

Fernan-Vaz Gorilla Project History

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Petit Evengue, now referred to as the “Fernan-Vaz Gorilla Project” (FVGP), is a project that focuses on caring for gorillas rescued from the bush meat crisis. It was initiated in 2000 with the aim of bridging ecotourism and gorilla conservation. The idea was to develop and integrate tourism into Gabon’s national economy, which could also contribute to sustainable conservation and management of both rescued and wild western lowland gorilla individuals and populations, respectively. Thus, a family of four western lowland gorillas was transferred from the Centre International de Recherche Médical de Franceville (CIRMF) to the then-called “Petit Evengue” project (see *Gorilla Gazette*, April 2004, pages 16-17). The initial objective was to improve the family’s quality of life by releasing it onto an island locally referred to as “Petit Evengue.” Tourists would then be allowed to view these gorillas in a semi-captive and natural setting. Two releases were attempted but failed, which subsequently led to placing this family into a semi-natural forested electrified enclosure. In February 2006, two adult female gorillas and one of the female’s male offspring unfortunately passed away. The cause of their death remains unknown but was likely linked to a lack of continual “in-the-field” management.

Although we feel it necessary to be liable and transparent with respect to this tragedy, we also wish to move forward by keeping Kessala, Kim and Ozangue’s death as a constant daily reminder that FVGP’s current management scheme requires continuity, up-to-date husbandry adapted to in-situ conditions, a multidisciplinary approach, and daily dedication. Once the mismanagement had been acknowledged, it was now necessary to focus on the remaining resident gorillas and those who would undoubtedly become victims of the on-going bush meat crisis. In parallel, it was also crucial to eventually address both education and law enforcement in order to attenuate this established and well-known bush meat phenomenon. Lastly, besides the obvious fact that the project’s management scheme needed to be completely exclusive to tourism management, the project needed to implement strict policies and regulations adapted to the unofficial concept of “responsible tourism.” Although there are no defined guidelines for “responsible tourism,” a basic rule-of-thumb is to prioritize individual gorilla welfare and well-being while educating national and international visitors by providing them with a non-invasive and posi-

tive experience with the gorillas. In the FVGP’s context, a non-invasive and positive experience could be simply defined as “educated, regulated and supervised viewing of semi-captive gorillas without any physical contact and with minimal visual contact between humans and gorillas, all-the-while considering the gorillas’ well-being as the project’s top priority.”

The role of “responsible tourism” in conservation has become, in my opinion, indisputably important since it can assist with (1) Educating the global community on its direct role in the growing and on-going bush meat crisis; (2) Contributing to the local and national economy IF tourist dollars are truly redistributed into the right hands; and (3) Contributing to sustainable conservation IF tourist dollars go toward financing conservation projects, educating local populations, and enforcing law.

The Fernan-Vaz Gorilla Project (FVGP) today. As of November 2006, it was established that the overall goals of the project would be to:

- Provide up-to-date care and improve the quality of life of all FVGP resident gorillas;
- Rescue gorillas who are victims of the bush meat crisis in line with legal confiscation protocols;
- Contribute to the protection and conservation of wild western lowland gorillas;
- Apply responsible tourism sensitive and aimed solely at contributing to the welfare and conservation of gorillas.



Photo of Kessala with her son, Ozangue (on back) and daughter, Kim, taken Jan. '05 by Chisato Abe.

As such, the following objectives were established;

1. Apply and develop up-to-date standards of care and protocols, respectively, adapted to rescued gorillas who become victims of the African bush meat trade;
2. Re-introduce orphaned gorillas using scientifically recognised guidelines (i.e. IUCN);
3. Provide formal training to local staff specific to gorilla husbandry and conservation;
4. Establish a scientific database on various parameters from rescued gorillas kept in semi-captivity;
5. Develop and build relevant housing infrastructures with well-defined capacities;
6. Develop and promote responsible tourism through policies, regulations and education;
7. Educate local populations on conservation;
8. Facilitate non-invasive research that aims to contribute to gorilla welfare and/or conservation;
9. Fight the bush meat trade through law enforcement using local and national authorities, and;
10. Develop a network with relevant experts and members of the global community.

In an ideal world, all gorillas orphaned by the bush meat crisis would return to the wild. Unfortunately, some of these gorillas have lost their critical survival skills and have become desensitized to the presence of humans. As such, these gorillas have lost their potential for re-introduction and are destined to a semi-natural captive setting within a sanctuary in their country of origin.



However, even for those orphaned gorillas with a promising re-introduction potential, the road ahead is a long, challenging and uncertain one.

The FVGP's rehabilitation Centre: Quarantine and Forest Education: As of October 2007, all incoming gorilla orphans go directly into isolation within a quarantine facility conceived and built for this precise purpose. The quarantine facility allows for a gradual integration of the orphan to his or her new surroundings including their keeper and, more importantly, allows for a series of health tests to be undertaken, with results that will hopefully ascertain a disease-free status, for the individual being screened for this will qualify this individual to the reintroduction program being currently developed. The minimum quarantine period is 3 months, but may be longer if clinical signs warrant an extended period. Many diseases, known as (anthropo-) zoonoses, can bi-directionally be transmitted between humans and gorillas. If no proper quarantine protocols are set in place and religiously followed, an orphan may unknowingly transmit a disease to other gorillas. The transmission of this disease may then compromise any gorilla's re-introduction potential, let alone be detrimental to gorillas and humans in the vicinity.

Once the quarantine period is finalized and an orphan is considered "disease-free", social integration and rehabilitation within the forest follow. Social integration is never straight forward and depends on each gorilla's temperament and behaviour. The most basic and essential requirement is a gradual approach tailored to each



Orphanage and quarantine buildings.

gorilla's circumstances. Socializing young gorillas as early as possible is definitely the key to a higher level of success. But if done too early it may actually be more traumatic to the gorilla and compromise its long-term social success in a group. The immediate outcome of an integration process is unpredictable and can sometimes be very distressing to the "integrees," as well as for the humans externally involved. Knowing when to interfere (in as much as it should be minimized) is the biggest challenge. There's unfortunately no given recipe and so one must learn as one goes, using as gradual a process as is needed, which will depend on the individual gorilla and the group's individuals and social structure. As a general rule though, gorillas usually adapt well to each other with time by developing close ties or simply tolerating each other's presence. However, relationships between individuals in a given group tend to be dynamic over time.

Once social integration has been accomplished, the group now starts the long road toward learning to function and adapt to its environment. At the FVGP, the orphans being rehabilitated go into the forest from 8:00 am until 5:30 pm everyday. They sleep in an orphanage at night since they are not yet confident within the forest. Anecdotally, it seems as though the orphans, depending on their previous experiences, appear to indirectly teach each other different skills (i.e. nest building strategies, different plants and plant parts, danger avoidance such as snakes, etc.). Although this can never replace the role of one or more experienced adult gorillas, each orphan's bank of knowledge may be contributing, and indeed critical, to the group's long-term ability to function and survive in the wild, though again, this is purely anecdotal. The human keepers also try and add to this knowledge by showing them different food resources and introducing them to different biotypes on the island. Moreover, the keepers are being trained to minimise human contact to a level where simple TLC is allowed under stressful circumstances.



Above: Silverback, Mabeke.
Below: Orphans in the forest.

Our long-term goal within the rehabilitation centre is reintroduction. Phase I consists of 1. Quarantine, 2. Social integration, and 3. Supervised forest schooling. Phase II would consist of re-locating the orphans onto an island locally known as "Grand Evengue," which is located across "Petit Evengue." On this island, we would simulate what would eventually be done in the final phase, that of reintroduction on mainland. We are currently developing a reintroduction program proposal, but no definite plans have been established as of yet.

The sanctuary consists of a 4,000 sq.m. forested electrified enclosure. Mabeke, a 27-year-old silverback who lived at the CIRMF for 20 years, shares the enclosure with two other males: Owendja, a 6 year-old male juvenile and Izowuet, a 4 year-old male juvenile. In the last year, a number of 8 local staff

has been specifically trained in gorilla husbandry. A number of individuals were "trialed," but only a few have made "the cut" as not everyone is able to work with these sensitive animals. Two of these 8 gorilla keepers remain daily at Mabeke's enclosure. They provide the sanctuary gorillas with 5 daily feedings and take observations every 15 minutes from 7:45 am until 5:30 pm. Observations are taken on nutrition, basic behaviour, activities, as well as various clinical signs that the keep-

ers have been trained to recognise. It is well known that gorillas are resilient individuals and tend to instinctively hide their clinical signs. We have developed, over the last 15 months, statistical data on each individual's average daily feeding, resting and activity level as percentages spent performing these throughout the day. We are assessing whether this may help us detect health concerns by assessing more than 5% deviations in these established values as disease indicators. The number of kilocalories ingested by each gorilla is also estimated by the keepers at the end of each day for comparison with standardized and recommended kilocalorie intakes where weight, age and health status

are taken into consideration. The keepers are trained to evaluate the quantity, quality and variety of foods offered to the gorillas as part of a sound nutritional program. They also provide the on-site veterinarian with both a verbal and written report at the end of each day, at which point in time discussions are held with the goal of improving any aspect of the project's daily operations.

With respect to tourism, a maximum of two 30-minute guided and supervised visits are allowed per day taking into consideration the gorillas' feeding times and resting periods during which time no tourists are allowed. A mandatory conservation lecture is held prior to each visit at which time visit regulations are also communicated and reminded to the visitors. A maximum number of 8 visitors are allowed per visit, and all children below 15 years of age are required to wear a face mask. Only one visit per visitor per day is allowed, and rarely is there more than one visit per day.

With respect to the orphans being rehabilitated in the forest, only one 30-minute daily visit is allowed very early in the morning. The orphans are viewed from within an enclosure which has the only purpose of preventing human contact. Human contact is not allowed so as to (1) Prevent and minimize disease transmission, (2) Minimize stress, and (3) Minimize sensitization to the presence of humans in light of a future potential reintroduction in the wild.

Curbing the bush meat trade; the on-going challenge: It is well-known that every great ape conservation project is as successful as their efforts to curb the bush meat and live animal trades. Thus, a successful conservation project will eventually be one where no more individuals, under the right circumstances, require human assistance and that the species these sanctuaries are fighting to conserve eventually survive in a sustainable way in the wild. Unfortunately, and I specify unfortunately because it is a reflection of the on-going bush meat crisis, the FVGP has rescued four young gorillas since November 2006. It has done so, however, within the limits of the project's carrying capacity. It is quite challenging to respect what is lightly termed "carrying-capacity" since the bush meat

crisis does not discriminate timing and ideal scenarios. And although there is no specific definition of what a sanctuary's "carrying-capacity" should be, the FVGP has focused on the following parameters for each incoming gorilla orphan:

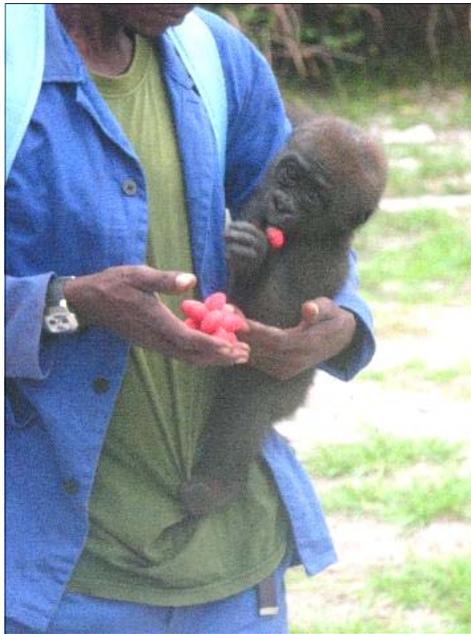
1. Project's financial budget;
2. Available infrastructures (the limiting factor being the quarantine facility since it is the first step of the rehabilitation process);
3. Number of available and adequately trained staff;
4. Social demography of the project's current gorilla group destined for re-introduction unless lifelong semi-captivity is otherwise a viable option;
5. Implementation of legal confiscation procedures using local and national authorities aiming at curbing the live animal trade.

However, it must be mentioned, in defence of all projects where the carrying capacity has been reached and perhaps even exceeded, that it is challenging to refuse any victim of the bush meat crisis. And this is why it is important, through organizations like the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance, for any project to continually be in touch and develop standardized procedures for maximising the successful placement of any great ape orphan. Most importantly though, it is also important for any project to develop sustainable and long-term strategies that will contribute to preventing other orphans from entering this repetitive cycle of the bush meat crisis through both education and law enforcement. But even then, within the field, it's not as straight forward as one would think.

SO, can tourism play a role in curbing the bush meat crisis? The answer is not straight forward either. But responsible tourism CAN play an important role in conserving gorillas and other threatened species. It can do so by promoting and developing educational campaigns; by contributing to the local and national economies; and by helping in-situ conservation projects educate the global community and enforce law. The sound and responsible management of any given eco-tourism-driven conservation project is challenging and requires continual re-thinking.

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Orphan and caregiver.

But gorillas of those projects aren't aware of these challenges or their inherent human politics. This is why it is important for the global community to take action and become liable for its responsibility in perpetuating the bush meat crisis. We can ignore the important role of ecotourism in conservation or we can re-define its role as a community. We can criticise welfare organizations or acknowledge their voice. We can act alone inefficiently

or act together and prosper. But in the best interest of the gorillas, we best work together for that is where hope lies. And perhaps we will see the day where local populations can continue to safely prosper; where national and international tourists will understand their role in conservation while experiencing unforgettable moments; and where gorillas can one day rekindle with freedom or finally be left alone to enjoy life as they know it.

All photos courtesy of author, unless otherwise indicated.

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Death in a Bachelor Group

For more information on the gorillas at the Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta, Indonesia, see previous issues of the Gorilla Gazette including June 2003 (page 17) and April 2005 (pages 56-7).



Personal emails from Amos Courage to Jane Dewar
(Reprinted with permission)

24Feb08: "Dear Kidjourn died last week, the facts are these; he was attacked by one of the other males one month ago sustaining seemingly superficial wounds but was separated together with one of the other males (Kihi) whom he got on well with. He initially responded well to a course of antibiotics drinking and eating small amounts and until last Friday when his condition and appetite deteriorated, dying on Monday (18Feb08)."

03Mar08: "There are further tests to do but it looks like he had massive brain hemorrhage which is not something I have come across before."

Kidjourn in 2005. Photo courtesy of Hannah Barlow.