

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



Seventy-seventh meeting of the Standing Committee
Geneva (Switzerland), 6–10 November 2023

Illegal trade and enforcement

ILLEGAL TRADE IN AFRICAN GREAT APES
(GORILLA GORILLA, GORILLA BERINGEI, PAN TROGLODYTES AND PAN PANISCUS)

1. This document has been submitted by Liberia.*

Background on the history of CITES activities

2. All species of African great apes are included in CITES Appendix I and are classified as Endangered or Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.
3. CITES is the principal multilateral environmental agreement that tackles the international trade in great apes, resulting in previous, longstanding efforts to conserve the species including through international enforcement operations, trainings, workshops and the CITES Great Ape Enforcement Task Force. African great apes also come under the purview of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS): Gorillas are listed in Appendix I and since 2008 have been protected under the Gorilla Agreement, a legally binding treaty negotiated between the 10 range States; chimpanzees are listed in CMS Appendix I and II. According to the Convention, Parties that are a Range State to a migratory species listed in Appendix I shall endeavour to strictly protect them by prohibiting the taking of such species with very restricted scope for exceptions. CMS Appendix II covers migratory species that require international agreements for their conservation and management.
4. Concerns about poaching of and illegal trade in great apes and their specimens led to the development and adoption of Resolution Conf.13.4 (2004, CoP13, Bangkok) proposed by Ireland on behalf of the European Union, directing the Standing Committee to review the implementation of the Resolution and report to each meeting of the Conference of the Parties with any recommendations for further action.
5. At SC53 (2005, Geneva, Switzerland) the Standing Committee instructed the Secretariat to convene a CITES Great Ape Enforcement Task Force composed of great ape range and consumer States.¹
6. The Task Force met in Gigiri, Kenya from 31 October to 2 November 2006 with funding provided by the Government of the United Kingdom. It recognized the lack of information about the nature of trade in great apes, and agreed to distribute a country profile form to collect data through CITES, the Great Ape Survival Partnership (GRASP), Interpol, and the World Customs Organisation (WCO), with the data being analyzed by the CITES Secretariat.²

* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

¹ SC53 Summary Record. Paragraph 18.

² Notification No.2006/070 including the Annex.

7. The Task Force agreed that capacity building for law enforcement officials was needed and recommended that awareness raising posters should be distributed to customs, police and wildlife offices.³ The CITES Secretariat subsequently obtained funding from CITES observer organisation Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) and other NGOs for the production of the poster.⁴ Considering the importance of awareness for transit and destination countries involved in the trade in African great apes, an Arab language version of the poster was displayed with funding by an observer organization during the 58th meeting of the Standing Committee.⁵
8. In 2011, between January 24 and February 6, Operation GAPIN (Great Apes and Integrity), led by the WCO, was conducted with funding from the Swedish government. The operation was launched in 14 African countries and supported by customs in 23 European and Asian countries, resulting in 99 seizures consisting of items with a total weight of more than 22 tonnes and 13,000 specimens of protected wildlife from over 31 species. No great apes were seized during the operation likely due to the fact that most of the countries participating in the operation were not African great ape range States and that the trafficking of great apes did not occur on a daily basis. Valuable findings included identification of several trafficking routes, the important role of customs in transit countries, and the need to strengthen follow-up investigation and the use of controlled delivery techniques by customs. The CITES Secretariat assisted with the training for customs officers. Great ape identification materials were distributed, drawing upon the previous work of the CITES Great Ape Enforcement Task Force.⁶
9. In January 2012 the Swedish government and the government of Tanzania, in collaboration with the CITES Secretariat and the WCO, organized a roundtable in Dar es Salaam on how to prevent and combat illegal trade in endangered species, which considered possibilities for future collaboration with a particular focus on great apes. Participants included representatives of The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), GRASP, PASA, WWF, and other expert organizations.⁷ Later that year, funding from the European Commission enabled the CITES Secretariat to participate in a Project GAPIN II seminar held in Kampala, Uganda, hosted by the WCO in cooperation with the Uganda Revenue Authority.⁸ With funding from the Swedish government, Project GAPIN II also organized a series of workshops for customs officers in 2012. One was held at Zurich airport in Switzerland in June that year for French-speaking airport customs officers from seven African countries, one in Durban, South Africa in August for seaports customs officers from 12 African countries, and one in September at Brussels airport for English speaking airport customs officers.⁹
10. The 65th meeting of the Standing Committee in 2014 noted that an integrated approach involving law enforcement, local communities, and decision-makers, supported by appropriate funding and other resources, was required to effectively address the threats affecting great apes. SC65 also acknowledged that sanctuaries can be important sources of information on habitat loss, disease, and illegal trade. The Committee noted that their role could be further explored.¹⁰
11. During SC74 in Lyon, France, in 2022, several African range States provided interventions expressing concerns about the illegal trade in great apes and their commitment to combat the illegal trade. Gabon suggested that the Standing Committee prepare a draft decision for CoP19 directing the Secretariat to seek collaboration with other MEAs. The Standing Committee chair suggested that that the conservation of great apes could be highlighted as a priority area in broader work on partnership and synergies with other MEAs.¹¹ However, no recommendations were submitted to the 19th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP19).
12. CoP19 in Panama was the first CITES CoP in 22 years that did not have a dedicated agenda item on great apes. In lieu of the lack of a working document on great apes, the United States submitted [Inf.Doc. 85](#) on the illegal trade in great apes.

³ CoP14 Doc.50.

⁴ SC57 Doc.30.

⁵ SC58 Summary Record.

⁶ SC61 Doc.40.

⁷ SC62 Doc.42.

⁸ CoP16 Doc.49.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ SC65 Doc.37.

¹¹ SC74 SumRec.

Illegal trade in African great apes

13. The illegal trade in African great apes, both live animals and their carcasses and body parts, continues to occur within source, transit, and destination countries, threatening the survival of populations and species, and undermining law enforcement and conservation efforts.
14. One of the biggest threats to the survival of the African great ape is the loss of habitat. Resolution Conf. 13.4 (Rev.CoP18) takes note of this significant concern and urges actors in the energy, extractives, and agricultural sectors to apply best practice guidelines in minimizing impacts on great ape populations and habitats.
15. A 2013 rapid response assessment report by GRASP, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and UNESCO revealed numerous cases of organized illegal trafficking and trade of great apes, warning that “the illegal trade in great apes mirrors the recent spike in elephant and rhino poaching, as well as the rise in illegal logging.”¹² The report documented that at least 643 chimpanzees, 48 bonobos and 98 gorillas had been trafficked from the wild between 2005 and 2011. Extrapolation estimates suggest that during that period, an average of 2,021 chimpanzees, 150 bonobos, and 420 gorillas were lost each year through illegal hunting and trade.¹³
16. Wildlife NGOs in Africa such as the Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement (EAGLE) network, ConservCongo, and APPACOL-PRN regularly seize illegally traded great ape parts and live animals. In 2022, 10 primate traffickers were arrested, and three chimpanzees were confiscated as a result of EAGLE operations.¹⁴ Since 2016 EAGLE has seized 58 great ape skulls.
17. Given the covert nature of illegal trade, it is difficult to know the full extent and value of the illegal trade in African great apes. One study estimated that the average annual value of the international market for live infants and juveniles may be US\$2.1 million-US\$8.8 million, while the domestic market for wild ape meat in Africa may be worth as much as USD\$6 million annually.¹⁵
18. A recent report suggests that local prices for live great apes in rural areas have remained stable over the past decade at approximately USD\$25 to USD\$270 per individual, depending on the species. However, current export and import prices of the illegally traded animals have more than doubled since 2016 with the lowest recorded at US\$135 for a chimpanzee and the highest at USD\$10,000. At the end buyer level, a live chimpanzee without CITES permits can command USD\$50,000, and \$100,000 with fraudulent permits.¹⁶
19. One indirect indicator of illegal trade is the influx of rescued apes at wildlife sanctuaries. In 2021, PASA member organizations across 13 African countries rescued 400 animals including 32 great apes and 150 other primates.¹⁷ In 2022 PASA members rescued 50 African great apes, a substantial increase from 2021.¹⁸
20. On average PASA members collectively care for more than 3,200 rescued wild animals every year including more than 1,300 great apes.¹⁹ These numbers do not include the animals rescued by non-PASA members or the deaths prior to, during or shortly after the rescues due to the fragile or injurious condition of the trafficked animals.
21. In September 2022, three baby chimpanzees rescued from the illegal trade were stolen from a primate sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the first time that live great apes in a sanctuary were

¹² Stiles, D., Redmond, I., Cress, D., Nellemann, C., Formo, R.K. (eds). 2013. *Stolen Apes – The Illicit Trade in Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Bonobos and Orangutans. A Rapid Response Assessment. United Nations Environment Programme, GRID-Arendal.* www.grida.no

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 2022 EAGLE annual report.

¹⁵ *Illicit Financial Flows and the Illegal Trade in Great Apes. 2018. Global Financial Integrity.*

¹⁶ Stiles, D., *Empty Forests: How politics, economics and corruption fuel live great ape trafficking. 2023. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.*

¹⁷ PASA 2021 Census Report. <https://pasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PASA-CLIMATE-CRISIS-REPORT.pdf>

¹⁸ PASA (personal communication, July 25, 2023)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

targeted by criminals.²⁰ The criminals subsequently demanded a ransom. No ransom was paid and there is still no news about the fate of the animals or the whereabouts of the criminals.

22. The number of confiscated and rescued animals at wildlife sanctuaries typically represents a small fraction of the animals taken from the wild and trafficked live or killed for their body parts. It is estimated that anywhere from one to fifteen great apes die for each live specimen obtained for the illegal trade.²¹ One study estimated that for every infant arriving at a sanctuary, 10 chimpanzees are killed in the wild.²² Law enforcement experts estimate that no more than 10 percent of all contraband is seized, suggesting that the majority of trafficked apes reach their destination undetected.²³
23. Resolution Conf.13.4 (Rev. CoP18) paragraph 1. g) urges all Parties to “be vigilant and strictly adhere to the provisions of the Convention regarding any proposed trade in wild-caught or allegedly captive-bred live specimens of great apes.” Serious concerns have been expressed about the international trade in allegedly captive-bred chimpanzees. In 2019 it was reported²⁴ that South Africa exported 18 chimpanzees to zoos in China where demand is high.²⁵ South Africa is not a chimpanzee range State and there is no CITES registered captive breeding facility for chimpanzees in the country. No stud book is available to verify the legal acquisition or origin of the animals.²⁶ Wildlife investigators reported that the owner of a South African wildlife park offered six chimpanzees for sale at USD\$95,000 each according to a report released in 2023.²⁷
24. News reports highlight African great apes kept in captivity in private facilities or held by private citizens in several countries in the Middle East and South Asia despite no records in UNEP-WCMC detailing such imports since 2012.²⁸
25. Social media plays a major role in perpetuating market demand for live African great apes. Influencers, private commercial zoos, and traders display and advertise live apes on their accounts, and platforms such as WhatsApp are used to broker illegal transactions. Between 2015 and 2022, close to 600 trafficked great apes in 17 countries were observed on online forums by wildlife investigators.²⁹
26. Despite their CITES listing, the development of a specific CITES Resolution, and associated CITES Decisions and activities, trade in and international trafficking of African great apes continue at unsustainable levels, weakening the implementation of Resolution Conf.13.4 (Rev.CoP18) and threatening the survival of African great ape species. It is therefore critical that CITES considers further actions it can take to address this conservation challenge.

Recommendations

27. The Standing Committee is invited, in accordance with RC13.4 (Rev.CoP18), to:
 - a) review the information in this document;
 - b) review the draft decisions contained in Annex 1 and the proposed changes to RC13.4 (Rev. CoP18) in Annex 2 of the present document and consider recommending them for adoption by the Conference of the Parties at its 20th meeting (CoP20).

²⁰ [3 Chimpanzees Kidnapped for Ransom From Congo ... The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com › chimps-kidnapping-congo \(google.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com › chimps-kidnapping-congo (google.com))

²¹ Nellemann, C., Redmond, I., Refisch, J. 2010. *The Last Stand of the Gorilla – Environmental Crime and Conflict in the Congo Basin. A Rapid Response Assessment.* UNEP, GRID-Rendal.

²² Sonner, S., Ross, C., *Primates of Gashaka: Sociology and Conservation in Nigeria's Biodiversity Hotspot.* Chapter 14.

²³ Stiles, D. et al. 2013. p.35.

²⁴ [South Africa's Live Wild Animal Trade to China Exposed | Environment News Service \(ENS\) \(ens-newswire.com\)](https://4apes.com/news/ape-alliance/item/1614-new-ape-alliance-report-on-chimpanzees-in-chinese-captive-wild-animal-facilities)

²⁵ <https://4apes.com/news/ape-alliance/item/1614-new-ape-alliance-report-on-chimpanzees-in-chinese-captive-wild-animal-facilities>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Stiles., D. 2023.

²⁸ Manno's substack: <https://manno.substack.com/> (accessed July 27, 2023)

²⁹ *Ibid.*

DRAFT DECISIONS OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

Directed to the Secretariat

- 20.AA The Secretariat shall, subject to external funding,
- a) re-establish and convene the CITES African Great Apes Task Force consisting of representatives of range, transit and consumer States affected by poaching and illicit trafficking in such specimens (bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas), non-range States whose territories have commercial or unaccredited facilities or individuals with African great apes in captivity, GRASP, ICCWC partner organizations, representatives from African great ape rehabilitation centres and sanctuaries, and other relevant experts;
 - b) assist the Task Force in reviewing the implementation of RC13.4 (Rev. CoP18) and the identification of gaps and current needs of range, transit and consumer states affected by the illegal trade in African great apes, including the development of concrete strategies with other relevant multilateral environmental agreements, such as specific outreach to actors in the energy, extractive, and agricultural sectors, to minimize impacts on great ape populations and habitats in line with the 2005 Kinshasa Declaration on Great Apes;
 - c) report on the work and recommendations of the Task Force no later than the 81st meeting of the Standing Committee (SC81).

Directed to the Standing Committee

- 20.BB In consultation with the Animals Committee, develop Terms of Reference for the CITES Great Apes Task Force

Directed to Parties

- 20.CC Parties affected by illegal trade in African great apes are encouraged to report on the implementation of Resolution Conf.13.4 (Rev.CoP18) and pursue joint investigations and operations aimed at halting the international trafficking of African great apes.

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO RESOLUTION CONF.13.4 (REV.COP18) ON
CONSERVATION AND TRADE IN GREAT APES

The following new provisions in underlined text are proposed for inclusion in the resolution:

Operative section

THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION

7. CALLS UPON all governments, intergovernmental organizations, international aid agencies, non governmental organizations and other donors, as a matter of urgency, to assist the range States in any way possible in supporting the conservation of great apes including through:
- a) the provision of funding;
 - b) assistance with enforcement, training, capacity building and education;
 - c) population monitoring, and the gathering and exchange of scientific, technical and legal information and expertise;
 - d) habitat management and restoration;
 - e) mitigation of conflict between humans and apes in a manner that conserves in situ viable ape populations and habitat;
 - f) the development of projects and African great ape species specific national and regional Action Plans which deliver tangible benefits to local communities such as studies on alternative sources of protein and monitoring the efficacy of such alternatives;
 - g) the development and utilization of technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) facial recognition to build a global database of captive great apes and wild great apes monitored by camera traps, and a DNA database to facilitate the geolocalization of the wild origin of confiscated animals;
 - h) sustainable livelihoods and habitats restoration projects for fringe communities residing around Protected Areas, Community Conservation Areas and other landscapes in range States, to enable and incentivise continued protection and management of African great ape populations;
 - i) support of range States' One Health Program for prevention and mitigation of zoonotic diseases;
 - j) short, medium, and long term strategies to ensure that accredited ape sanctuaries adhere to high operational standards including sustainability and that the welfare of the rescued African great apes remains a priority in the conservation of the species.