



Gorilla-Eaters of Gabon

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'Gorillas destroy our crops and they are vicious animals', the authors were told last December in Gabon, where, along with Professor Roger Short and Dr Richard Wrangham, they were investigating the status of gorillas and chimpanzees. Gorillas can be shot on sight, and both animals are killed for meat. Gabon people are predominantly rural, and because they are so dependent on the forests for food, it may be that the Government will preserve these, and with them the wildlife, despite impending large-scale development.

In every village in which we stopped and enquired, gorilla skulls were proudly produced by the local people. One restaurant owned by a Frenchman not only had three gorilla heads mounted on its walls, but also a captive juvenile gorilla in a chicken coop in the back yard. 'Could we easily buy a young gorilla or chimpanzee ourselves?' we asked. 'No trouble at all: adults are being killed all the time in retaliation for crop-raiding and as food. If the young are not captured, they simply starve on the body of their dead mother.'

Thus were confirmed some of the fears roused by Sr Gustavo Gandini's report to FPS about his trip to Gabon in August 1978 for the Federazione Italiana Turismo Ecologico. Obviously a trade in gorillas, albeit small, existed within the country, but we found that it was by no means all internal. The restaurant owner told us that he would have no problems at all in sending his young gorilla to a zoo in France; he knew which zoo would take it. While Gabon has not even attended any of the CITES meetings, let alone signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, France is a full signatory state. Furthermore, when the UK Department of Environment was consulted about the import of gorilla skulls into Britain, it became clear that the wording of the Endangered Species Act is ambiguous and could be interpreted to allow the import of skinless heads, the most frequent form of gorilla trophy.

In Gabon itself, gorillas receive little legal protection: they are considered dangerous animals and can be shot on sight. A fee of £120 will, we heard, buy a

Above: One of three gorilla heads on the wall of a Gabon restaurant

Young gorilla at the doorway of the chicken coop in which it is kept



Displayed by its owner

Hunter with the skull of a gorilla he had recently killed



licence that allows the hunter to kill as many as he wants. The answer to our question about whether the people would mind if gorillas disappeared completely sums up the Gabonese attitude. 'No', the villagers replied, 'we'd be happy if that happened; gorillas destroy our crops and they are vicious animals.' In Gabon the gorilla is vermin and, moreover, vermin that can be eaten.

Chimpanzees fare almost as badly. Although better protected by law than are the gorillas, they too are killed for meat and because they raid crops. In fact, there are probably more young chimpanzees than gorillas in captivity in Gabon. Certainly this is so of the new medical centre at Franceville, whose chimpanzees were all bought from people who had caught them in the wild after killing their mothers. The fact is that in a country in which a large proportion of the population actually lives by hunting, effective enforcement of laws banning the killing of particular species is impossible. Nevertheless, even where control should be feasible, as in Gabon's national parks, the law is not enforced. Thus Sr Gandini reported extensive hunting and the presence even of villages and two logging operations within the Okanda National Park which, with the contiguous Lopé and Offoué Reserves, forms Gabon's largest conservation area.

At the moment it is impossible to say how much impact hunting is having on the chimpanzee and gorilla populations as a whole. When we asked people in the larger, permanent villages whether gorilla numbers were increasing or decreasing in the vicinity, we were told that they were decreasing. On the other hand, the inhabitants of the small, temporary villages deep in the forest said that they were continually seeing gorillas. To be sure, there are some features of the country that stand in the apes' favour. Agriculture throughout Gabon is practised on a minimum subsistence level, although 85 per cent of the population is rural. For example, along the central 170km of the 390km of road between the two main towns in the east, the average length of plantation for the 21 settlements that we counted was about 300m, and these slash-and-burn plantations usually extended only 100m or so into the forest. Nor is any land used up on livestock, which is limited to a few goats and chickens per village; cattle are almost unknown.

In fact, some Gabonese people present the fascinating picture of an up-to-date hunter-gatherer society. They have their radios, stainless steel cutlery and flowery painted crockery, and yet, if you arrive in one of the small forest villages before about 10 a.m., no-one will be there: the men are out hunting and the woman gathering the fruits of the forest. This way of life is possible largely because Gabon is so sparsely populated. Slightly bigger than the UK, its population is one-third that of Birmingham's. As a result three-quarters of the country is still covered by tropical forest. However, far from being happy with the low population, the Government wants to increase it. Each woman reputedly produces only three or four offspring in her life (c.f. the recently quoted figure of 8 for Kenyan women). A major reason is thought to be sterility brought on by venereal disease and filarial parasites. As a consequence the population is growing at less than one per cent per year, and, since a male's life expectancy is only about 30 years, there is a shortage of labour to power the economic expansion the country seeks.

With its enormous resources of oil, timber, manganese and uranium, Gabon is the richest (and by far the most expensive) country in black Africa.

However, the oil is now running out and, if Gabon is to maintain its wealth, extraction of the other resources must increase. There is no doubt at all that this is going to happen: millions of dollars, the USA and France being major contributors, have been invested in 'opening up the interior', as it is called. The Transgabon railway being built now will, it is estimated, double the amount of timber extracted. Yet approximately 1½ million cubic metres of timber are already produced, making this Gabon's second most important export, ahead of the lucrative manganese and uranium industries. Clearly the potential exists for a disastrous impact on the forest and the wildlife. As just one small example, we were shown an iron mining concession at Belinga whose work force had consumed 24 tons of meat from the forest in a year – and this was just a small exploratory mine.

Richness of Gabon's Wildlife

The diversity of life in Gabon's hot and humid forests is utterly amazing. A short walk produces scores of butterflies and yet hardly a single species is seen more than once. A tremendous amount still remains to be learned about tropical forest ecosystems, especially in West Africa where the full complement of species is not yet known, let alone their biology. In fact, we have little idea of the numbers and distribution of even well-known species like the gorilla and chimpanzee. As far as conservation of Africa's great apes is concerned, Gabon almost certainly holds a special responsibility. Judging from the area of suitable habitat, Dr Geza Teleki has estimated that it could contain the second highest number of chimpanzees of any country in Africa and, with Cameroon, probably contains the bulk of the West African gorilla population. On the fate of the Gabon forest, therefore, could hang the future of the West African gorillas and, to an important extent, of Africa's chimpanzees. Realising the paucity of knowledge available on the gorilla and chimpanzee in Gabon and yet the importance of Gabon to their conservation, the Director of the Centre International de Recherches Médicales de Franceville has, with admirable foresight, agreed in principle to support a nationwide survey and subsequent field study of Gabon's apes. Given that the apes are killed all over the country, the sanctity of national parks must be ensured, as well as more stringent laws effected to ensure protection outside the parks. Far more important, however, is the necessity to control and manage the large-scale exploitation and resultant devastation of the forests. If these are destroyed we can be sure that it won't be only the animals that suffer. The people have an unusually high degree of dependence on the forest, since for many it is effectively their sole source of food for months at a time. If the human population increases and the forests are felled, the Gabonese people and hence the Government of Gabon could be in desperate straits. If the Government can be made to realise this, the peoples' hunting existence could, paradoxically, be the salvation of the forest and its wildlife.

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Disaster in Gulf of Mexico?

The disaster that was feared to the waterfowl of North America from the Campeche oil gusher in the southern Gulf of Mexico when we went to press with the last *Oryx* (November 1979, p130) has so far been averted. Although many beaches on the long narrow islands that protect the Texas coast were thickly coated, booms stretched between the islands protected the rich lagoons from what is by far the worst spill ever. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department declared in October that there was no evidence of noticeable damage to Texas wildlife or fish, other than possibly to redfish larvae. The oil had little or no effect on shore birds and none on the whooping cranes at the Aransas refuge or on wildfowl migrating down the Mississippi flyway; on the Mexican coast beaches have been badly oiled, and fisheries may prove to be seriously damaged. The oil is still (February) gushing, and if it is not stopped before spring, when the tide flow changes from south to north, the story may be very different.

Ten thousand Atlantic ridley turtle eggs were about to hatch on the Rancho Nuevo beach in the Gulf of Mexico last July when oil from the giant spill started to come ashore. Mexican and US officials and volunteers collected the hatchlings as they appeared and before they could get to the oil-polluted sea, and air-lifted them to an oil-free region of the Gulf; here they were released on floating beds of seaweed which would provide both food and refuge from predators. What happens to the survivors cannot be known until about 1987 when these young will be mature. How will the airlift affect them? Will they come ashore to nest, and if so where?

Convention with No Teeth

All but three of the 21 countries in the Council of Europe, together with Finland and the European Economic Community, have signed the Council's Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. Four appendices list threatened species of flora (119, mostly in southern Europe), protected fauna (55 mammals, 294 birds, 34 reptiles and 17 amphibians), animals deserving some degree of protection, and prohibited methods of killing. Each signatory has one vote on the Standing Committee. But the Convention has few teeth. No action is specified for dealing with offenders, and signatories can evade any provision on the grounds of 'overriding public interests'. Clearly the Convention is only a first step, but at least it is in the right direction.

Scandinavian RDB

Hotade djur och växter i Norden is in effect a Red Data Book for the three Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden) plus Finland, produced for the Nordic Council of Ministers. It follows broadly the same categories as the IUCN Red Data Books, and lists 90 vertebrates and nearly 190 vascular plants. The 9 mammals are Bechstein's bat *Myotis bechsteini*, dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*, garden dormouse *Eliomys quercinus*, wolf *Canis lupus*, Arctic fox *Alopex lagopus*, European mink *Mustela lutreola*, wolverine or glutton *Gulo gulo*, Saimaa seal *Phoca hispida saimensis*, and reindeer *Rangifer tarandus fennicus*. Altogether 24 species are classed as endangered (Category 1), nine of which remain in only one place or one limited area. Only half these 24 species are actually protected at the present time.

Sperm Oil is Not Needed

'My Department . . . is now satisfied that substitutes exist for all present uses of sperm oil', said the Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of Industry in the House of Commons. In 1979 up to September the UK imported 864 tonnes of sperm whale oil; after September all imports required a licence and only one was issued. According to the *Leather Magazine*, for most users of the oil 'fully effective substitutes are available'; for most tanners it says, 'a good artificial sperm oil product is interchangeable . . . and in many cases indistinguishable' from the natural product.