



# African Great Apes



**Our closest relatives are suffering at our hands**

Chimpanzee mother with young, Gombé, Tanzania. © WWF-Canon / Michel Gunther

Inset: Western lowland gorilla, Gabon. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

Africa's great apes are faced with a deadly combination of threats: destruction and degradation of their habitats, commercial hunting for bushmeat and live animal trade, and disease — all largely resulting from conflicts with humans who live alongside them. All African great apes — gorillas, chimpanzees, and Bonobos — have suffered population declines, and many experts predict they might well become extinct in the wild within the next half century. A huge effort is needed to ensure that African great apes continue to survive.

## There are four African great ape species:

**1. Chimpanzees** were once found in 25 African countries, but are now extinct in three or four and nearing extinction in many others. Due to a lack of survey data in many regions, estimates for the wild population are wide, ranging from 172,700 to 299,700. Four sub-species are recognized, all classified as Endangered. Western (*P. t.*

*verus*) and Nigerian (*P. t. vellerosus*) chimpanzees have the smallest populations; the central chimpanzee (*P. t. troglodytes*) has the largest population of up to 115,000 individuals; and the eastern chimpanzee (*P. t. schweinfurthii*) has a moderate population. There is a wide range of behavioural differences between groups from different regions, so the loss of any one group represents a loss of cultural as well as biological heritage.

**2. Bonobos** are arguably our closest living relative. Once known as pygmy chimpanzees, these Endangered animals only occur in the heart of the Congo Basin, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Only one National Park lies within their range, Salonga National Park. Populations have declined rapidly over the last 30 years. Estimates of the surviving population range widely from 60,000 to fewer than 5,000 individuals. Their actual geographic range also remains unknown.

### At a glance:

- Species:** Bonobo (*Pan paniscus*), chimpanzee (*P. troglodytes*), eastern gorilla (*Gorilla beringei*), western gorilla (*G. gorilla*)
- Habitat:** Tropical and subtropical moist broadleaf, semi deciduous and dry forests and montane woodlands
- Range:** West, Central, and Eastern Africa
- Population:** A few hundred to a few tens of thousands, depending on the sub-species
- Status:** Endangered to Critically Endangered (IUCN-The World Conservation Union)

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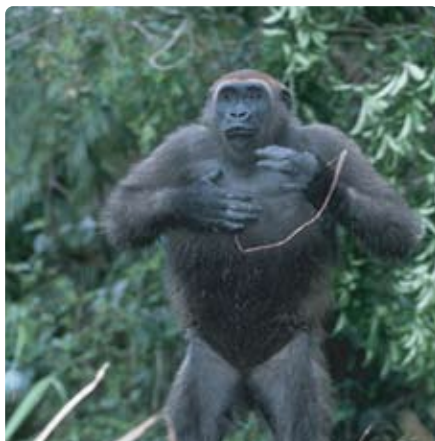
3. Of the two sub-species of **western gorilla**, the Endangered western lowland gorilla (*G. g. gorilla*) is the most widespread and numerous, possibly numbering 100,000 individuals; however there are no accurate estimates of numbers as these elusive apes inhabit some of Africa's densest and most remote rainforests. The recently discovered Cross River gorilla (*G. g. diehli*) is restricted to a small area of highland forest on the border of Cameroon and Nigeria. This Critically Endangered sub-species is probably the world's rarest great ape, with a population of only around 300 divided into several subpopulations, some of which number no more than 20 individuals.

4. Separated from western gorillas by about 900km of Congo Basin forest, **eastern gorillas** inhabit the upland and mountain forests of eastern Central Africa. There are two sub-species: mountain gorilla (*G. b. beringei*) and the Eastern lowland or Grauer's gorilla (*G. b. graueri*). Found only in the Virunga Mountains of DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda and the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest of Uganda, mountain gorillas are Critically Endangered with a total population of approximately 700 individuals. Grauer's gorillas occur at lower altitudes along the western wall of the Albertine Rift Valley in eastern DRC. Classified as Endangered, there are no reliable estimates of their numbers due to lack of census data in remote regions, as well as the unknown impact of decades of civil conflict in eastern DRC. At one time the population could have reached 17,000. The largest protected population, in Kahuzi Biega National Park, has declined markedly in the past ten years due to war-related habitat destruction and hunting.

## What are the problems facing African great apes?

### Hunting and poaching

Great apes have a slow reproductive rate and tend to be distributed patchily within their geographic ranges, making them very vulnerable to hunting. All species are killed and eaten as bushmeat by people in many areas of West and Central Africa, and their body parts are also used in traditional medicine. These widespread practices are no



Western lowland gorilla, Gabon.  
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longer sustainable under increasing commercialization and human population growth. In the Great Lakes region of eastern Central Africa and in some West African countries, years of armed conflict have forced many urban people to flee into the forest where they must hunt wild animals, including apes, for food. Mountain gorillas are also hunted for trophies, and there is demand for great ape infants for an illicit trade for pets, private zoos, and collections. Although African great apes are protected by legislation in all the countries they inhabit, government resources to enforce laws are often woefully inadequate.

### Habitat loss

Another grave threat to African great apes is the escalating destruction of forests for human settlements, agriculture, timber production, and road networks. In densely populated West Africa, farming and livestock grazing have claimed most of the lowland rainforests, with little now remaining outside of protected areas. Similar pressures are contributing to the decline of forests in eastern Africa. While vast areas of tropical rainforest survive in Central Africa, particularly in the Congo Basin, they too are under increasing threat from new logging concessions.

### Disease

The slow reproductive rate and patchy distribution of African great apes also makes them vulnerable to disease. The Ebola virus has decimated many populations: for example, the virus wiped out up to 90 per cent of the largest populations of western lowland gorillas in Northern Congo and Gabon. As more people move into ape habitat, and more tourists come to see great apes, they are also becoming increasingly exposed to a variety of human ailments.

### Conflict with humans

When humans and apes live in close proximity, conflict sometimes occurs. In Uganda, chimpanzees raid crops such as banana, maize, and sugar cane, and have been known to attack human infants. In response, affected farmers put out traps, snares, or poison to kill the crop-raiders. Similarly, mountain gorillas that have lost their natural fear of humans due to gorilla-based tourism also raid crops.



Park ranger clearing away wire snare animal traps, Virunga National Park, DRC.  
© WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey





Left to right: Western lowland gorilla, Central Africa; Tourists and park guards observing a mountain gorilla, Virunga National Park, DRC; Bonobo, DRC. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

## What is WWF doing to reduce threats to African great apes in the wild?

African great apes are ‘flagship’ species for their habitats — that is, charismatic representatives of the biodiversity within the complex ecosystems they inhabit. Because these animals need a lot of space to survive, their conservation will help maintain biological diversity and ecological integrity over extensive areas and so help many other species.

In 2002 WWF launched the African Great Apes Programme. Drawing on over 40 years of experience in great ape conservation, the programme’s long-term aim is to conserve viable populations of all species and sub-species of African great apes, through improving protection and management, increasing public support, and establishing conservation policies and laws to protect apes and their habitat. WWF also works with TRAFFIC — the international wildlife trade monitoring network organized and operated as a joint programme by and between WWF and IUCN–The World Conservation Union — on monitoring and reducing illegal trade in great apes and their body parts.

## Examples of current work to protect African great apes include:

**1. In Côte d’Ivoire**, WWF is working with the Ministry of Environment to conserve Tai National Park — part of the largest area of undisturbed tropical rainforest in West Africa, and a haven for the western chimpanzee. Special focus is placed on education, bio-monitoring of chimpanzees, and protected area management.

**2. Nigeria’s** 6,500 km<sup>2</sup> Gashaka Gumpti National Park is home to several thousand Nigeria chimpanzees. In this part of West Africa, chimpanzees are not hunted because most of the local people are Hausas, who as Muslims do not eat primates. WWF is working with the government, the Nigeria Conservation Foundation, and other partners to strengthen management of the park and improve the livelihoods of the Hausas living around it.

**3. In the highland forests on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria**, WWF is working with the Wildlife Conservation Society and the governments of the two countries to save the Cross River gorilla. The project is helping to strengthen protection and law enforcement measures and aims to improve cooperation between the two countries for protecting the gorillas. An important goal is to establish new protected areas (such as the proposed Kagwene Mountains Gorilla Sanctuary in Cameroon) and to establish protected corridors of forest habitat that will allow movement of gorillas between different groups.

**4. In Gabon, the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic (CAR)**, WWF is working to strengthen forest protected areas that harbour chimpanzees, western gorillas, and other threatened species. In Cameroon, WWF is championing protection of Campo Ma’an National Park, including special focus on bio-monitoring of great apes and possible ecotourism options. WWF will also reinforce great ape conservation in and around Cameroon’s Lobeke, Boumba Beka, and Nki National Parks, as well as the newly created Ngoila-Mintom corridor, through establishment of a targeted bio-monitoring programme and increased law enforcement measures including patrol posts. In Gabon, WWF is assisting the Gabonese Ministry of Water and Forests in the Minkebe Conservation Project: a 6,000km<sup>2</sup> area recently declared as a national park. In Congo, WWF is reinforcing protection of Odzala National Park and works with partners on preventative measures to reduce the impact of possible future Ebola outbreaks. WWF additionally shares its long-established expertise on great ape habituation and tourism in CAR with other priority sites in Central Africa.

**5. In DRC**, efforts to protect Grauer’s gorilla have intensified after years of warfare left Kahuzi Biega National Park derelict. WWF is funding and equipping anti-poaching patrols of the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), which are now able to protect parts of the park previously affected by illegal mining and poaching. Park staff are also monitoring more than 80 Grauer’s gorillas belonging to seven family groups. WWF is also helping to develop a management plan for the Itombwe Massif, a currently unprotected area south of Kahuzi-Biega, which is thought to have a sizeable population of Grauer’s gorillas.

**6. Also in DRC**, WWF focuses on Bonobo conservation in Salonga National Park and the Lac Tumba region. In addition to surveys and prioritizing core conservation zones, WWF helps to train and equip park staff and researchers, and is supporting anti-poaching operations.

**7. In DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda**, WWF has been working for 30 years to save the mountain gorilla and its forest habitat (see Focus Project).

**8. In Uganda**, WWF is working with CARE International on an Integrated Conservation and Development Programme with local communities and the National Forest Authority in and around Kasyoha Kitomi Forest Reserve, home to about 500 eastern chimpanzees. The project aims at safeguarding this forest while promoting sustainable livelihoods for local people.

## Focus Project: Virunga Mountains; DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda

Volcanic and often shrouded in mist, the Virunga Mountains rise to over 4,500m along the borders of DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda. Their marshy deltas and peat bogs, open grasslands, and high-elevation forests form one of Africa's most biologically diverse regions, with many endemic species.

The six dormant volcanoes are home to more than half the world's 700 mountain gorillas, whose forest habitat is protected by the three adjacent parks: Virunga National Park (DRC), Volcanoes National Park (Rwanda), and Mgahinga National Park (Uganda).

But mountain gorilla habitat is far from secure, particularly in DRC. The protected forests are now islands in a sea of agriculture and livestock pastures. Since civil war and ethnic strife erupted in DRC in the early 1990s, poachers, refugees, soldiers, and rebels have ravaged Virunga National Park. Invasion has continued even with recent relative stability: in 2004, encroaching farmers and pastoralists turned 15km<sup>2</sup> of the park into farming and grazing areas in less than a month.

The wars and civil unrest have made wildlife protection and management extremely difficult, and often dangerous. A number of rangers have been killed by rebels using Virunga National Park as a refuge.

Despite the danger, conservationists have continued to work to save the mountain gorilla and its habitat. Since 1987, WWF, in collaboration with the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), has supported conservation initiatives including environmental awareness and education, sustainable livelihoods, reforestation, as well as equipping and paying salaries for Virunga park staff. In 2002, WWF also provided

additional funding to increase the numbers, duration, and coverage of anti-poaching patrols in Volcanoes National Park, leading to the arrest of poachers and a complete stop in poaching.

Formed in 1991, the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), a joint initiative of AWF (African Wildlife Foundation), FFI (Flora and Fauna International), and WWF, works on a number of fronts. For example, a ranger-based monitoring system has been established, where data on the gorillas and their habitat is continuously collected and analysed. The information is fed to park authorities in DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, and has greatly helped focus management and conservation activities to specifically address the threats faced by mountain gorillas.

An important aspect of IGCP's work is to strengthen links with the local communities who live alongside mountain gorillas and to develop sustainable tourism based on viewing the gorillas.

The success of these conservation measures is borne out by a recent survey which found that mountain gorilla numbers in the Virunga Mountains have increased by 17% over the past 14 years, to 380.

IGCP and WWF are also active in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, the only other habitat for mountain gorillas.

The Virunga Mountains are part of the Albertine Rift Montane Forests Ecoregion and the Ruwenzori-Virunga Montane Moorlands region of the East African Moorlands Ecoregion – two of WWF's Global 200 Ecoregions, biologically outstanding habitats where WWF concentrates its efforts.



Virunga National Park, DRC.  
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Mountain gorilla mother and young, Virunga National Park, DRC.  
© WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

### Find out more...

This fact sheet is designed to give a broad overview of some of the threats faced by African great apes, and to give examples of WWF and TRAFFIC's work and solutions on the ground. For more detailed information on species, WWF, TRAFFIC, and the work we do, please visit [www.panda.org/species](http://www.panda.org/species) and [www.traffic.org](http://www.traffic.org)

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WWF International  
Avenue du Mont-Blanc  
CH-1196 Gland  
Switzerland

tel: +41-22 364 9111  
fax: +41-22 364 0640