

LENGUI, Victim of the Bushmeat Trade: Twice

Tony King, PPG, Republic of Congo

This is the true story of one of the gorillas under the care of PPG-Congo, a story we use as an education tool here in Congo. Please feel free to use it yourselves if you think it might help, or contact us if you would like the story in French.

What do you know about the bush-meat trade? Do you know that along with habitat encroachment and the deadly Ebola virus, the illegal bush-meat trade is pushing our three closest-living relatives to extinction. But aside from population numbers, what do you know of the individuals? What does the bush-meat trade mean to a central-African bonobo, chimpanzee or gorilla? For most, we will never know. But here is the story of one gorilla who has survived the horrors of the bush-meat trade. Twice.

Lengui arrived at the Brazzaville Gorilla Orphanage, in the capital city of the Republic of Congo, on 22 April 1994. Despite being about 18 months old, she weighed only 5 kg. A healthy gorilla of that age should weigh double that, or more. A week earlier she had been rescued while tied to a stake in a field of maize in north-west Congo, not far from the border with Gabon.

Northwest Congo is heavily forested, with a low human population density and some of the highest densities of gorillas and chimpanzees ever recorded. Lengui would have been one of the youngest members of a small group of gorillas, probably containing about eight individuals. Her father was almost certainly the large silverback male that led and protected the group, her mother one of perhaps three adult females benefiting from the silverbacks leadership. A couple of immature gorillas, and another infant, probably Lengui's half-brother, would have completed the group.

The group would spend the day together, feeding, resting, socialising. During the wet season, the group would travel extensively, feasting on the fruiting trees spread sporadically through the forest. During the dry



LENGUI near Pointe-Noire in 1998.
Photo courtesy of Amos Courage.

season there would have been less fruit available, so the group would have been more sedentary, feeding principally on the leaves and stems of succulent understory plants, more evenly spread throughout the forest. Lengui would have always stayed close to her mother, she needed her for protection, comfort, milk and transport. If the group were settled, she may have been adventurous enough to take a few steps away from her mother to play with the other infant in the group. At night she would have slept with her mother in a nest built from folded twigs, stems and leaves, sometimes on the ground, sometimes high in the forest canopy. One day, around about 12 April 1994, Lengui's mother ventured into the small field of maize to feast on the abundant cobs. She didn't know that this field had been planted

by local villagers, and was unaware of the danger involved. As she walked on her knuckles, with Lengui clinging to her back, she felt a tug on her hand. This was nothing new, her forest home was full of vines and lianes that would momentarily trap her feet and hands. Without concern, she pulled her hand a little harder. But still it was stuck. The harder she pulled, the tighter the noose-like cable became. The more she pulled, the deeper the metal snare cut into her flesh.

We don't know how long Lengui's mother was trapped in the snare, set by the villagers in the hope of catching smaller prey like antelope or forest hog. It must have been a considerable time, however. When the villagers arrived, to check on their snares and their crop, they found just the mother's hand, and beside it, her baby daughter, Lengui. Although she was too small to eat or to sell as smoked meat, there was a chance a price could be found for Lengui alive. In the meantime, the villagers tied her there, bringing her some fruit to keep her alive. Word spread, and after a few days her story reached Odzala National Park. Immediately, a scout was sent on a motorcycle to rescue her. He returned with her tied in a home-made basket on his back. When she arrived, dirty and exhausted, she gratefully swallowed a whole bottle of water with local honey mixed in, and fell asleep in a box full of fresh green leaves.

A week later, having recuperated some of her strength during her stay at Odzala, Lengui made the two-day trip to Brazzaville. Her arrival at the gorilla orphanage on the 22 April 1994 saved her life. The orphanage staff immediately provided her with what she was missing most - the physical contact and affection essential to young gorillas. They also treated her three different types of intestinal worms, perhaps picked up from the fruits given her by the villagers, and her infected sores from the rope that had been tied around her waist. They fed and watered her, slowly at first, gradually increasing to a nutritious diet. Unlike many orphan gorillas, she survived the initial few weeks, regained her health, and soon joined a group of other gorilla orphans rehabilitating in a small forest in Brazzaville.

In June 1997 civil war hit Brazzaville. Lengui and the rest of her group were evacuated under fire to the coastal city of Pointe Noire, where she remained almost a year and a half until calm had returned to Brazzaville and



Lengui after surgery (above) to amputate her hand, destroyed by a poacher's snare and irreparable (below).
Photos courtesy of Christelle Chamberlan.

the surrounding areas. By then, November 1998, she was already six years old, so rather than returning to the abandoned orphanage in Brazzaville, she and her group were transported to a protected area 130 km north of Brazzaville, the Lesio-Louna Gorilla Reserve. This is an area of savannah hills with gallery forests along the numerous rivers feeding the Lefini and eventually the Congo rivers. The site was selected to give the orphan gorillas a chance to learn the skills necessary to survive in the wild. In December 1998 she was fully released into the Lesio-Louna, along with the rest of her group, three males and three other females. Lengui thrived in her new surroundings, so much so that in January 2001 she left the group with whom she had been released and joined the dominant group in the reserve, the first true case of female transfer between groups ever observed in released orphan gorillas. This was a good sign that the behaviour exhibited by the orphans was similar to that of wild gorillas, despite the artificial nature of their social relationships.

However, while the core area of the Lesio-Louna Reserve was well patrolled by project staff, Lengui and her group were ranging further and further afield, into areas where hunters were able to avoid the park guards and lay snares. On the 26 April 2002, project staff located Lengui's group in the south of the reserve, and noticed that Lengui had an injured hand. She was not using the hand for walking. She had not been observed directly since 28 March, and it was apparent that, just like her mother eight years earlier, she had caught her hand in a snare. Unlike her mother, though, by her sheer strength she had been able to rip the snare from the ground, but in her efforts to remove it had only succeeded in tightening the metal cable around her palm. The group was led back to base camp, arriving on the 29 April, and Lengui was lured into a cage for closer inspection. The prognosis was not good. The snare had cut through her palm to the bone. All her fingers were dead, the flesh rotten. An infection had spread to her wrist. Two days later, a vet arrived from Kinshasa, anaesthetized Lengui, and amputated her arm below the elbow. Without such intervention, she would most likely have died from blood-poisoning, as her mother may well have done. Had she been a wild gorilla, this effect of the bush-meat trade

would have gone unrecorded. As it was, Lengui remained caged until the 15 May 2002, on a course of antibiotics and with regular bandage changes. She rejoined her group in the forest, and despite her handicap and an increased wariness of humans, she has continued to thrive.

On 18 January 2003, Lengui was one of a group of five gorillas released to the more isolated Lefini Reserve, the first release in a long-term programme to re-introduce gorillas to this reserve, from where the species was extirpated by over-hunting at least fifty years ago. The movements of the group are now monitored daily, and the project staff are confident that through their vigilance the zone is now free from hunters and their snares. Twice a victim of the bush-meat trade, Lengui hopes finally to live in peace and security. On 13 April 2004, ten years after Lengui lost her mother, possibly to the day, a newborn gorilla was seen in the Lefini Reserve for the first time in living memory. He was born not to Lengui, but to Djembo, the oldest member of the re-introduced group. His presence in her group is now helping to recreate that family atmosphere Lengui vaguely remembers from ten years ago in north-west Congo. With your help, let us not allow a third generation of her family to feel that sudden tug on their hand as they roam their forest home.

Questions for you to answer from this story:

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| 1. What 3 animals are the most closely related to humans? | 7. What does a gorilla group do during the day? | body with a young gorilla or chimpanzee? |
| 2. On which continent can you find all of these? | 8. What does a gorilla group do during the night? | 15. Where was Lengui released in December 1998? |
| 3. What species of animal is Lengui? | 9. What do gorillas eat? | 16. What does 'female transfer' mean? |
| 4. What country does Lengui come from? | 10. At what time of year do gorillas eat more fruit? | 17. What happened to Lengui when her hand was trapped in a snare? |
| 5. How large is a typical gorilla group in Congo? | 11. What happened to Lengui's mother? | 18. What would have happened to Lengui if the vet had not amputated her hand? |
| 6. What name describes the dominant male in a gorilla group? | 12. Why was Lengui not killed when she was found by some local villagers? | 19. Where is Lengui now? |
| | 13. Is it legal to kill, keep or sell a gorilla? | 20. What do you think might happen to Lengui in the future? |
| | 14. What should you do if you see some- | |



Left: Lengui (foreground) with Makoua after their reintroduction to the Lefini Reserve, 2003. Photo courtesy of Christelle Chamberlan.

Tony King
Projet Protection des Gorilles (PPG)
BP 13977, BRAZZAVILLE
Republic of Congo
E-mail: ppg@uuplus.com (text-only messages)
E-mail: ppg_congo@hotmail.com (other correspondence)
Tel #: +882 162 115 7607
or +242 668 12 62
Fax #: +871 763 263 752