

Western gorilla re-introduction to the Batéké Plateau region of Congo and Gabon

Tony King¹ & Amos Courage²

¹ - Scientific Consultant, Gorilla Conservation Projects, The Aspinnall Foundation, Port Lympne Wild Animal Park, Kent CT21 4PD, UK (ppgscience@yahoo.com)

² - Overseas Projects Director, The Aspinnall Foundation, Port Lympne Wild Animal Park, Kent CT21 4PD, UK (amosc@howletts.net)

Introduction

The western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) is classified by IUCN (2007) as Critically Endangered due to past and current rapid population decline, and is listed on CITES Appendix I. The UK-based charity The Aspinnall Foundation is coordinating the re-introduction of the species to the Batéké Plateau region of the neighboring Republics of Congo and Gabon, from where it has been extirpated during the past few decades. This is being undertaken within the framework of the Projet Protection des Gorilles (PPG), initiated in co-operation with the respective governments in Congo in 1987, and in Gabon in 1998. The overall mission of PPG is “to work with local partners for the conservation of indigenous endangered species in general, and of gorillas in particular”. Gorilla re-introduction is one of the activities of PPG to realise this mission. The current re-introduction sites are the south-west Lefini Reserve in Congo, and the Batéké Plateau National Park (PNPB) in Gabon. The two protected areas are approximately 200 km apart, and are subject to collaborative management projects as a result of the re-introduction program.

Goals

- Goal 1: To re-introduce viable, self-sustaining populations of western gorillas within their former range.
- Goal 2: To ensure effective long-term management of the release sites within legally protected areas.

Success Indicators

- Indicator 1: High post-release survival of released individuals.
- Indicator 2: Successful adaptation of released individuals to release site.
- Indicator 3: Exhibition of social and other behaviors similar to those observed in wild populations.
- Indicator 4: Reproduction within the re-introduced populations.
- Indicator 5: Long-term



Western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*)



A male Western gorilla
(*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*)

persistence of the re-introduced populations.

- **Indicator 6:** Improved legal status of the release sites.
- **Indicator 7:** Effective management of the release sites leading to ecosystem recovery.

Project Summary

Planning for the program commenced in Congo in the late 1980s, with a cautious approach taken. Various risks involved were recognized and plans were developed accordingly. Risks to released individuals were minimized through soft-release strategies and intensive post-release monitoring. Risks to wild populations were virtually eliminated by selecting release sites where great apes had been locally extirpated, and other primates were at low densities, and by long-term medical assessments of release stock. The sites selected represented relatively degraded ecosystems, for which the re-introduction of

gorillas was considered beneficial, both in terms of the significant ecological role that the species has been shown to fulfill in central African forests, and through the associated site management activities. The Batéké Plateau supports a fragile ecosystem, with large expanses of nutrient-poor savanna soils and a growing human population heavily reliant on natural resources. The maintenance of ecosystem functioning is therefore of great importance within the socio-economic situation of the region. Long-term political, technical and financial support were considered crucial to the success of such an ambitious program, so both projects benefit from co-operative partnerships between the respective governments and The Aspinall Foundation.

The Aspinall Foundation manages the largest and most successful breeding colony of gorillas in captivity, at the Howletts and Port Lympne Wild Animal Parks in UK, and is fully committed to supporting the re-introduction program in the long-term. The release stock consists primarily of wild-born gorillas orphaned by the illegal bush-meat trade and confiscated by the national governments. Usually less than three years-old at arrival, the gorillas undergo a lengthy period of rehabilitation and preparation prior to full release. The Gabon release stock has been supplemented by hand-reared captive-born individuals transferred from UK, who also require lengthy pre-release preparation. Rehabilitation and preparation is a complex process that includes aspects such as psychological support, social integration, forest adaptation, behavioral and health assessments, and occasional medical interventions.

The gorillas are released in groups established during the preparation phase. Group composition has generally been influenced by the availability of suitable release stock during the pre-release preparation, and group size at release has

ranged from three to 17 individuals. The first releases took place in 1996, followed by further releases in 1998 and 2001, in the Lesio-Louna Reserve in Congo. Despite high post-release survival and successful adaptation to the site, this first attempt was finally abandoned due to the lack of major ecological barriers between the released gorillas and human activity. Large rivers appear to be the most suitable barriers, and are now used in both Congo and Gabon to separate released gorillas from villages, project



Aerial view of release site

camp and local-use zones, although intervention strategies are kept available if necessary. All the surviving gorillas released in the Lesio-Louna were gradually recaptured, and most were re-released in the new site in the neighboring southwest Lefini Reserve in 2003 and 2004. A further three sub-adult females were added to this population in 2006. In the PNPB in Gabon, two groups have been released, in 2001 and 2004. Further releases are planned at both sites.

Post-release monitoring is undertaken by trained national staff using direct and indirect tracking techniques. Initially highly intensive, monitoring is gradually reduced for each group over time to decrease the impact of human presence on gorilla behavior, until it consists simply of a daily or weekly assessment of group ranging, composition and general health. Medical intervention is rarely necessary or even possible, but has been undertaken in some cases. Initial results are encouraging. A total of 51 gorillas have been released between 1996 and 2006, 25 in Congo and 26 in Gabon, consisting of 43 wild-born orphans, plus one *in situ* and seven *ex situ* hand-reared captive-born individuals. Overall post-release survival rates are high, at 84% in Congo and 84.6% in Gabon, and have been similar for males and females and for wild-borns and captive-borns. Other indications of program success include the observed feeding patterns of the released gorillas which include over 100 species of natural food plants, the ranging behavior of the released groups which is similar to that of wild western gorillas, and the exhibition of natural social behaviors such as female transfer and male dispersal. However, probably the highlight of the program so far has been the birth of six babies to re-introduced groups in the past four years. The baby born to the youngest of the six mothers, at 8.5 years-old, disappeared after six weeks, but the first to be born, to a 16.5 year-old, is now over 3.5 years and in good health. Given the slow life-histories of gorillas and the ongoing release stage, it is still too early to judge long-term population persistence. At the site level, two protected areas have been created through the program, and both, plus another formerly neglected protected area, are now subject to collaborative long-term management projects.

Mammals

Major difficulties faced

- Lack of major ecological barriers between released gorillas and human activity at the first release site in the Lesio-Louna Reserve.
- Fairly low numbers of available release stock in-country.
- Small number of released groups leading to rapid and long-distance dispersal by solitary adult males.
- Incompatibility of gorillas with radio-tracking equipment.
- Civil unrest.

Major lessons learned

- Gorilla re-introduction is a feasible and realistic conservation strategy, given sufficient long-term technical, financial and political commitment.
- While the general area for a gorilla re-introduction may be identified through consideration of several ecological, sociological and political criteria, the presence of effective ecological barriers between habituated released gorillas and all human activity should define the specific site for release.
- Intervention strategies should be kept available in case of actual or potential human-gorilla conflict.
- Significant pre-release preparation, soft-release strategies and initial intensive post-release monitoring can ensure high post-release survival rates for both orphaned wild-born and hand-reared captive-born gorillas.
- Re-introduction is a media-friendly process that can be used to raise awareness of conservation issues at national and international levels.

Success of project

Highly Successful	Successful	Partially Successful	Failure
	√		

Reasons for success/failure:

- Highly successful in terms of survival, adaptation and reproduction of released gorillas, and facilitation of protected area management projects.
- It is too early to conclude that the goal of “re-establishing viable, self-sustaining populations” has been realized.

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Cover photo: Clockwise starting from top-left:

- Formosan salmon stream, Taiwan
- Students in Madagascar with tree seedlings
- Virgin Islands boa

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Contact

Details: Pritpal S. Soorae, Editor & RSG Program Officer
E-mail: psoorae@ead.ae