



PRESS RELEASE

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Alarming decline of West African chimpanzees in Côte d'Ivoire

Apes are emblematic species and our closest living relative. Unfortunately, all ape species are listed as endangered or critically endangered on the IUCN Red List, and their populations continue to decline throughout their range. The major threats to their survival are poaching, habitat destruction and disease. They are particularly vulnerable because, like humans, they possess a slow reproductive rate. Chimpanzees, in particular, invest up to 5 years in their newborn, a period during which the youngster can learn amazing technical and social skills needed for its survival. In a new study led by researchers from the Max-Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (Leipzig), it is shown that within one generation, equivalent to 17 years, the chimpanzee population in Côte d'Ivoire has dramatically plummeted to the point of disappearing in many regions. These results highlight the urgency to monitor these wild populations more precisely, regularly and systematically if we want to anticipate rapid decline and be able to implement measures to prevent them from extinction (*Current Biology*, October 14, 2008).

In the 1960s, the population of chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes verus*) in Côte d'Ivoire was estimated at about 100 000 chimpanzees (Kormos et al. 2003). A few decades later, at the end of the 1980s, the first nationwide chimpanzee survey was carried out (Marchesi et al. 1995). With the data derived from this survey, the total population of chimpanzees was then estimated to be between 8 000 and 12 000 individuals. This was already a drastic decrease from previous assumptions. Nonetheless, this population estimate meant that Côte d'Ivoire was still thought to harbor about half of the world's remaining western chimpanzee populations. Furthermore, with no other data having been collected throughout the country in the past 17 years since this study, it was assumed to hold true even up until today.

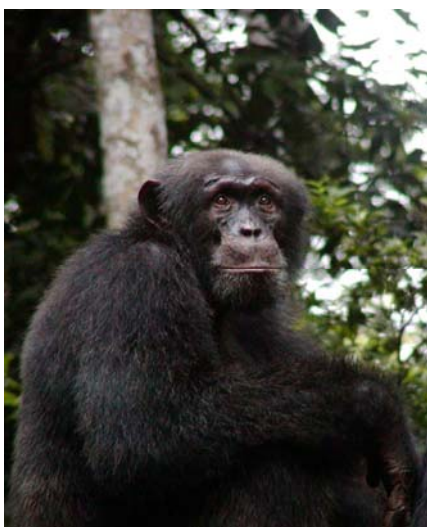


Image: Gogol, an adult male from a habituated chimpanzee community in the Taï National Park, is assumed to have been killed by poachers in February 2008 (left). In Marahoué National Park the forest is being cleared illegally and converted into cacao plantations (right).

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In this new study, the previous nationwide survey was replicated. The findings are catastrophic, showing a 90% decrease in chimpanzee nest encounter rate since the last survey was conducted. This decline is especially strong in forest areas with low protection status, in which no chimpanzee signs were found. The main factors affecting these populations are primarily thought to be forest destruction and poaching. Furthermore, these threats were seen to have dramatically increased within protected areas, when surveillance ceased and/or when external funding and support were interrupted. For instance, Marahoué National Park was thought to hold one of the largest chimpanzee populations in Côte d'Ivoire, but within a few years after international conservation projects had been suspended, due to ongoing civil unrest in the country that began in 2002, the park was invaded by farmers and most of its fauna has now disappeared. Professor Christophe Boesch, leading the research team, said "This study dramatically illustrates that conservation activities can be very successful but that continuous long-term financial support is required". Geneviève Campbell, the lead author that collected the data remembers "Following my transect lines in Marahoué NP was similar to do so in Classified Forests throughout the country, where I had to search long and hard to find any wild trees. It was saddening that I only found one nest in this park, as during the previous survey they had found 234 nests along the same transects. The one nest I did find was also in an area that had just been cleared for agriculture. The future of chimpanzees in Marahoué NP seems bleak".

The few remaining chimpanzee populations in Côte d'Ivoire are now highly fragmented, and one of the only viable populations seems to be living in Taï National Park. However, this population is also extremely threatened by poaching activities, and with the external financial support ending in 2010, this might have disastrous consequences on this last stronghold of chimpanzees in Côte d'Ivoire. We urge funding agencies to treat Taï National Park as a priority site for the conservation of chimpanzees in Côte d'Ivoire and consider funding the park after 2010. Paul Kouamé N'Goran explained that "The disappearance of forest areas in our country compels people to travel long ways to Taï NP, where forested areas remained, which provides suitable climate for agriculture. This in turn increases the immediate pressures on this park. We have to protect this forest and consider it as a jewel for the future generations".

Furthermore, funding should be made available to conduct more surveys within the western chimpanzee's range to better assess their status and locate the remaining viable populations. As new surveys are conducted and more information is gathered, we will be able to determine if this decline is observed throughout the range of the western chimpanzees and if their status should be upgraded to the category "critically endangered". Hjalmar Kuehl, an expert in wild population monitoring concluded "This study, however dramatic the results may be, reveals that conservation can work but requires from all partners for a long term and sustained commitment".

[GC]

Original work:

Geneviève Campbell, Hjalmar Kuehl, Paul Kouamé N'Goran and Christophe Boesch
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