

Gorillas in Crisis

By Kathleen Donovan-Snavely

What will you have for supper tonight? Hotdogs? Pizza? Gorilla? It may surprise you to know that these “gentle creatures of the jungle” regularly appear as the featured entrée at many a meal served near the African rainforest. That isn’t the only problem that haunts gorillas lately. The combined threats posed by hunters, loggers, and disease are eliminating large numbers of gorillas in central and West Africa. The future of gorillas in the wild is at risk.

1.

Gorilla meat is a dietary staple for nearly 12 million people who live near the rainforests of central and West Africa. Some Africans prefer bush meat, such as gorilla, because it provides an economical source of daily protein. Poor families without the means to purchase food at the market travel a short distance to the rainforest to get bush meat. Their only expense is the cost of ammunition and the fee to rent a gun. Some of these same families raise chickens and goats, but do not eat them. Instead, they sell the animals for the cash they need for buying supplies. Africa’s population is increasing rapidly, along with its demand for bush meat. If nothing changes, primatologists fear that gorillas may become *extinct* in the next thirty years.

2.

Moving away from one’s childhood home sometimes leaves us longing for familiar places and traditions. Naturally, the African families who move away from their original rainforest homes struggle with these feelings of sadness and displacement. Now living in villages and cities, they eat bush meat to feel closer to the past and to their old way of life. For them, gorilla feeds the body and the soul as well. This custom brings little comfort to endangered gorillas, whose females produce only one offspring every five to seven years. It is easy to see why gorillas are being killed faster than they can reproduce.

3.

While Africans plunder the gorilla population, they are not the only ones. Over the years, their European neighbors have developed a taste for exotic bush meat as a status symbol. Trophy hunters value gorillas for their collectable heads and hands. Finally, some hunters persist in the decades-long practice of trapping young gorillas to sell to zoos and private citizens across the world. When mature members of the gorilla troop try to defend an infant, hunters shoot to preserve their prize. Entire troops of gorillas have perished this way. The international gorilla trade continues even though it is illegal, since the laws are nearly impossible to enforce. Gorilla populations continue to decline.

4.

You have heard the slogan, "Save the rainforest," with good reason. Conservationists know that if the forest is cut down, the habitat needed to sustain countless tropical plants and animals will no longer exist. Already the loggers who harvest tropical trees have eliminated some of the bush where gorillas live, causing crowding that leads to the spread of disease. Furthermore, logging has depleted the vegetation on which gorillas depend for their daily food. Up to 70 pounds of plants and leaves are required daily for a mature gorilla's diet. Finally, the logging roads that facilitate removal of harvested trees also enable poachers efficiently to remove freshly killed gorillas from the bush to the market for sale. Loggers are endangering the rainforest, along with its inhabitants.

5.

Most recently, a disease called Ebola fever has joined forces with hunters and loggers to further threaten the existence of gorillas. Biologists suspect that the virus was first spread across species with the help of tropical insects. Whatever its origins, we do know that the virus is now carried from gorillas to humans in a deadly cycle. Hunters contract the headache and fever when they kill and eat infected bush meat. As the disease runs its course, internal bleeding leads to death. Meanwhile, an unsuspecting hunter who seems only a bit "under the weather" may return to the bush, effectively sickening an entire troop of gorillas. Ninety percent of all gorillas that get Ebola fever die. Healthy gorillas that come into contact with diseased bodies in the bush get the disease as well. Scientists are currently researching treatments for Ebola. Since human and gorilla DNA are so similar, it is possible that a vaccine for humans will eventually help gorillas as well. Meanwhile, Ebola continues to thrive.

People once thought that gorillas were fierce, threatening animals. Today, scientists know that gorillas live peacefully in family groups. Their only enemies in the bush are people. Watch these "gentle giants of the jungle" now, while you can. Unless we work together to make sure that gorillas survive, they may disappear forever.