

Since this article was written, Mr John Aspinall, founder of the Howletts and Port Lympne wildlife parks in Kent, and of the two gorilla rehabilitation projects described in the article, has sadly lost his long fight against cancer. He was thrilled, though, that in the final few months of his life he saw his long-term dream fulfilled, of releasing two of his captive-bred gorillas into the wild. Kwa-Kwa, the younger of the two gorillas, died suddenly of appendicitis, but the elder, Kwam, has settled in to the Mpassa group well, and is still thriving almost a year after completing the long trip to Gabon. Mr Aspinall would have been very proud of his progress.

## **Is Mr A Saving the Gorilla? Gorilla rehabilitation and reintroduction as a conservation tool in Central Africa.**

By Tony King, 2000

### **Introduction**

Mr A loves gorillas. As a boy he visited London Zoo on a daily basis to spend hours watching his favourite gorilla. Now he has established the world's most successful gorilla captive-breeding programme, and single-handedly funds two separate projects in Central Africa attempting to rehabilitate orphan gorillas and release them back into the wild. Some conservationists argue that his money could be better spent, but in a world where every new day seems to usher in new threats to virtually every living creature, is Mr A saving the gorilla?

### **The current status of gorillas**

Of the three subspecies of the gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*), it is the most well-known, the mountain gorilla *G. g. berengei*, that is the most threatened, with a total population of just 600 surviving in two forest patches, the Impenetrable Forest of Uganda and the Virunga volcanoes of Uganda, Rwanda and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) (Schaller 1989, 1993, Smith 1993, Leach 1996), and with none in captivity (Godwin 1991). The eastern lowland gorilla *G. g. graueri* of eastern Zaire is thought to have a wild population of approximately 17,000 (Hall *et al.* 1998), with very few represented in captivity (Godwin 1991). It is the western lowland gorilla *G. g. gorilla* that Mr A is involved with, the most widespread and numerous of the three sub-species, with an estimated 75,000 (Schaller 1993) to 100,000 (Leach 1996) individuals ranging from southern Nigeria through Central African Republic and Cameroon to Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo (People's Republic of), and with several captive populations around the world.

### **Threats to gorillas in the wild**

Harcourt (1996) expects a crash in gorilla numbers across their range during the next century, predicting their survival only in protected areas. The two main threats are recognised as:

- loss of or disturbance to their forest habitat;
- human predation.

Of these, it is the second that is considered to be the greatest threat (Oates 1996), with the current bush-meat trade in many African primate species being unsustainable across west and

central Africa (Bowen-Jones and Pendry 1999). This certainly appears to have been the case in forest areas I visited in Gabon and Congo that were near human habitations, with gorillas already absent and other primates at low densities.

## **The efforts of Mr A**

### *Captive breeding in England*

It is undoubtedly Mr A's lifelong love for gorillas as individuals that has driven his various initiatives, and therefore that has moulded the objectives and outcomes of each one. Having founded two zoos in England, it is no coincidence that through these he has developed the most successful gorilla captive-breeding programme in the world, with his zoo-keepers encouraged to have considerable personal contact with the animals.

### *Brazzaville orphanage, Congo*

Many of Mr A's original gorillas were rescued as orphans in Congo but the increasing number being encountered during the 1980s led him and the Congolese government to agree to set-up a gorilla orphanage within Congo itself, funded solely by Mr A. One of Mr A's experienced gorilla keepers agreed to set-up and run the Congo orphanage, located within the capital city of Brazzaville, and his extensive personal experience with captive gorillas in England was a major factor in the early success of the project (see Attwater 1999). However, being located within the city led to serious outbreaks of disease, often causing high gorilla mortality, and with the eventual need for a release site for the growing gorillas, the project gradually moved to a forest area about 2-hours drive north of Brazzaville.

### *Lefini forest, Congo*

The Congo project is now situated in the Lefini Forest Reserve, in a large area of savanna and forest set aside for the project. The new site continues to provide a safe environment for the upbringing of baby orphans, while allowing for the release of older gorillas at appropriate times. The project is currently the guardian of 21 gorillas, in three distinct groups. The youngest group consists of babies up to about four years old, who sleep together in a cage at night, are provided with milk three or four times a day, are fed twice a day, and who receive human supervision during the day as they explore the nearby forest. They spend the day travelling, foraging, resting, playing, occasionally fighting, and generally developing relationships. The human staff provide discipline when necessary, as well as the individual and constant love that is so vital to the development of young gorillas. The second group consists of individuals about 5 to 8 years old, who are generally accompanied by a staff member during the day, and who often spend time with the babies group, but who sleep free in the forest. This group has provided the only birth for the project so far, and although the mother ignored her baby to start with, she is now showing more interest and spends a lot of time with him and the other babies. The final group consists of gorillas aged about 9 to 13 years old, who tend to roam further than the others but who still frequently visit the camp, probably in search of easy food and human attention. Two males of this group ventured so far that they were discovered on separate occasions close to local villages, and so for their own safety had to be tranquilised and returned to the camp, where they are currently caged while a more suitable release site is identified.

### *Mpassa forest, Gabon*

In the past two years, Mr A has funded the development of a very similar project in the Mpassa region of neighbouring Gabon, a very isolated area of gallery forest in the process of receiving legislative protection. In the summer of 1999 this project provided for a single

group of 11 young gorillas, from 6 months to 5 years old. Again they spend the day in the forest under human supervision, and sleep caged, although new-arrivals under about 8 months old are often permitted to sleep in bed with their 'adopted' human parent, until such time as they are comfortable with the other gorillas to sleep with them. This practice in both the Congo and Gabon projects, an incredible commitment on the part of the staff, has generally overcome the widely-reported problem of orphan gorillas dying tragically due to a basic loss of the will to live following the emotional stress of being orphaned. As in Congo, the youngsters are provided with milk four times a day, but are only provided with a small amount of food at the end of the day, primarily so as to encourage them into their cages. The Gabon group, then, spends a higher proportion of the day foraging than the Congo babies group does, and also, perhaps as a consequence, the Gabon gorillas are far more wary of human strangers than those in Congo. There was a pronounced difference in the receptions I received on first meeting the two groups - those in Congo came to greet me as I was approaching, and within seconds I had three young gorillas clambering all over me, while in Gabon the eldest male and female argued over who would be first to greet me, then later the third eldest, and it took several weeks for some of the younger ones to approach me. This increased distrust of humans should be considered a good sign for the long-term success of the Gabon project.

## **Assessment of the rehabilitation programmes**

### *Aims*

The two projects appear to share similar aims, namely:

- To rescue young gorillas that have been orphaned, generally as a result of the killing of their mothers' for the bush-meat trade.
- To provide a safe and loving environment to ensure each individual orphan's integration into a gorilla group.
- To encourage the gorilla groups to mature towards independence from the security provided by humans.
- To provide and protect sufficient areas of suitable habitat as long-term homes for the growing number of released gorillas.

### *Successes*

- Care provision - The two projects currently provide forest homes for over 30 orphan gorillas.
- Integration - The integration of new gorillas into the projects appears to occur without great problems, presumably as they are young when they arrive.
- Mortality - Since relocating to the Lefini Reserve, disease levels have fallen drastically and gorilla survival has been very high. The Gabon project, located in a very isolated area, has yet to suffer a single fatality.
- Births - One so far, the baby is progressing well in human care, but it will be several years before it becomes clear whether the orphaned gorillas can learn the skills of parenthood.
- Introduction of captive-bred gorillas - The Gabon project has now gone a step further, with the integration into the group of two captive-bred gorillas from England. This occurred two months after I left Gabon, but so far is said to have been successful, and may yet be considered a landmark in the history of *ex-situ* conservation.
- Habitat protection - Two forest areas, one in Congo and one in Gabon, are now recognised as gorilla protected areas.

- Public awareness - The original location of the orphanage in Brazzaville, along with the enthusiastic confiscations in the early years, ensured that awareness of the plight of orphan gorillas was raised considerably within the city. Since relocating to the Lefini Reserve, many workers are employed from the local village communities, and again, this helps to spread the notion of gorillas as individuals deserving to be treated with respect and compassion. The Gabon project, though much younger, is now having a similar impact, and is currently keenly supported by individuals within political circles.

### *Problems*

- In the early years of the Brazzaville orphanage mortality due to disease was a major problem, but now appears to have been overcome due to the increased isolation of the two forest sites.
- Political instability in Congo has caused several difficulties over the years, once forcing the evacuation of the majority of the staff and gorillas to a safer area.
- The Congo release site appears to be too close to human habitations, with the two eldest males having to be caged since being discovered feeding in people's crops.
- The Gabon site is far more isolated, and should prove a better location for the release of gorillas, but the increased isolation may mean less of an impact on local communities in terms of education and awareness than has been the case in Congo.

### *Possible solutions*

It is apparent that the choice of sites has been crucial to the effectiveness of the projects, but also that differing aspects of the work have been affected in different, often conflicting, ways. While the release of adult gorillas needs to be done in very isolated areas, especially as the gorillas have become completely unafraid of humans, the raising of awareness is more effective the closer the project is to human communities. The use of separate sites to fulfill the differing aims has several logistical implications, while the only way of compromising would be to ensure a natural barrier between the release site and the human communities. This was thought to have been achieved with the Lefini, with savanna and escarpments expected to inhibit gorilla movements, but this has not proved to be the case. A major river is probably the most effective natural barrier, and the Mpassa river has been utilised to good effect in the Gabon project to separate the gorillas from the staff camp.

### **So, is Mr A saving the gorilla?**

Currently, Mr A is funding the reintroduction to the wild of 21 gorillas in Congo and 15 in Gabon, while he has a captive population in England of around 70 individuals which may provide a source of future reintroductions of captive-bred gorillas. Compared to the estimated 75,000 to 100,000 wild gorillas still surviving in Africa, Mr A's contribution may appear small. Mr A himself would justify the expense purely on the grounds of his love for gorillas as individuals deserving to be treated with love and respect. This is a sentiment shared by the contributors at the Great Apes of the World Conference in Malaysia, 1998, who agreed upon various actions for countering threats to the 'great apes' (gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans). Most were rather predictable regarding research, education, legislation, economic support, and international co-operation, but rather than concentrating only on species or populations, stress was also laid upon the rights of great apes as individuals – as "sentient, intelligent beings with a rich emotional life" (OFI 1998). As a life-long conservationist I have a tendency to consider issues at the species or community levels, but having met with Mr A's orphan gorillas, having formed personal relationships with them, having presumed to have out-witted the devious sense of humour of a particular female only

to be humbled minutes later as she pulled me from my perch on a fallen log to leave me stuck upside-down in the mud, I can only support his motives, and envy his attitude that he is thankful to have the funds through which he can indulge his passion (McRae 2000).

However, whether intentionally or not, Mr A's projects are tackling the two major issues that threaten the long-term survival of the gorilla as a species, and of African forests as an ecosystem, namely habitat destruction and human predation. His African projects are dependent on the protection of forest areas in Congo and Gabon as long-term homes for the released gorillas. Further, the community involvement in the projects has raised awareness of conservation amongst local people. These two factors have combined to allow the wildlife in the Lefini Reserve to increase in numbers, and most impressively, have resulted in pride amongst members of the communities who recognise the increase in wildlife. One moment during my stay in Congo that really encouraged me was while riding in the back of a packed pick-up through the Lefini Reserve the driver stopped when a group of De Brazza's monkeys was spotted. I feared, expected, that we had stopped to try our luck at shooting them, no doubt a welcome break from manioc and smoked fish, but instead the men explained very excitedly to me how numbers had increased during the life of the project, and we all simply enjoyed the spectacle the monkeys provided.

Mr A does not hold the key to the future of the gorilla. He has no impact on the two most threatened sub-species of the gorilla. He is not protecting the habitat of any completely wild gorilla populations. But he is affording protection to areas of African forest and their wildlife that are under threat from human population growth, he is having an impact on the attitudes of many Congolese and Gabonese communities with regards forest conservation, resource management, and the hunting of gorillas and other primates, and he is providing a second-chance for individual gorillas who have suffered tremendous loss at the hands of his own species. These are all extremely valuable actions for the long-term survival of the gorilla and it's African habitat, and we should all be grateful that he is.

## **Conclusions**

The future survival of the gorilla is uncertain (Harcourt 1996) and will be heavily dependent on our responses to the dual threats of habitat disturbance and human predation. The magnificent efforts initiated by George Schaller and Dian Fossey have brought the plight of the mountain gorilla to the attention of the world, but much less work has been carried out on the western lowland gorilla, mainly due to the typically swampy nature of their habitat (Smith 1993). Research has been steadily increasing over the latter years of the 1990s, but there is still a need for a widespread conservation effort throughout Central Africa that integrates research and habitat protection with the raising of awareness of the intrinsic value of wild animals in such a way as to counter the problems associated with the unsustainability of the bush-meat trade. The orphan rehabilitation programmes funded by Mr A have had a major impact on public awareness in African communities, particularly in Congo, and demonstrate what can be achieved by committed and high-profile conservation projects.

## References

- Attwater, H.R., 1999, *My Gorilla Journey - Living with the Orphans of the Rainforest*. Sidgwick & Jackson. 297pp.
- Bowen-Jones, E. and Pendry, S., 1999, The threat to primates and other mammals from the bushmeat trade in Africa, and how this threat could be diminished. *Oryx*, 33(3): 233-246.
- Godwin, S. 1991, *Gorillas: Bridging the Gap Between Man and Ape*. Headline Book Publishing. 128 pp.
- Hall, J. S., Saltonstall, K., Inogwabini, B.I. and Omari, I., Distribution, abundance and conservation status of Grauer's gorilla. *Oryx*, 32(2): 122-130.
- Harcourt, A.H., 1996, Is the gorilla a threatened species? How should we judge? *Biological Conservation*, 75(2): 165-176.
- Leach, M., 1996, *The Great Apes: Our Face in Nature's Mirror*. Blandford. 176 pp.
- McRae, M., 2000, Central Africa's orphan gorillas: Will they survive in the wild? *National Geographic*, February 2000: 84-97.
- Oates, J.F., 1996, Habitat alteration, hunting and the conservation of foliovorous primates in African forests. *Australian Journal of Ecology*, 21(1): 1-9.
- O.F.I., 1998, Commitments and Agreements of the Great Apes of the World Conference, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. <http://www.ns.net/orangutan/actionpl.htm>
- Schaller, G.B., 1989, In: Nichols, M., *Gorilla: Struggle for Survival in the Virungas*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Schaller, G.B., 1993, Epilogue. In: Goodall, J., Nichols, M., Schaller, G.B. and Smith, M.G., *The Great Apes: Between Two Worlds*. National Geographic Society.
- Smith, M.G., 1993, A history of research. In: Goodall, J., Nichols, M., Schaller, G.B. and Smith, M.G., *The Great Apes: Between Two Worlds*. National Geographic Society, pp. 23-41.