

Gorilla welfare

Sarah Monaghan explains how an educational programme is helping to change cultural attitudes to great apes and aid conservation

SEPHORA BINET-MBOTI, aged 13, of Gabon in Central Africa had never travelled as far as the capital, let alone to the developed world. But in December 2009 she boarded a plane for an all-expenses-paid week in Paris. She was one of two children from Gabon and five from Uganda who were taken to France by UNESCO and the French Environment Ministry to be crowned 'Young Ambassadors of the Great Apes' at a culminating event for the UN Year of the Gorilla (YoG).

The event, held on 5 December, was timed to coincide with the run-up to COP15. UN YoG Ambassador Ian Redmond, the British conservationist and colleague of the late Dian Fossey, was at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris for the inauguration ceremony of the children who have returned to their countries in their new ambassadorial roles to spread the conservation message.

The participating children were selected from more than 100 schools in Gabon and Uganda that since 2008 have been taking part in a nationwide educational awareness project called 'Great Apes and their Habitat', devised by primatologist Sabrina Krief of Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, to teach about the importance of protecting great apes from extinction and preventing deforestation and climate change.

Ian Redmond says: 'Getting children involved

is the key to the future. Children will be either the conservationists or the bush meat customers of the future. If we can convince them to help protect the great apes, they will educate their parents and their peers.' The young ambassadors all come from poor families, surviving mainly by subsistence farming, and all live in close proximity to wild gorillas. The project is supported by numerous conservation organisations including the Jane Goodall Institute, UNESCO, the Convention on Migratory Species, the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

It is hoped that later this year the project will be rolled out to Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon.

GREAT APES IN THE GARDEN

The two young ambassadors from Gabon are from forested areas near Loango National Park, which is inhabited by western lowland gorillas. The five from Uganda are from areas close to the Mgahinga and Bwindi national parks, one of the few regions where tourists have the chance to see some of the world's remaining estimated population of 750 wild mountain gorillas.

Both species are considered 'critically endangered' by the IUCN and face extinction. The main threats include logging and loss of habitat, bush meat hunting, disease and the impact of war and political unrest.

Immaculate Nyiransenga, one of the Ugandan young ambassadors to travel to Paris, says that people's attitudes to gorillas in Mgahinga can be negative despite the income gorilla tourism brings in. She says: 'We live on the edge of the park so sometimes the gorillas come into the gardens and raid our banana crops. But now I consider gorillas like my brothers – we have to be tolerant and live together.'



From left, clockwise: Sephora and Guinola visit the Eiffel Tower; with Hermann Loudou, the gorilla project team leader; Guinola shops for Parisian souvenirs



BUSH MEAT CULTURE

In Gabon a survey of the children who took part in the ‘Great Apes and their Habitat’ educational awareness project revealed that up to 70 per cent from the Loango area had eaten gorilla and up to 90 per cent had eaten chimpanzee.

In Asséwé, the small village where Sephora lives, most people get by growing manioc, sweet potato and bananas and small-scale fishing. Over half of the children surveyed here said their fathers regularly went bush meat hunting. ‘In my village people love to eat gorilla and chimpanzee meat,’ says Sephora. ‘They will put a bullet in a gorilla as soon as they see one in a tree.’

But the awareness project changed her mind. ‘I wouldn’t eat gorilla meat now – I couldn’t – the education project has given me a different idea of gorillas. We have to protect them, not eat them,’ she says.

She was accompanied to Paris by Herman Loudou, the Gabonese team leader at the Fernan-Vaz Gorilla Project at Loango National Park. The park has a ‘tourism pays for conservation’ ethos and its operator, Africa’s Eden, supports a pioneering gorilla reintroduction programme that transferred six bush meat gorilla orphans successfully into the wild in July 2009. Loudou was part of the team of conservationists that has visited 66 schools in Gabon with the great apes educational awareness project over the last 18 months. He says: ‘When we started talking of gorillas in terms of their being vulnerable and sensitive creatures, the children looked shocked. They considered them aggressive and frightening and had no idea of the importance of their role in seed dispersal and the forest life cycle.’ As part of the project the children were shown models of gorilla skulls, hands and feet. ‘They were so

like humans’!,’ says Guinola Guigambou, aged 12, who is from Omboué in Gabon and was one of the young ambassadors to be taken to Paris. ‘It made me realise how closely we’re related.’

Changing cultural attitudes is a major challenge to overcome in protecting the dwindling populations of gorillas and chimpanzees in Africa, but progress is being made. Since 2008 more than 15,000 children in Uganda and 4,600 children in Gabon have learned about the necessity to conserve gorillas in the wild though the project and it seems that education is key to changing attitudes. Loudou himself admits: ‘I used to hunt monkeys and sell them for money to buy things I needed, like exercise books for school, when I was a kid.’ While the children are being converted, the adult population may take a little longer. As Ian Redmond explains, gorillas are believed to confer strength: ‘Gorilla is a meat that the village chiefs want to eat because it is a big strong animal and they believe that in eating it, they will become powerful. It’s an engrained cultural attitude we have to try to change. If I’d grown up in a village like that I’d probably think the same thing.’ ■

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