

Chapter 5

Chimpanzee Conservation and Theatre: A Case Study of an Awareness Project Around the Taï National Park, Côte d'Ivoire

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1. Introduction

Do educational activities designed to increase awareness of wildlife and conservation issues actually lead to behavioral changes that promote conservation and protect wild populations? For the most part, this question remains unanswered for a variety of reasons. Evaluations of educational programs are often not conducted and, when they are, results addressing behavioral change are rarely included or are unclear. For example, the relationship between changes in knowledge and attitudes that often accompanies educational programs and changes in conservation-related behavior is not well understood (Stoinski *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, in many field situations, conservation activities are often multifaceted, and thus it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of individual components on changes in human practices (Oates, 1999). Specifically, gaining information on the effectiveness of educational activities aimed to influence the local population is important, as local support is mandatory for the long-term success of conservation programs.

We present here an assessment of an educational program that occurred in villages around the Taï National Park, Côte d'Ivoire. The focus of the program was a play performed by the company "Ymako Teatri" and organized by the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, a nonprofit organization created to address issues related to the decline of chimpanzee populations. The play focused on the problems related to the co-existence of chimpanzees and humans and was designed to confront the people with a serious conservation concern, namely, the threat to chimpanzee survival, in an original, attractive, and lively approach. Because theater had not been used before in this region of Africa to communicate conservation messages to the local population, the efficiency of the program was assessed through an independent evaluation done before and after the performances.

The chimpanzee is our closest living relative on earth and is strikingly similar to humans with respect to its natural biology, behavior, and cognitive capacities (Jones *et al.*, 1992; Tomasello and Call, 1997; Boesch and Boesch-Achermann, 2000). Recent results reveal chimpanzees and humans share many sophisticated abilities, such as tool use and tool making, cooperative hunting, empathy, and the understanding of others' knowledge and beliefs (Goodall, 1986; Boesch and Boesch-Achermann, 2000; Hare *et al.*, 2000, 2001). Despite such similarities, chimpanzee populations are threatened throughout the African tropical belt from Tanzania to Senegal. Chimpanzees are listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List (IUCN, 2002), and have already gone extinct within the last 40 years in 5 of the 22 countries of their original distribution (Teleki, 1989; Kormos and Boesch, 2003).

Christophe and Hedwige Boesch have been studying the chimpanzees of the Taï National Park, Côte d'Ivoire, since 1979, documenting the unique abilities and social complexities of this population (for a complete list of references see Boesch and Boesch-Achermann, 2000). Through contact with the local people, it became obvious that their knowledge about chimpanzees was very limited, but at the same time they were fascinated by the exceptional abilities of this species. Thus, the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation developed an awareness program aimed at informing local people about the plight of the chimpanzee. Because of the attraction of humans to theatric representations of life situations, particularly in societies with oral traditions, we decided to use a play as one of our first methods of communication with the local community (Farmer and Courage, Chapter 3, this volume). Theater seemed a promising way to improve the perception of the chimpanzee and to address the issue of its coexistence with the local human population.

The company Ymako Teatri, located in Abidjan, seemed well suited for this project. They had a history of presenting plays to villagers in several West African countries focused on real-life themes, such as the consumption of drugs, AIDS, religious sects, and the position of women in society. We decided the message of the play would be "chimpanzees are our cousins in the forest, do not kill them." This theme was based on the fact that, in forest regions extending from Liberia to the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are some families who believe they are related to chimpanzees because of dramatic events that occurred in the past and, thus, do not kill them. This tradition of keeping a "totem" is still very active in most villages and was a key concept of the play.

To develop a theme that would be both convincing and attractive to the local populations, Claude Gnakouri and Luis Marques, the directors of Ymako Teatri, visited the chimpanzees of Taï National Park to develop an understanding of chimpanzee behavior and motion. Additionally, they visited nearby villages to obtain detailed information from the local people on the problems related to the killing of chimpanzees and the destruction of the forest.

The structure of the play was a mixture of theatric actions, mimes, dances, music, and songs. Repeated consultations with people, dancers, and musicians living in the target region were done to select locally appealing music and songs, which were then adapted to the purpose of the play. The play consisted of different

scenes lasting approximately 45 minutes and included lyrics and dances that reiterated the overall message of chimpanzees and humans as cousins. The play was presented in French, but phrases in local dialects were embedded throughout.

Ymako Teatri used the “forum” format whereby the play was built to reach an intense conflict between the protagonists. At that moment, the play was interrupted and the audience was asked to give its opinion on how the situation should be resolved. The response of the audience decided the outcome of the play. If their response conflicted with the main message, the play was finished accordingly but with the original message being reinforced. For example, in the single village that said that eating chimpanzees was normal, the actors reinforced the message about sparing the chimpanzee’s life because they are our cousins. Once the play was over, staff of the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation led a discussion with the public, answering the questions raised by the play.

2. Content of the Play

2.1. *Protagonists*

- *The hunter family*: They are having a funeral in the village, where all the families will be present, but there is no meat in the kitchen. The wife threatens to leave her husband, Zaipodo, if he does not provide her with meat immediately. She is not going to face the shame of having guests and no meat to offer. An uncle supports her, and Zaipodo, who wishes to respect the law, has no choice but to go on a hunt illegally in the nearby national park.
- *The Oussé family*: This family lives in the same village as the hunter family but considers itself to be related to the chimpanzees because in the past one of the daughters went into labor alone in the forest. She and the baby survived through the assistance of a big male chimpanzee. To show its gratitude, the family decided to take the chimpanzee as a totem and to respect as a family member. The yearly ceremony to commemorate this event is performed on stage.
- *The chimpanzee family*: A group of chimpanzees is shown using branches and stones as hammers to pound nuts, and the mothers share the kernels with their youngsters. Two females drink water out of a tree trunk with the help of sponges made of fresh leaves while a male eats ants he fishes with sticks. After socializing for a while, they hear a red colobus monkey call. They form a well-organized team and successfully hunt the monkey. Meat is shared with all group members.

2.2. *The Drama*

As the chimpanzees, unaware of the imminent danger, share and eat the meat, Zaipodo approaches silently and shoots a mother with a youngster. The chimpanzees run away but after a while stop when they notice that the

mortally wounded female is unable to follow. Well hidden, Zaipodo observes with disbelief and fascination the emotions and behavior displayed by the chimpanzee family over the suffering and the death of the wounded female. All the chimpanzees surround the dying female, groom her, and lick her wound. Once she has died, they continue to try to provoke reactions from her body, chase the flies away, and remain quietly nearby. Eventually, they cover her body with branches. Meanwhile, the newly orphaned youngster screams desperately beside the body of his mother and is eventually adopted by his mother's closest friend. Zaipodo is highly moved by these observations, and he cannot imagine ever shooting or eating a chimpanzee again—"it is like murder." He is unable to bring the dead female back to the village, but his younger brother that followed him comes across the dead chimpanzee and carries it back to the village.

Shortly before Zaipodo leaves the chimpanzee, a daughter of the Oussé family who is looking for snails in the forest, sees Zaipodo with the dead chimpanzee. Shocked by what she perceives as murder, in tears she beats the hunter and runs back to the village. A violent discussion then unfolds between the two families: the Oussés want to give the dead chimpanzee a traditional funeral, claiming that she is a member of the family that died within the land belonging to the Oussé. The Zaipodo's family views the chimpanzee simply as food and wants to begin preparing the meat for the big funeral. Unable to agree, a fight between the elders starts.

At that moment the play is interrupted and the actors ask the audience how the conflict between the two families could be solved. What should be done? Should the chimpanzee be buried or cooked? Should the hunter go to jail? The public is given time to discuss the issue, and after reaching an agreement, the chief of the village gives the answers to the actors. The play is then finished accordingly.

3. Effectiveness of the Play

The play was performed for a total of 8,000 individuals in 16 villages located around the park during May 2002. Villages were selected to include different ethnic groups and socioeconomic situations of the region. Only one (6%) of the 16 villages suggested that Zaipodo's family was correct and that the chimpanzee should be eaten. In the remaining villages (94%), the public said that Zaipodo's family should give the dead chimpanzee back to the Oussé family so that a traditional funeral could take place. In four of these villages (25%) it was added that the park authorities should be informed of the chimpanzee's killing.

To assess the effectiveness of the play, a group of sociologists led by Professor Francis Akindes, from the University of Bouaké, interviewed 75 people in 5 of the 17 villages that observed the play. The evaluation was conducted in two phases. First, people were asked about their perceptions of chimpanzees a month prior to seeing the play (Akindes *et al.*, 2002a). Four

months after the play, a second evaluation was done to look for any attitudinal changes (Akindes *et al.*, 2002b). The sociologists were completely independent of the awareness team and were not involved in the play's creation or performance. They did, however, watch a performance of the play in Abidjan and developed the second evaluation in consultation with Christophe Boesch.

During the second evaluation, a new sample of 75 individuals from five villages were interviewed; 57% of the participants were local to the area whereas the remaining 43% originated from other regions of Côte d'Ivoire and West Africa (mainly Burkina Faso and Mali). Of the local people, 74% had a tradition of hunting for meat, but only 25% of those from outside the region hunted. Similarly, 67% of the locals reported sharing a totemic relationship with the chimpanzees, whereas only 25% of the second group had such a relationship (Akindes *et al.*, 2002). In general, 96% of the people thought the play was a good way of presenting a problem because it reaches a large audience, is easy to understand, faithful to reality, and facilitates empathy with the actors. Overall, people perceived the play as representing a real situation; 80% of the interviewed participants agreed with the reality of the situation proposed to them.

Table 5.1 presents the main messages remembered by audience members four months after seeing the play. The close similarity between chimpanzees and humans was sometimes expressed by people even before the play, but was accompanied by a negative impression of "incompleteness" in the chimpanzee's humanity when compared to human. Chimpanzees were described as being too 'savage', 'ugly' and 'uncontrolled' as compared with humans (Akindes *et al.*, 2002a). After the play, however, there was recognition of similarities between the two species based on shared traits of intelligence, an organized social life, the expression of feelings, attention to wounded and dead individuals, and the adoption of orphans. Interviewees expressed these sentiments through statements like "a chimpanzee is like a human" and 'the killing of chimpanzees by poachers is murder'. It is interesting that the former expression is used by elders in the population when referring to chimpanzees. Thus, the play appears to support traditional perceptions of chimpanzees and to increase awareness of this perception within the younger generation.

In terms of knowledge gained, 80% of the interviewees said they learned something new about chimpanzees from the play. Additionally, 57% of hunters and 65% of people without totemic relationships with chimpanzees

TABLE 5.1. Message remembered by interviewees four months after the play's presentation (after Akindes *et al.*, 2002b).

Message	Percentage of interviewees
The chimpanzee is like a human	62%
Chimpanzees have rich, daily lives	18%
Chimpanzees need to be protected	11%
Threats to chimpanzees	5%

TABLE 5.2. Behavioral/attitudinal changes after seeing the play in the Tai region (Akindes *et al.*, 2002b).

Behavioral/Attitudinal changes	Percentage of interviewees
New conception of chimpanzees	41%
Stopped consuming chimpanzees	27%
More affinity to the chimpanzee	15%
Need to protect the chimpanzee	10%
Killing chimpanzees is a crime	5%
Less fear of the chimpanzee	3%

reported gaining knowledge, suggesting that the play was effective in reaching a diversity of audience members.

The play was also effective in promoting attitudinal and behavioral changes towards chimpanzees, as shown in Table 5.2. Most striking is the fact that four months after the play, 27% of the interviewees reported they had stopped consuming chimpanzee meat and 10% said chimpanzees should be better protected. Seventy-nine percent of interviewees said people in the village changed their behavior following the play. Changes reported, in order of importance, included decreases in poaching of chimpanzees, less chimpanzee meat sold in the villages, and criticism by children of their parents for consuming chimpanzee meat. In all the visited villages, children were said to refer to their parents as “man-eaters” when they ate chimpanzee meat.

4. Conclusion

We believe the success of our play convincingly shows that theater can be a very effective medium for promoting positive cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral change toward wildlife among local people. Allowing people to visualize the complex lives of chimpanzees created a greater understanding of their unique abilities and facilitated both an increased awareness of the need to protect the species and behavioral changes towards such a goal. An important aspect of this success is presenting a clear, culturally relevant message that is understood by the audience. We felt this was achieved in our case through developing the concept with an African company whose members were from the same region where the play was performed, consulting local people about music and songs, and testing the credibility of the situation with local people. The popularity of the play produced requests among the audience for additional activities, and thus the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation is continuing its educational efforts in these villages through a variety of programs, including a newsletter, discussion group, and video presentations on the behavior of the Tai chimpanzees. Additionally, the positive response of the audience to the play as revealed by the evaluation, indicates that this could be an efficient tool for conservation programs in many target regions. Therefore,

the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation plans to export the play to other regions with protected forests and remaining chimpanzee populations. Additionally, we are planning to have Ymako Teatri members train secondary school pupils from the targeted regions to perform the play. In this way, the message will hopefully spread in regions where chimpanzees urgently need effective protection.

Since September 2002, political unrest in Côte d'Ivoire has limited the enforcement of wildlife laws. Such a situation increases the need for regular visits from conservationists to reinforce messages concerning wildlife, a point that has been emphasized to us by the local people in the last year. Fundraising agencies should be aware that in times of political instability such actions need particular support to ensure the active involvement of local people in conservation and research projects.

5. Postscript

In May 2003, one year after the play's presentation and eight months into a period of extreme civil unrest, we visited one of the test villages. Despite having to evacuate the village twice because of approaching looters, children were still rehearsing and singing parts of the play. Discussions with village members, including the chief, women, children, and a poacher, made it clear that the message of the play was still a vivid part of the village's memory.

Acknowledgments. We thank the Ivorian authorities for supporting the projects of the Wild Chimpanzees Foundation from the beginning, especially the "Ministère de l'Environnement," the "Direction de la protection de la Nature," the PACNPT (Projet Autonome pour la Conservation du Parc National de Taï), and the WWF. We like to thank the following people for support: Camille Troh Dji, Touré Zoumana, Honora Néné Kpzahi, and Paul Zouhou. Particular thanks go to Daniel Pauselius for his skill in filming the performances. We thank the following organization for logistic and financial support of this project: Swiss Center for Scientific Research (CSRS) in Côte d'Ivoire, Worldwide Wildlife Fund–Germany, Leipzig Zoo, Tierschutz Zürich, USFW–Great Apes Conservation Fund, and UNEP–Great Ape Survival Project.

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