctuary and Takamanda National Park. The designation of the Tofala Hill Wildlife Sanctuary brings the total up to three, and is an important step in the right direction.

The Prime Minister of Cameroon has signed a decree to officially create the Tofala Hill Wildlife Sanctuary in the south-west of the country – great news for Africa's most threatened great ape, the Cross River gorilla.

## The long road to conservation

The Cross River originates in Cameroon and flows into Nigeria, passing through swampy rainforest on its way to the ocean.

Scientists first became aware of gorillas in this region in the early 20th Century, but many feared they had been driven to extinction during the 1960s Nigerian conflict. In the 1980s, however, small groups were rediscovered, and for the first time they began to attract serious conservation attention.

Despite these early efforts, numbers in the wild remain low and restricted to small pockets of habitat – primarily rugged highland areas, where hunting pressure is lower. These habitat patches are surrounded by some of the most densely populated human settlements in Africa, and are becoming increasingly degraded and fragmented.

## Plan of action



Cross River gorilla. Credit: Arend de Haas, African Conservation Foundation

## Shared forests

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has been working in the Tofala-Mone Forest Landscape since 2004, and through its support of local partner Environment and Rural Development Foundation

(ERuDeF) played an important role in the rediscovery of a sub-population of Cross River gorillas in the area and the designation of the new protected area.

Before the declaration, gorilla habitat in the Tofala-Mone landscape was subject to communal forest laws, which allowed the land to be converted for any use other than forestry.

While the designation of the Tofala Hill Wildlife Sanctuary provides much-needed protection for the Cross River gorillas, it is important to ensure that indigenous, forest-dependent communities do not suffer as a result.

Therefore, alongside biodiversity monitoring and anti-poaching activities, a critical part of the preparatory work for the protected area has been to involve local people in its design, and to help them find sustainable ways to earn a living.

The designation is an important milestone for Cross River gorilla conservation, but much remains to be done. It is imperative that the official creation of the protected area results in action on the ground and FFI will continue to work until the Cross River gorillas are protected.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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