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EMPTY FORESTS

How politics, economics and
corruption fuel live great
ape trafficking

Daniel Stiles

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Cover: The only gorilla in Thailand, Bua Noi was trafficked to Pata Zoo in Bangkok from Equatorial Guinea in 1987 © Daniel Stiles

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Black Market Briefs

This is the third in a series of briefs by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) that examine market dynamics and prices of selected live and derivative products in the illegal wildlife trade (IWT).¹ These briefs are intended to present a snapshot of current product supply factors in East and Southern Africa, demand levels in destination countries, the impact on species population numbers and overall conservation status.

These black market briefs will also consider how externalities, such as statutory changes, economic conditions or the COVID-19 pandemic, might influence market dynamics and prices. Market dynamics include description of the product, supply sources, means of acquisition, identification of the perpetrators, quantities traded, transport methods and routes, and changes in these elements over time.

The value of price studies is that knowledge of current producer, exporter and importer wholesale selling prices, when compared to historical prices, provides insights on levels of demand, which can predict direction of trend in

illegal off-take. Retail prices of processed wildlife products are much less useful as there are too many variables to control that influence price, including quality, unknown quantity (as in medicinal products), location sold (street or online price is much lower for the identical product than in a luxury boutique or auction house), socio-economic status of the buyer and so on.

Price data of IWT products is difficult to collect accurately because of the covert nature of the market and the supply chains that feed it. There is no complete data for all points in the trade chain, from supply origin through the transport stages (which usually involve different middlemen) to the final destination country, processing point and distribution to consumers. Product supply can also derive from multiple types of sources (for example, wild or captive bred, field poached or legal stockpile leakage) that also influence the producer price at the beginning of the trade chain, which has knock-on effects at different points along the trade chain.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CAR	Central African Republic
CCF	Cheetah Conservation Fund
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CTD	CITES Trade Database
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EAGLE	Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement
GRASP	UN Great Apes Survival Partnership
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWT	Illegal wildlife trade
MA	Management authority (CITES)
PASA	Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
PEGAS	Project to End Great Ape Slavery
SA	Scientific authority (CITES)
SC	Standing Committee (CITES)
SGA	IUCN Primate Specialist Group's Section on Great Apes
SSC	Species Survival Commission (IUCN)
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime



OVERVIEW

Africa's great ape sanctuaries have become inundated with new arrivals, rescued from the collateral damage of the bushmeat trade and targeted trafficking to supply the exotic pet trade and the growing commercial zoo and safari park industry. As a consequence of the illegal trade, several species of great ape are in decline, and those involved in managing sanctuaries or in wildlife law enforcement fear the extinction of chimpanzees and bonobos should big international NGOs not act soon.

Over the past two decades there has been a spike in demand for exotic animals as pets, linked to the increasing capture of mainly young exotic animals in the wild, putting even more pressure on the survival of endangered species. Great apes, other primates, big cats and a few other exotic animals top the list of things to be shown off on social media by owners seeking to attract attention and status. Concurrently, private commercial zoos posing as 'rescue' or 'conservation' centres have also increased in more countries around the world, driving demand for photogenic, playful, endearing young animals that can draw in paying visitors. Joe Exotic's big cat zoo in Oklahoma, made famous in the Netflix series *Tiger King*, is just one example.²

The internet, via e-commerce and social-media marketing, is a favoured method for bringing consumers to suppliers. The major suppliers, who are often also exotic pet owners or zoo owners, are coming together in loose networks to buy and sell exotic animals, including great apes, and to find new customers. Some of these exotic animal social-media stars have millions of followers on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. TikTok and Snapchat are also becoming major marketing and deal-making platforms for exotic pets. A video post of a chimpanzee infant dressed in children's clothing, for example, can quickly reach numerous potential buyers. The trade deals are then negotiated out of public view, in private-messaging apps.

There has been a wave of chimpanzee infant captures and rescues in tropical Africa in recent years. © PEGAS



A skull trafficker arrested in April 2022 with gorilla, chimpanzee and monkey skulls in Cameroon. © EAGLE

The 'captive breeding facility' has emerged to evade the restrictive trading regulations established by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), as trade can be permitted if certain criteria are met, primarily stating that the animal was not born in the wild. These facilities, effectively commercial zoos, are open to the public, and the owners gain free advertising when paying visitors post their experiences interacting with exotic animals on social media. It's a lucrative business model: attract animal buyers online from visitor posts made by people who have paid for the experience. The social media companies also gain significant income from the views generated by the posts – the 'click' economy – an incentive to them not to enforce their own rules prohibiting illegal user activity.

The under-reporting of great apes seized in illegal trade incidents, both nationally and internationally, is flagged as a serious problem in bringing a true appreciation of the great ape trafficking situation to the attention of governments, international organizations and the media. Relevant institutions in the UN system and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are singled out as needing improvement in their approaches concerning the illegal trade in great apes.

By far the main demand driver for removing African great apes from the wild is for bushmeat, sold in local markets or transported to urban areas. Great ape body parts, particularly skulls and hands, have a local market for use in traditional medicine or rituals, and the skulls are sometimes purchased overseas by collectors, academic institutions and artists.³ Several seizures have been made of great ape skulls nationally or shipped internationally.

This report deals only with live African great ape trafficking, but infant capture often results as a byproduct of bushmeat hunting. Another potential deleterious impact of the illegal great ape trade was thrust into the spotlight by the COVID-19 pandemic. The most likely cause of the pandemic is that the virus passed from an infected wild animal to humans in a food market,⁴ although the possibility of a leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology is favoured by some.⁵ Most illegal great ape imports are done without veterinary health inspections or certificates, which raises considerably the risk of introducing one or more zoonotic diseases to humans in destination countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised government and public awareness about the health risks involved in the illegal wildlife trade (IWT), which may lead to better legislation aimed at controlling this frequently ignored threat.

Black market great ape prices

Great ape prices at source levels in African rural areas appear to have remained stable over the past decade at approximately US\$25–US\$270 per individual, depending on the species. Chimpanzees are the least expensive, with gorillas costing up to 10 times more. However, the prices at the level of middlemen who operate in villages and towns and supply great apes to the export cities have risen since 2012, with the lowest recorded at US\$135 for a chimp and the highest (US\$10 000) paid by an exporter to a middleman supplier. No recent middleman prices for bonobos or gorillas are available. The prices that exporters are demanding from overseas buyers, however, have spiked considerably in recent years, and today reach US\$50 000 for a chimp without CITES papers and US\$100 000 for a chimp with fraudulent CITES permits, transportation included. The export price for an infant gorilla can reach US\$250 000. Importer selling prices are correspondingly higher, with costs of US\$82 000 for an undocumented chimp and US\$548 000 for a gorilla recorded in Dubai in 2022.⁶

This report describes the evolution of this recent black market, which is different in important respects from the traditional exotic animal markets that preceded it. In some countries, the political and economic interests of corrupt government and law enforcement officials facilitate the illegal trade and hinder effective actions to stop it. Even international organizations dedicated to wildlife conservation are not free from the political and economic interests that impede successful trafficking-mitigation efforts, particularly in the case of great apes.

Key findings

- Rates of great ape poaching and infant capture have risen in most African range states since the onset of COVID-19 travel restrictions, shutdowns and the decrease in tourism.
- International smuggling has grown in certain countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Guinea, since at least 2020.
- A great ape trafficking network based in Guinea, working with corrupt national CITES officials, was broken up over the course of 2013–2015, but there are remnants of it and unknown new networks have emerged.
- Domestic rural prices for ape infants have remained stable, but export and importer selling prices have spiked to more than double pre-2016 prices.
- Certain social media wildlife influencers and commercial wildlife zoos and parks, often associated, have become epicentres of demand for live wildlife use, marketing and trade.
- These captive wildlife facilities are increasingly acting as centres for laundering wild-caught animals and illicit trade, producing a new form of the ‘C-scam’ pioneered in South Africa (see box: ‘Tricks of the trade’).
- African suppliers are collaborating with certain international dealers to form loose transnational organized crime networks moving great apes from source to end market.
- UN and IUCN organizations responsible for reporting on and controlling the illegal great ape trade are failing to do so.



Capturing great ape infants usually means killing the mothers and often other apes in the vicinity.

© Alain Lushimba

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE ILLEGAL GREAT APE TRADE

The great ape trade involves a complex, overlapping set of relationships between international and national institutions and interest groups, and the ways in which these shape policy and implementation of the regulations regarding trade. In the case of the great ape trade, the main international institutions are CITES, relevant UN agencies and certain big international NGOs. The principal government institutions are governments, national CITES management authorities (MAs), law enforcement agencies (including wildlife agencies and customs departments), the military, international and national NGOs, and indigenous peoples and local communities. The international elements interact with the national institutions and interest groups. Figure 1 presents a simplified schematic illustration of these relationships. Each of these entities has particular interests and aims, not always in alignment with the others.

National issues

In Africa, the overriding issue has been the corruption of some elements of the military, police, judicial, wildlife and customs authorities, who either are bribed to frustrate law enforcement, or who become active participants in the trafficking. This corruption can even reach the highest levels of political leadership in governments. Politicians interfere with the authorities in arrests, prosecutions and even sentencing. The primary motivations are economic gain, although political concerns may be involved if political authorities intervene to protect political allies or family members involved in the trafficking.

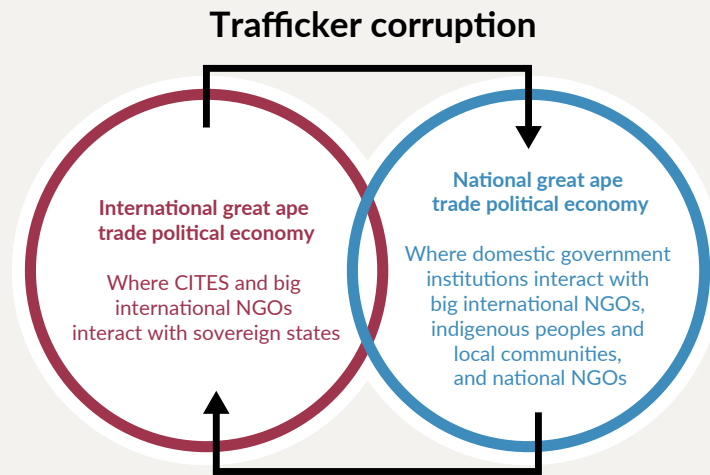


FIGURE 1 The international and national components involved in the political economy of the illegal great ape trade. Influential transnational criminal organizations can corrupt government and national institutions, which feeds back into the international system.

SOURCE: Adapted from Corporate Financial Institute, Political economy, <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/economics/political-economy>.

The case of the Sidibe-Traore organized criminal network in Guinea is an example of a situation in which all of these authorities became involved. The network allegedly bribed the Guinean CITES MA in exchange for falsified CITES export permits. They even reused altered permits originally used for other species to export Appendix I specimens. When arrests were forced upon law enforcement by evidence provided by Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement (EAGLE) and US law enforcement, the

courts convicted. However, the CITES MA official was pardoned by the president of Guinea and the others received trivial sentences, no doubt under political pressure.⁷ This is not unusual in Africa, as previous GI-TOC reports have demonstrated.⁸ At the receiving end, particularly in China and Armenia, the CITES MAs did not cooperate in investigations and denied all involvement. These national institutions in effect facilitated the trafficking of hundreds of great apes.

International issues

Ofir Drori, founder of the Last Great Ape Organization and EAGLE, revealed back in 2013 that despite being known to authorities, major ape dealers continue to operate with impunity. This is partly because the international institutions created to deal with wildlife conservation and IWT have not given the same attention to the illegal great ape trade as they have given to other major species. The most important of these are CITES, the UN Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP), and the Section on Great Apes of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group.⁹ All three maintain that

illegal trade poses no major threat to great ape conservation, and the last two assert that habitat loss is the much greater threat, in spite of research that shows a more complex picture.¹⁰

The motivation behind great ape killing seems increasingly to include live trade along with the more traditional bushmeat, body parts and crop protection, particularly as transport and electronic communications infrastructure have penetrated even the most remote landscapes, facilitating trade.

CITES

In 2004, the 13th Conference of the Parties (CoP) adopted Resolution 13.4, 'Conservation of and trade in great apes', which urged all parties to adopt national legislation to prohibit the trade in wild-caught great apes for any commercial purpose, with deterrent penalties. After abundant evidence was produced by the UN's 'Stolen apes' report¹¹ and NGO investigations over subsequent years that certain parties were not implementing key provisions of Resolution 13.4,¹² a push was made at the 65th Standing Committee (SC 65) meeting in 2014 for the establishment of a working group to discuss the evidence for illegal trade and recommend actions that parties could take.

In spite of evidence to the contrary, the CITES secretariat's report on great apes to SC 65 stated that 'although there is some illegal trade in great apes, data from official sources suggest that the illegal international trade in great ape specimens is currently limited'. Further in the report, the secretariat noted that 'there is very little illegal international trade in great ape specimens'.¹³

Lack of government reporting is a main cause of the perception that little illegal great ape trade occurs. As a UN body, CITES only accepts official government reporting as a source. The World Customs Organization is a key source for official data reporting on great ape seizures, which also goes into the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World WISE database of wildlife seizures.¹⁴ These reporting mechanisms primarily use the seizures made at the point of export or import (e.g. airports and land border crossings), which miss the majority of seizures made elsewhere.

Despite the Secretariat's dismissive report¹⁵ on great ape illegal trade, Niger requested the creation of the working group. The request had considerable backing, including from Côte d'Ivoire, the Species Survival Network, the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) and other NGOs. Notable exceptions were GRASP and the IUCN. Most of the species on the SC meeting agenda had a working group, including elephants, rhinos, Asian big cats, cheetahs, pangolins, sharks and rays, snakes, and even sturgeons and paddlefish.

After consultation with the CITES secretary-general, the SC chairman announced that great apes could be discussed in the working group on Special Reporting Requirements.¹⁶ However, the Special Reporting Requirements working group is not the appropriate forum in which to examine in detail the evidence for the illegal great ape trade and make recommendations for amending Resolution 13.4.

Two SC member parties at the 66th CITES SC meeting in 2016 recommended that a 'great ape working group be established by the SC to examine this evidence in more detail with the objective to recommend revisions to Resolution Conf. 13.4 (Rev CoP16) to address weaknesses in current wording',¹⁷ particularly in problems related to trade in specimens claimed to be derived from captive breeding, and Decision 16.67, which recommended the establishment of an illegal trade reporting mechanism for great apes.¹⁸ Yet as of CoP19 in 2022, there was still no great apes working group in CITES. In fact, there was not even an agenda item or document report on the status of the illegal great ape trade at CITES CoP19.

GRASP

GRASP was launched in 2001 by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to help ensure the long-term survival of great apes. The GRASP Global Strategy¹⁹ and the most recent Priority Strategy (2013–2016)²⁰ include numerous references to illegal trade as a main threat to great ape conservation and to planned actions to address that threat. Until 2016, GRASP was quite active in working with collaborators in conducting investigations, making joint missions to discuss illegal trade with governments, gathering data on illegal trade and creating an ape seizures database, engaging actively with CITES and publishing reports on the illegal great ape trade, including the 'Stolen apes' report.²¹

When GRASP changed leadership in 2016, almost all illegal trade activity stopped. The Great Apes Seizures Database launched by GRASP at CoP17 in 2016 has not reported any seizures since then;²² illegal trade investigations and visits have ceased; no further reports on illegal trade have been published; the activity map on the website does not function; and the GRASP history stops at 2017 on the website.²³ GRASP members have not met since before the 2017 CITES 70th SC meeting and no staff even attended CoP18 in 2019 or CoP19 in 2022.

The one UN institution created specifically to deal with great ape conservation apparently no longer serves that function in respect of illegal trade work, although a GRASP staff member assured the GI-TOC that 'illegal trade and related issues will be of growing significance in GRASP.'²⁴

IUCN/SSC Great Apes Section

Most IUCN specialist groups include controlling illegal trade as an integral part of their objectives and strategy. The IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group includes a group that deals exclusively with primate commercial exploitation, particularly illegal trade.²⁵ However, the Section on Great Apes (SGA), which has its own website independent of the Primate Specialist Group,²⁶ does not include illegal trade in its activities,²⁷ although the individual species and subspecies conservation action plans do.²⁸

At CITES meetings, representatives of the IUCN have consistently supported the view of the secretariat that illegal great ape trade is limited, and that habitat loss is the main threat to great ape conservation. The SGA did not contribute to a report on great apes for CoP19.

Thus, the three institutions conferred with the most responsibility for dealing with the illegal great ape trade have not given adequate attention to this serious issue.

The institutions conferred with the most responsibility for dealing with the illegal great ape trade have not given it adequate attention.

Tricks of the trade: How to dupe CITES trade controls

CITES is an international treaty that regulates the legal international trade in wild animals and plants to ensure that wild species' survival is not threatened by excessive trade. The convention covers live specimens as well as their parts and derivative products. CITES entered into force in 1975 and there are currently 184 signatories, referred to as parties.²⁹ Each party designates a management authority (MA), which, among other things, is responsible for issuing permits and trade reporting, and at least one scientific authority (SA), which is largely responsible for advising the MA on whether or not the trading of certain species is detrimental to its survival. CITES classifies endangered species according to a system of appendices, which determines the rules and conditions for the international trade in each included species. These are defined in the articles.³⁰

Appendix I includes all species considered to be threatened with extinction that are or may be affected by trade. Trade in specimens must be subject to particularly strict regulation.

Appendix II includes all species that, although not necessarily now threatened with extinction, may become so unless trade is subject to strict regulation.

Appendix III includes only species that any party identifies as being subject to regulation within its jurisdiction for the purpose of controlling exploitation involving other parties.

Some of the highest demand from traders is for animal species listed in Appendix I or II. Appendix II species are still relatively easy to trade, as CITES simply requires an export permit from the exporting country, which signifies that the country's SA believes that the export would cause no threat to the species' conservation. No CITES import permit is needed for Appendix II species.

CITES Appendix I, on the other hand, poses a much greater challenge to exotic animal traders. CITES requires both export and import permits for Appendix I species, assurances that the source is not from the wild, that the intended use is not commercial and that the destination is appropriate and acceptable for live animals.

To assist the national MA in assessing whether an export conforms with CITES regulations, exporters must indicate on the export permit application the source and purpose (i.e. the intended use) of the specimens, using codes. The codes of relevance to live animals are as follows:

Source of specimen codes

W	Specimens taken from the wild
R	Specimens originating from a ranching operation
C	Animals bred in captivity in accordance with Resolution Conf. 10.16 (Rev.).
D	Appendix I specimens bred in captivity for commercial purposes
F	Animals born in captivity (F1 or subsequent generations) that do not fulfil the definition of 'bred in captivity' in Resolution Conf. 10.16 (Rev.)
U	Source unknown
I	Confiscated or seized specimens

Purpose of transaction codes

T	Commercial
Z	Zoo
E	Educational
S	Scientific
Q	Circuses and travelling exhibitions
N	Reintroduction or introduction into the wild
B	Breeding in captivity or artificial propagation
P	Personal

Any Appendix I trade, therefore, should not have a 'W', 'F' or 'U' source code or a 'T' purpose code. CITES offers two loopholes that traders can use to avoid these trade restrictions. The first involves the source code and the second, usually used in conjunction with the first, makes use of the purpose code. If the trade is non-commercial in nature, a CITES Appendix I specimen may be exported if it is second-generation bred and born in captivity (in other words, not captured in the wild), which is source code 'C'.³¹ A non-commercial trade is most commonly indicated by purpose codes 'Z', 'E' or 'S', although there are others used.

It is also possible to trade Appendix I species for commercial purposes if the specimen has been bred in a CITES-registered breeding facility that is approved by the respective national government. Animal exports are given a 'D' source code and 'T' purpose code (commercial). Many valuable big cat, bird and reptile Appendix I species are bred for commercial export, but no CITES-registered facility for breeding and selling great apes exists. Source codes 'C' and 'D' are treated as if they are Appendix II and do not need CITES import permits.

However, there is demand for great apes, and where demand with attractive prices exists, the means to achieving the ends will be found. The means has been termed the 'C-scam'.³² Corrupt national CITES MA officers falsify CITES export permits using the source code 'C' and sell these permits to traffickers (in the case of great apes, for up to US\$5 000 each). For example, from 2007 through 2011, over 130 chimpanzees and 10 gorillas were exported purportedly from Conakry, Guinea, to China using the 'C' source code. All of these great apes were in reality caught in the wild in Guinea (there are no ape-breeding facilities in Guinea) and other great ape range countries. Great apes were also reported in the CITES Trade Database (CTD) during this period as being exported from Guinea to the UAE, Armenia and Russia using the 'C' source code. China reported the imports of these apes to the CTD, but Guinea did not report the exports.³³

Another method used to dupe CITES is the 'Q-scam'. An exporter uses the 'Q' ('Circuses and travelling exhibitions') purpose code, which requires that the same specimens return to the exporting country, but they never do, and the trafficker hopes that no one notices.

Health risks

The COVID-19 pandemic is most likely to have started in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, where the SARS-CoV-2 virus infected humans from animals being sold there. An alternative hypothesis, favoured by various US institutions, is that the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.³⁴ Although the origin host was probably a bat species, which passed on the virus through an intermediary species,³⁵ great ape species pose the highest risk to humans from zoonotic spillover events, because of their close genetic relationship.³⁶ The HIV and Ebola viruses, for example, are most likely to have originated in great apes before being passed on to humans hunting for bushmeat in central Africa. The serious Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, the first occurrence of this strain ever seen in the region, may have been linked to the great ape illegal trade in Guinea, as the outbreak started in a remote great ape habitat area there.³⁷

Any highly contagious pandemic virus emerging in future could also be spread to humans through contact with a wild species, which has prompted calls to put further restrictions on IWT, possibly through an amendment to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.³⁸ There have even been calls to end all wildlife trade, whether illegal or legal, as the best way of reducing the risk of a future zoonotic pandemic.³⁹ In contrast, a recent study by the IUCN concluded that human–wildlife interactions pose a very small risk of zoonotic spillovers when compared to the interactions between humans and domestic animals.⁴⁰

Most illegal great ape imports are done without veterinary health inspections or certificates, which considerably raises the risk of introducing one or more zoonotic diseases to humans in the destination countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised government and public awareness about the health risks involved in IWT, which may lead to stronger legislation aimed at controlling this frequently ignored threat.

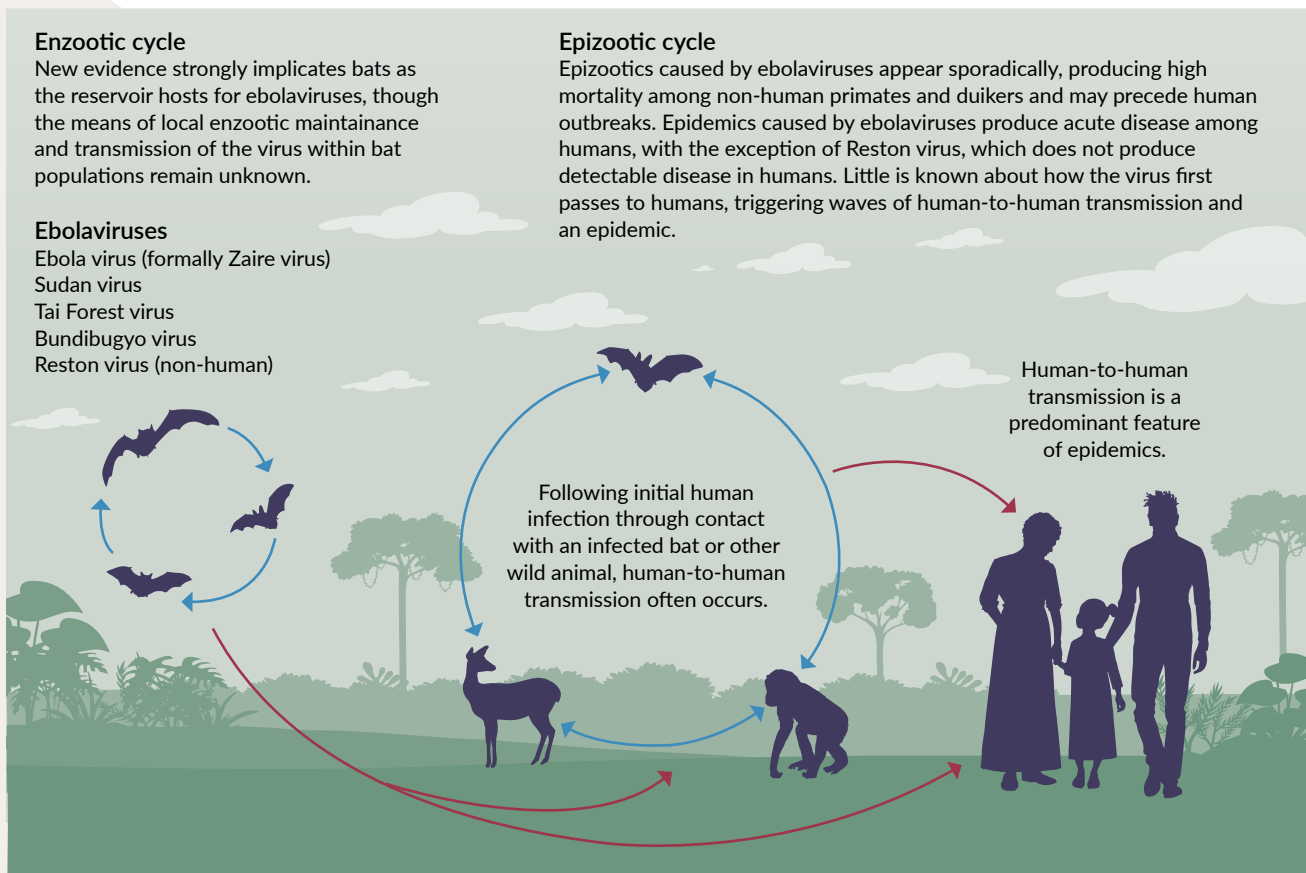


FIGURE 2 Schematic diagram of how the Ebola virus can be passed from the bat reservoir species, through another species and on to humans. This type of transmission route seems to have been the same for COVID-19.

SOURCE: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



MARKET SUPPLY

All great apes are completely protected by national and international laws in all countries of their range. It is, therefore, illegal to kill, capture or trade in live great apes or their body parts.⁴¹

There are two main types of great apes in Africa, the chimpanzee and the gorilla. The chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) has four subspecies distributed in West and central Africa.⁴² The chimpanzee is one of two species in the genus *Pan*, which also comprises the bonobo. The bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) is found only in the DRC, where small groups are spread out over a large area south of the Congo River.⁴³ All *Pan* species are assessed by the IUCN as endangered, except for the Western chimpanzee, which is classified as critically endangered (Figure 3).

There are two recognized species of gorilla, the Western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*) and the Eastern gorilla (*Gorilla beringei*), both with two subspecies: the Western lowland and the Cross River gorilla (Western gorilla), and Grauer's gorilla and the Mountain gorilla (Eastern gorilla) (see Figure 3). All but the Mountain gorilla, which is endangered, are assessed by the IUCN to be critically endangered.⁴⁴

Infants captured in the wild are the most common source of trafficked great apes. The mothers and nearby apes are regularly killed. © Guenter Guni

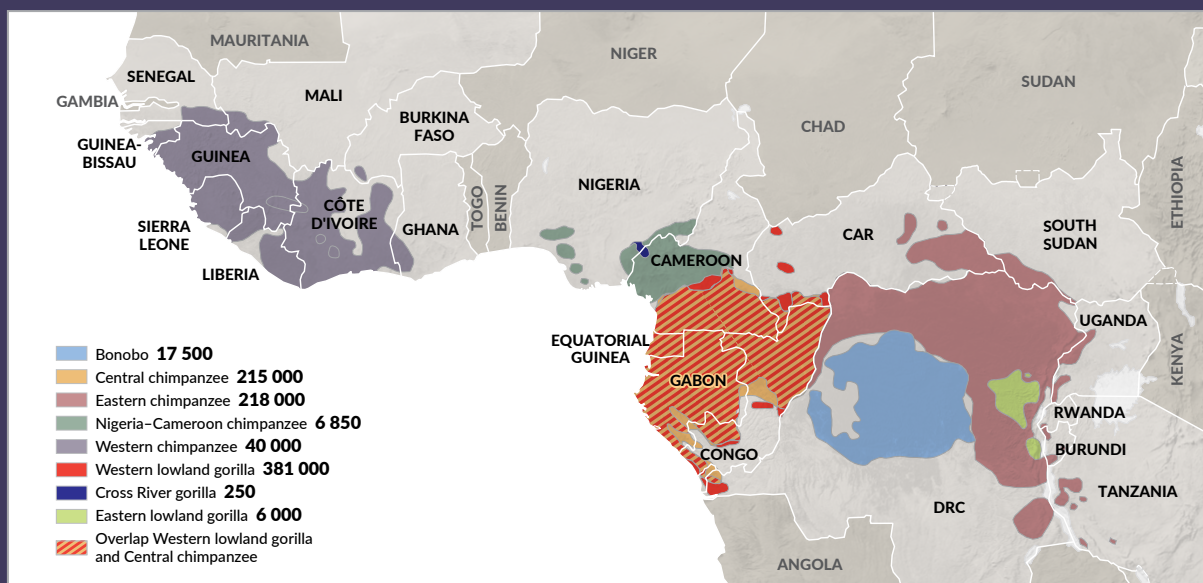


FIGURE 3 Distribution of non-human great apes, with approximate number of each type.

SOURCE: Javier Prado-Martinez et al, Great ape genetic diversity and population history, *Nature*, 499 (2013), 471–475

Location, number of great apes and potential supply to market

Surveying for population numbers rarely depends on actual sightings of the apes, but rather on secondary evidence such as making counts of sleeping nests and dung droppings. The ape numbers are then estimated based on assumptions of densities that are plugged

into statistical models. Figure 4 presents the population number estimates of the different types of non-human African great apes. There are usually quite wide margins of error in these estimates, as the table shows.

Chimpanzees (<i>Pan sp.</i>)	Western ⁴⁵	Nigeria-Cameroon ⁴⁶	Central ⁴⁷	Eastern ⁴⁸	Bonobo ⁴⁹	TOTAL
	18–65	4.4–9.3	114–317	181–256	15–20	332–667
Gorillas	Western lowland ⁵⁰	Cross River ⁵¹	Grauer's ⁵²	Mountain ⁵³		TOTAL
	303–460	0.2–0.3	1.3–9.0	1.0		306–470

FIGURE 4 Population number estimates of the different types of non-human African great apes (in thousands).

The estimate of all chimpanzee subspecies taken together is between 317 400 and 647 300 (approximately 482 000), with roughly an additional 17 500 bonobos. All gorillas together number from around 306 000 to 470 000, or approximately 388 000. All African great apes, therefore, number fewer than 900 000, which is less than the population of a modest-sized city.

Referring to Figure 4 again, the largest potential supply sources of chimpanzees are the areas that the Central and Eastern chimpanzee inhabit, comprising from west to east: Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, southern Central Africa Republic (CAR) and small parts of western Uganda and Tanzania. The largest potential source of gorillas by far is the area that the Western lowland gorilla occupies, being about the same as the territory of the Central chimpanzee.

Supply locations and quantity to market

Since 2020, and especially with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of chimpanzee, bonobo and gorilla captures for export and rescues appear to have increased, based on social media reports and anecdotal observations. Reflecting on the strength of the trade, Adams Cassinga of Conserv Congo declared recently that a video of a captive chimpanzee in the DRC showed just a small sample of thousands of other captive great apes.⁵⁴ Similarly, Franck Chantereau, head of Jeunes Animaux Confisqués au Katanga (JACK), a confiscated-animal sanctuary in Lubumbashi, DRC, revealed the organization to be 'more than busy with baby chimps who have arrived and all the ones who are arriving in the next days or weeks'.⁵⁵ This was echoed by Iris Ho of the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA), who, during discussion of the agenda item on great apes at the 74th meeting of the CITES SC in March 2022, stated that since the beginning of 2020, more than a hundred great apes have been seized in trafficking attempts in Africa.⁵⁶

Offering support to Ho's statement, a number of great ape rescues (some with arrests)⁵⁷ have been reported on social media recently, taking place in various parts of the DRC – including in Mbandaka, Bunia, around Kindu and the Lomami National Park,⁵⁸ and in the Ituri Forest in the north-east.⁵⁹

The number of Bonobo rescues also appears to be rising, as Lola ya Bonobo Sanctuary near Kinshasa, DRC, stated on Facebook: 'With a huge increase in rescues due to an increase in poaching, we have many more mouths to feed.'⁶⁰

Since COVID-19, reports of chimpanzee, bonobo and gorilla captures for export and rescues appear to have increased.

Sanctuaries

Sanctuaries and rehabilitation centres across Africa and Asia play a vital role in the battle against the illegal trade in great apes. These facilities work closely with law enforcement officials and provide permanent care to the apes that are confiscated from illegal traders. The authorities in great ape range countries that have sanctuaries are much more likely to make arrests of traffickers and confiscations of the apes than those in countries that do not have sanctuaries. PASA has 23 member facilities in 13 African countries, which collectively care for approximately 1 300 chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos rescued from illegal trade.⁶¹ Another hundred-plus chimpanzees can be found in two sanctuaries in Liberia and some 14 gorillas are housed in a sanctuary in the DRC, none of which are PASA members. Although some of the sanctuaries were established more than 40 years ago, most were created as a result of the bushmeat crisis and the black market live trade that flourished in the 1990s. The crisis has not abated, however. PASA sanctuaries do not permit breeding, and new apes are added primarily through confiscation of wild-born individuals. Approximately half of the PASA sanctuaries are committed to reintroduction to the wild programmes in accordance with IUCN guidelines.

More than 100 chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos have already been returned successfully to the wild. However, reintroduction is a complex, expensive and highly difficult process. No more than a fraction of the great apes in sanctuaries can ever return to the forests, and reintroduction is only a complement to traditional conservation.

Photo: Daniel Stiles

Government agencies, NGOs and the UN system have been deficient in recording and reporting great ape seizures.

The number of great apes lost to the wild every year, which constitutes the illegal supply level, cannot be estimated with a high degree of accuracy because trafficking is conducted clandestinely. Another limitation to this estimation is the deficient reporting of seizures made in illegal trade incidents. The number of seizures made in national and international illegal trade incidents is the usual method employed to estimate annual trade levels of any illegal product, and to determine trends. However, government agencies, NGOs and the UN system have been deficient in recording and reporting all of the seizures made. There is no operational centralized database collating official government and unofficial non-governmental reports of great ape illegal trade seizures. GRASP launched such a database in 2016,⁶² but access is not permitted to those outside of GRASP and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, which maintains it.⁶³ In August 2022, GRASP provided the GI-TOC with the latest data they have of great ape seizures, but the table contained no details about seizure location, date, whether the seizure took place domestically or internationally, or sources for the numbers, and so the information cannot be used.⁶⁴ All of the other sources used to compile the numbers in Figure 5 included these details.

The GI-TOC has used a combination of the CTD, CITES annual trade reports, TRAFFIC seizures⁶⁵ and various NGO sources (EAGLE, PASA and Robin des Bois). The big international NGOs that report on the wildlife trafficking of elephant ivory, rhino horn and big cats (such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Environmental Investigation Agency and the Wildlife Justice Commission) have not taken up great ape illegal trading in any systematic way.

Figure 5 presents a summary of illegal great ape seizures reported from attempted trades. An effort was made to avoid duplication of reports in the totals by comparing details of date, country and any more complete descriptions. Trades reported in the CTD were assessed as 'definitely illegal', 'technically illegal' and 'possibly illegal'. Only entries in the 'definitely illegal' category have been included in the totals in Figure 5.

Type	Chimpanzee	Bonobo	Gorilla	Total
National ⁶⁶	86	4	5	95
International	67	5	1	73
All	153	9	6	168

FIGURE 5 Estimated number of great apes reported in illegal trade, 2016–2022.⁶⁷

These low numbers should not be interpreted as representing the actual illegal trade numbers, as many seizures go unreported and even more trades successfully reach their destination. The sanctuary rescue numbers are not included because often sanctuary personnel do not know whether trade was involved. To help in improving accuracy, it would be useful if PASA members could report the annual number of rescues made for each species and the circumstances, whether linked to trade or not.

Based on photographic evidence on social media and wildlife facility visits, until recently the majority of chimpanzees seen in trade, both legal and illegal, have been the Western subspecies, located mainly between Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire (see Figure 3). Today there are approximately 40 000 Western chimpanzees left in highly fragmented habitats surrounded by humans. In the past there were many more, but with no good survey data before the 1990s, the number can only be speculated. Gezi Teleki, a pioneering Hungarian primatologist, has estimated that there were approximately 600 000 Western chimpanzees before human population growth took off several decades ago.⁶⁸

Differentiating West African from Central African chimp infants



Central African chimpanzee (left) and Western chimpanzee (right). *Photo: Instagram*

Western chimpanzee infants can be recognized by a dark 'mask' across the eye area. The whole face darkens with age, and by three or four years old, the mask can no longer be detected.

Central African (including Eastern) chimpanzee infants have a clear, white face and ears until about the age of two or three, when it starts to darken. By the age of four or five, it is not possible to distinguish western from central African chimps.

Most of the chimpanzee youngsters seen in captivity in the 1980s to the early 2000s bore the West African masks. Similarly, most posts of chimp infants on social media are of the Western variety, but the white face of central African chimpanzees appears to be increasing in frequency. The Western chimp population being much smaller than the central African population – the latter standing at approximately 434 000 – indicates that illegal trade levels have been disproportionately high in the West African subregion. This could help explain why there are relatively few Western chimpanzees remaining.

*Between five and
10 great apes
die for every
one captured.*

Transnational organized crime sources

As with other forms of IWT, great ape trafficking has become more organized over time. It now involves poaching gangs run by traders and their middlemen who organize the poaching, capture and transport of young apes from the forest to urban centres for export, sometimes including trans-border movement across Africa. Infant apes from other sources, such as bushmeat hunting and the killing of crop-raiding adults, also find their way into these organized trade chains. Live great apes are most often moved to overseas markets by air, because long-distance shipping to destinations in the Middle East, Europe or Asia, for example, would be difficult to complete successfully by sea.

The capture of great ape infants usually requires the killing of the mother and any older apes in the vicinity. In many parts of West and central Africa, great apes are hunted for bushmeat; in addition to the meat of the adults being sold in markets, there is also a business for various body parts, such as skulls, hands and feet, which are used in traditional medicine or rituals or even exported to collectors.⁶⁹ EAGLE reports having seized 58 great ape skulls since 2016.⁷⁰

While some great apes are killed during the actual hunt, others die later as a result of injuries, illness or mistreatment while in captivity. Infant gorillas are particularly difficult to keep alive after separation from the mother. Estimates indicate that between five and 10 great apes die for every one that is captured.⁷¹

The two most active source countries for great ape illegal supply are the DRC and Guinea. Both have long histories of transnational organized criminal networks being involved in the trade in numerous live wildlife species, especially birds, reptiles and primates.

The DRC network

In the 1990s, many chimp infants were smuggled to Zambia from Lubumbashi, DRC, making their way to the private wildlife parks in South Africa.⁷² Chanterreau estimates that three chimps a month were arriving in Lubumbashi over a 10-year period from 1994 to 2003, with an average of six chimps dying in the hunt for each one captured. This adds up to 360 baby chimps over this period, with another 2 160 killed for bushmeat in south-eastern DRC alone. When JACK opened in 2006, many of the chimpanzee orphans were rescued and put in the sanctuary, and the smuggling to Zambia from Lubumbashi eventually stopped.⁷³

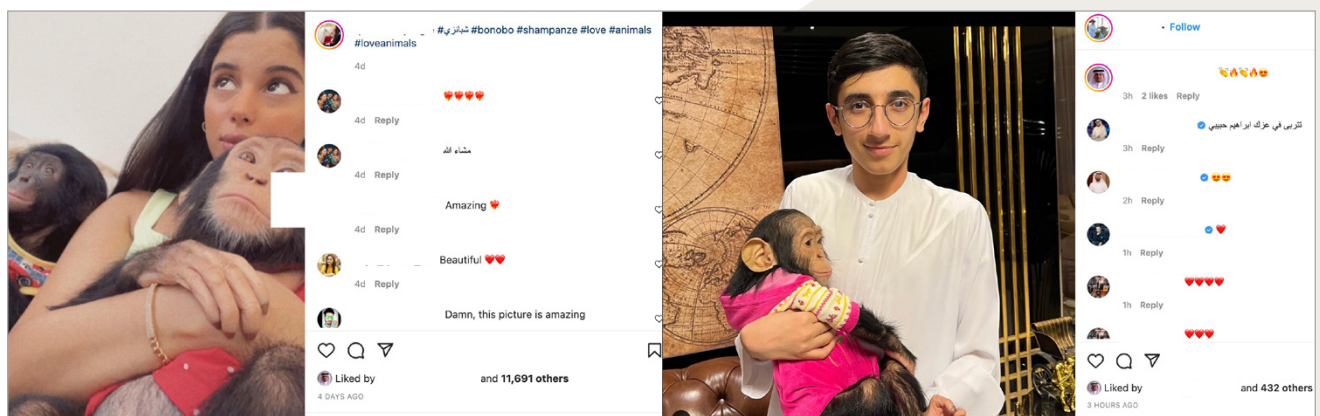
The urban trade in chimpanzee infants has largely ceased, but Chanterreau believes that the hunting continues. Indeed, with the frequency of the calls that JACK is now getting informing of captive orphans in surrounding villages, Chanterreau believes that hunting has increased, and has taken a sinister turn, with entire groups of chimpanzees killed in the capturing of infants.⁷⁴

To drive home the magnitude of the current demand for infant apes in the exotic pet trade, three infant chimpanzees were stolen from JACK sanctuary in September 2022, an unprecedented event.⁷⁵

Other sources, who must remain anonymous, provided some private WhatsApp messages and other videos advertising chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas for sale. Many of these were circulated by a dealer who is located in Dubai. He made an order for 10 additional chimp infants with one of his DRC suppliers shortly before the three chimps were stolen from JACK in September 2022. It is unknown whether the chimp-napping was connected with the order. The fate of the three chimpanzees remains unknown as of March 2023.

During the current ape poaching crisis in the DRC no great apes have been exported with CITES permits – at least not with permits indicating *Pan* or *Gorilla* species. They are being smuggled out, possibly with monkey or bird CITES permits.⁷⁶ No exporter arrests have been made, and no export, in transit or import seizures ('I' source code) have been reported in the CTD involving the DRC.

The fact that so many of the great apes make their way to the DRC's capital city of Kinshasa, where the videos are shopped around, suggests that this is the point of export. In earlier years, the suspected great ape dealers were those also active in exporting birds, monkeys and other live wildlife, who were based in Kinshasa. They had close links with the Guinea network traffickers described below.



Instagram posts featuring chimpanzees and bonobos. Photos: Instagram

Kinshasa roadside traffickers and the DRC armed forces



Monkeys for sale on the Avenue des Poids-Lourds circled in red, with soldiers protecting the location circled in blue. Behind the wall is the military base. © PEGAS

The DRC military has reportedly been linked to wildlife trafficking, particularly ivory but also primates. In July 2021, an army major was arrested and a bonobo seized and sent to Lola ya Bonobo sanctuary.⁷⁷

In October 2014, an investigator from the Project to End Great Ape Slavery (PEGAS) visited Kinshasa and came across two places with great apes for sale along the Avenue des Poids-Lourds, a major road with auxiliary lanes that lead to the Congo River. The Avenue des Poids-Lourds provides access to small river ports and warehouses where various commodities are offloaded from boats coming from upriver. On the side of the road, near the N'Dolo military airfield, PEGAS found cercopithecoid monkeys, a baboon and birds for sale.

As PEGAS noted in their report, 'We stopped and [the assistant] spoke in Lingala with two men. [...] [O]ne of them said that he had just sold a chimp yesterday to a buyer who had flown in from Angola to pick it up for US\$800.'⁷⁸

In addition to uncovering the going prices for all three great ape species, PEGAS discovered the routes through which the apes reach Kinshasa: mainly on river boats from Mbandaka upriver in Equator Province and by road from the



FIGURE 6 The apes arrive mostly by boat from Mbandaka upriver or by road from Mayombe Forest to the west.

Mayombe Forest to the west.⁷⁹ Roadside middlemen took orders with mobile phones from buyers and then placed the orders with those doing the capturing in the wild. Soldiers from the nearby N'Dolo military base were patrolling and protecting the middlemen, so it is possible that a senior army officer was involved in the trade.⁸⁰

The Guinea network

Between 2017 and 2020, Guinea reported 33 chimpanzee seizures to CITES in its Annual Illegal Trade reports, more than any other party to CITES.⁸¹ Additionally, during this period, EAGLE reported five seizures not declared in other sources, and TRAFFIC's Wildlife Trade Portal declared another two chimpanzee seizures from Guinea in 2017,⁸² making a total of 40. Significantly, since 2014, no great ape exports directly from Guinea have been recorded in the CTD. These relatively high numbers of seizures, coupled with the recent photos and videos of West African chimpanzees offered for sale seen by the author on social media and shared by informants, indicate that active chimp trafficking is still occurring.

Guinea is home to the largest remaining population of critically endangered West African chimpanzees. It is also home to the most extensive network of wildlife traffickers in Africa. The network, first signalled by CITES in a 1994 report on alleged infractions of the CITES regulations committed by parties, has a long record of trading great apes.⁸³ Fraudulent CITES export permits from Guinea were involved in a number of attempted trades of chimpanzees and other CITES-listed species to various countries, with Egypt initially emerging as an important destination country for great apes. The fraudulent use of Guinean CITES permits persisted and developed into a more organized system in the following years.

The animals were supplied primarily by two families, whose members established themselves in several West and central African countries, from Guinea to the DRC, where they built relationships with other wildlife dealers throughout Africa. Key leaders included Abdourahamane Sidibe, who worked alongside his son, Abdoul. Thierno Barry negotiated with foreign buyers to sell the illegal animals and Balla Doumbouya was the exporter, both based in Conakry, who prepared the CITES export permits, using names of non-existent companies with false addresses.⁸⁴

From 2007 to 2013, more than 150 chimpanzees, bonobos and possibly gorillas⁸⁵ were exported to various countries (mainly China, but including Russia and Armenia) using fraudulent Guinean CITES permits.⁸⁶ Even after CITES sanctioned Guinea with a commercial trade suspension for these activities,⁸⁷ Ansoumane Doumbouya, the Guinea CITES MA official, continued to issue fraudulent CITES export permits for great apes and other CITES-listed species.⁸⁸ After more than a year of investigations by EAGLE, the Guinean police (National Central Bureau of Interpol) arrested Doumbouya in August 2015 for his suspected role in corrupt and fraudulent actions in the issuing of CITES export permits. Abdourahamane and Abdoul Sidibe were also charged but went into hiding.⁸⁹

Abdourahamane and Abdoul Sidibe were eventually arrested in 2017, both having been sentenced in absentia to five years in prison in 2015 for forgery and the use of forged permits related to the illegal export of chimpanzees. However, these sentences were later significantly reduced.⁹⁰ Balla Doumbouya received a sentence of six months' imprisonment for illegal wildlife trading and paid a fine equivalent to roughly US\$17. Ansoumane Doumbouya was sentenced to 18 months and Barry to 12 months, both with small fines.

Evidence used to gain a conviction included fraudulent CITES export permits found with Ansoumane Doumbouya and copies of wire transfers made into Balla Doumbouya's personal bank account from China. Wires totalling US\$450 000 from the same Chinese bank account were transferred into Abdourahamane Sidibe's bank account, information provided to the court by the US Department of Homeland Security, which investigated Sidibe's operations.⁹¹

Ansoumane Doumbouya appealed his conviction, but was granted a pardon by Guinea's President Alpha Condé before a ruling could be made.⁹²

Uganda: An emerging player

Uganda hosts relatively significant chimpanzee and Mountain Gorilla populations in the south-west of the country, but it has no record of being involved in the illegal great ape trade. There are no CTD reports of exports or imports of live gorillas or bonobos as far back as 1990.

Two lines of evidence suggest that a wildlife conservation centre in Entebbe could be involved in illegal chimpanzee trading, however. The first is a visit made there in March 2016 by Vardanyan, the owner of Jambo Exotic Park in Armenia, who has been linked to alleged great ape and monkey trafficking (see box on previous page). Shortly after visiting the wildlife conservation centre, Vardanyan was arrested with his brother in Tanzania on suspicion of smuggling hundreds of monkeys to Armenia in a chartered Antonov cargo plane at Kilimanjaro International Airport.⁹⁶ No chimpanzees were mentioned as being seized with Vardanyan's monkeys, but Vardanyan's visit to the conservation centre, which held several chimpanzees at the time, means he may have been looking into obtaining chimps at some future date. After seven months in a Tanzanian jail awaiting trial, Vardanyan and his brother were released and the case dropped with no explanation from the Tanzanian authorities.⁹⁷

The second line of evidence is more than suggestive of the conservation centre's involvement in chimpanzee trafficking. In communications by WhatsApp with a confidential informant posing as a zoo owner in search of chimpanzees, the owner of a South African wildlife park offered six chimpanzees for sale at US\$95 000 each, indicating that the chimpanzees were being kept at the conservation centre in Uganda and sending photos of them.⁹⁸ The South African dealer claimed that the chimpanzees would be exported with CITES and veterinary health permits and would therefore be legal.

The chimpanzee trade would only be legal if all of the chimps were second-generation born in captivity. The Ugandan wildlife conservation facility advertises that its chimpanzees are rescues from the wild, and its social media posts do not suggest that the six infants were ever born there, nor do the photographs of the chimpanzee population at the zoo, with mini biographies of each, displayed at the entrance to the chimpanzee exhibit, indicate these births.

In the communications, which spanned two months in late 2020, the South African also mentioned that 12 more chimpanzees will be exported to China, along with 30 cheetahs, once China lifts the live animal import ban imposed as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

There are currently 22 chimpanzees at the Ugandan conservation centre, an unusually high number for a zoo, especially considering that there is a chimpanzee sanctuary on Ngamba Island, a short distance away. None of the monkey species listed in the CTD as exported to South Africa were in captivity at the conservation centre, making it possible that they were captured in the wild for export.⁹⁹ It is a known practice for traffickers to export great ape infants using export permits listing monkey species, sometimes putting the great apes in the shipping crates with the monkeys.¹⁰⁰

An investigator from EAGLE, working in collaboration with the GI-TOC, managed to gain access to the conservation centre area where four young chimpanzees were being kept and take photographs. They appear to be the ones in the South African's photos, as the holding area looks the same, and the distinctive facial markings on one of the chimps are the same in the two sets of photos.

South Africa's 'legal' wildlife trade

South Africa is well known for its involvement in the live wild animal trade in most native species, as much of it is done ostensibly legally through captive and wild-managed operations. South Africa's conservation strategy is based on breeding, ranching and trading wildlife. All species except live elephants are allowed under South African law to be exported, as long as the trades conform with CITES regulations. A large captive breeding industry has developed, with many facilities, including self-styled wildlife parks, rescue centres and sanctuaries, deriving income from fee-paying visitors. Increasingly, these breeding and tourism facilities have imported, bred and displayed non-indigenous wild species, such as chimpanzees and Latin American monkeys, jaguars and pumas (cougars).

The legality of the export of 18 chimps to a zoo in China in 2019 has been called into question by a report published by Ban Animal Trading (BAT) and the EMS Foundation¹⁰¹ and in a letter addressed to the CITES secretariat from Advocates for Animals, a UK NGO of legal specialists.¹⁰² The export facility of the chimpanzees was the Hartbeespoort Dam Snake and Animal Park and the 'free on board' payment for the chimps was indicated as US\$490 000 (or a US\$27 222 average price for each), according to the invoice the export agent sent to Oriental Zoological Consultancy Ltd., the import agent in Hong Kong.¹⁰³ The CITES export permit specified that all 18 chimpanzees had been bred in captivity ('C' source code), which is the only code that could be used to export the chimps legally to a zoo. Christa Saayman, owner of Mystic Monkeys and Feathers Wildlife Park in South Africa, is indicated on the CITES export and import permits as the contact person, even though the Hartbeespoort Dam Snake and Animal Park is the source of the chimpanzees. Saayman also prepared and signed the packing list for export with the microchip number of each chimp and wrote a letter attesting that all 18 chimps were captive bred.¹⁰⁴

The criteria for the issuing of a 'C' source code includes proof that specimens were legally acquired. The origins of the sires of each of the 18 chimps that went to China, which ranged in age from one to 51, is unknown, as the Hartbeespoort Dam Snake and Animal Park does not report to any known chimpanzee studbook. The owners of the zoo should be required to provide evidence that legally acquired chimpanzees were at the zoo prior to 1968 capable of producing offspring. The Advocates for Animals letter presents a long list of legal requirements and CITES regulations that were not met by this chimpanzee export to China.

In response to the allegations of irregularities in the chimpanzee export to China made in the BAT/EMS report, Saayman denied the claims, saying that she was 'sick and tired' of people going 'ballistic' over the chimpanzee trade. She told *The Independent*: 'All those chimpanzees were bred in captivity. They were not smuggled. I've got nothing to hide.'¹⁰⁵



Some of the 25 chimpanzees observed at the Hartbeespoort Dam Snake and Animal Park in March 2019.

Photo: Daniel Stiles

Other possible suspicious dealings in South Africa came to light in the BBC investigation of Ibrahima Traore of the Guinea network. The resulting BBC article presented fake CITES re-export permits from Jordan for chimps to Thailand and gorillas to China, dated in 2016, all indicating that the live specimens originated in South Africa, giving export permit numbers and dates of issue.¹⁰⁶ None of these trades are recorded in the CTD, and it is not known whether they in fact took place nor whether the South African permit numbers are genuine.

In addition to these source markets, there are other sources of great apes, with Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville and Liberia being the most active, but nothing has been reported about organized trafficking from these countries.¹⁰⁷

Great ape prices

Great ape prices are quite variable at all levels of the trade chain. The selling price levels are as follows:

Level 1: Forest seller or poacher – The person supplying infant apes from the wild could be a bushmeat hunter, a capture agent hired by a trafficker, or simply a villager who acquired the orphan (e.g. as a result of killing the mother in a crop-raiding incident or simply by finding the orphan in the forest).

Level 2: Rural middleman – The person who buys or receives the apes from Level 1. This person is usually a trader or business person who intends to sell the apes on for a profit. The person might be in the military or police,¹⁰⁸ work for a logging company, run a small shop in a rural area, be a bushmeat supplier to urban areas or the trafficker who hired the capture agent.

Level 3: Urban middleman/exporter – The person who buys the apes from Level 2, usually located in a large town or city. This person is typically a professional wildlife trafficker, who will either sell to the exporter or may be the exporter. The trade price of the exporter selling to an international market will be much higher than a domestic middleman selling to the exporter. The urban middleman level could be eliminated if the exporter has rural middlemen in the field who supply him directly.

Level 4: Exporter – The export price normally includes the shipping, since the buyer is located in a foreign country. The price goes up considerably if a CITES export permit is included, and by more if a health certificate is also included.

Level 5: Demand-side buyer – This person could be a wholesaler in a transit or destination country who is a dealer who will sell to the end user, or else may be the end user buying directly from the exporter.

Level	Chimpanzee	Bonobo	Gorilla
Forest seller or poacher	US\$25–US\$150	US\$50–US\$200	US\$135–US\$270
Rural middleman	US\$135–US\$200	US\$450	No data
Urban middleman	US\$500–US\$10 000	US\$1 000–US\$2 500*	US\$2 500*
Exporter	US\$15 000–US\$100 000	US\$15 000–US\$40 000	US\$37 000–US\$50 000
Demand-side buyer	US\$15 000– US\$82 000	US\$300 000 (in Dubai)	US\$548 000

FIGURE 7 Price range for each species at different selling levels, 2012–2022.

SOURCE: Most sources are given in the annex tables of Christine Clough and Channing May, *Illicit financial flows and the illegal trade in great apes*, Global Financial Integrity, October 2018. Others are from the author’s investigations.

NOTE: The exporter prices include shipping. *No update available for 2014 prices

The lowest export prices do not include CITES permits, while the highest prices do include them. The one supplier described in the Ugandan section above offered Ugandan chimps in the WhatsApp communications for US\$95 000 with permits, and the author negotiated with a dealer based in India in November 2021 who offered two chimps for US\$50 000 each without permits (US\$100 000 with permits), including shipping.

Prices at the exporter and importer selling levels have more than doubled since PEGAS obtained the last online prices on social media. Before 2017, chimpanzees were being offered in Gulf countries for between US\$20 000 and US\$34 000. No prices have been seen since then, as a result of stricter enforcement of Meta’s terms of service.



MARKET DEMAND

The demand market for live great apes has evolved over time, as summarized in Figure 8.

The creation of CITES has fundamentally altered the way in which wildlife is traded internationally. Until 1975, a number of fairly large animal-capture companies and a few independents operated mainly in the US and Europe, then the principal demand countries. They filled orders that were sent to them by middleman companies or directly by users in North America and Europe. Operators in Africa, Asia and Latin America captured the animals in the wild and shipped them. In this way, exotic animals were supplied legally to zoos, safari parks, circuses, biomedical research facilities, the film and television entertainment industry and, rarely, for keeping as exotic pets.

Two major trends that have been evolving and becoming more organized over the past 20 years are the use of social media and privately owned zoos for importing, laundering, marketing and exporting wildlife in illegal trading operations. Social media and private zoos are often linked, as the private zoos use social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to advertise their facilities to attract visitors. Social media posts of some of these private zoos even suggest, or make clear, that some of the animals shown are for sale. Negotiations are quickly moved to private-messaging apps. Fee-paying visitors also provide supplemental revenue that makes breeding wildlife, even great apes, a much more attractive financial proposition. Established private zoos – variously also called safari or wildlife parks or even sanctuaries – can offer covers for assigning a ‘C’ source code for CITES Appendix I exports, even if the animal was caught in the wild and smuggled in.

Gorillas are in high demand at zoos, being among the most popular display animals. Bua Noi at Bangkok’s Pata Zoo has been the subject of many campaigns to free her.

© Manan Vatsyayana/AFP
via Getty Images

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AFRICAN GREAT APE TRADE

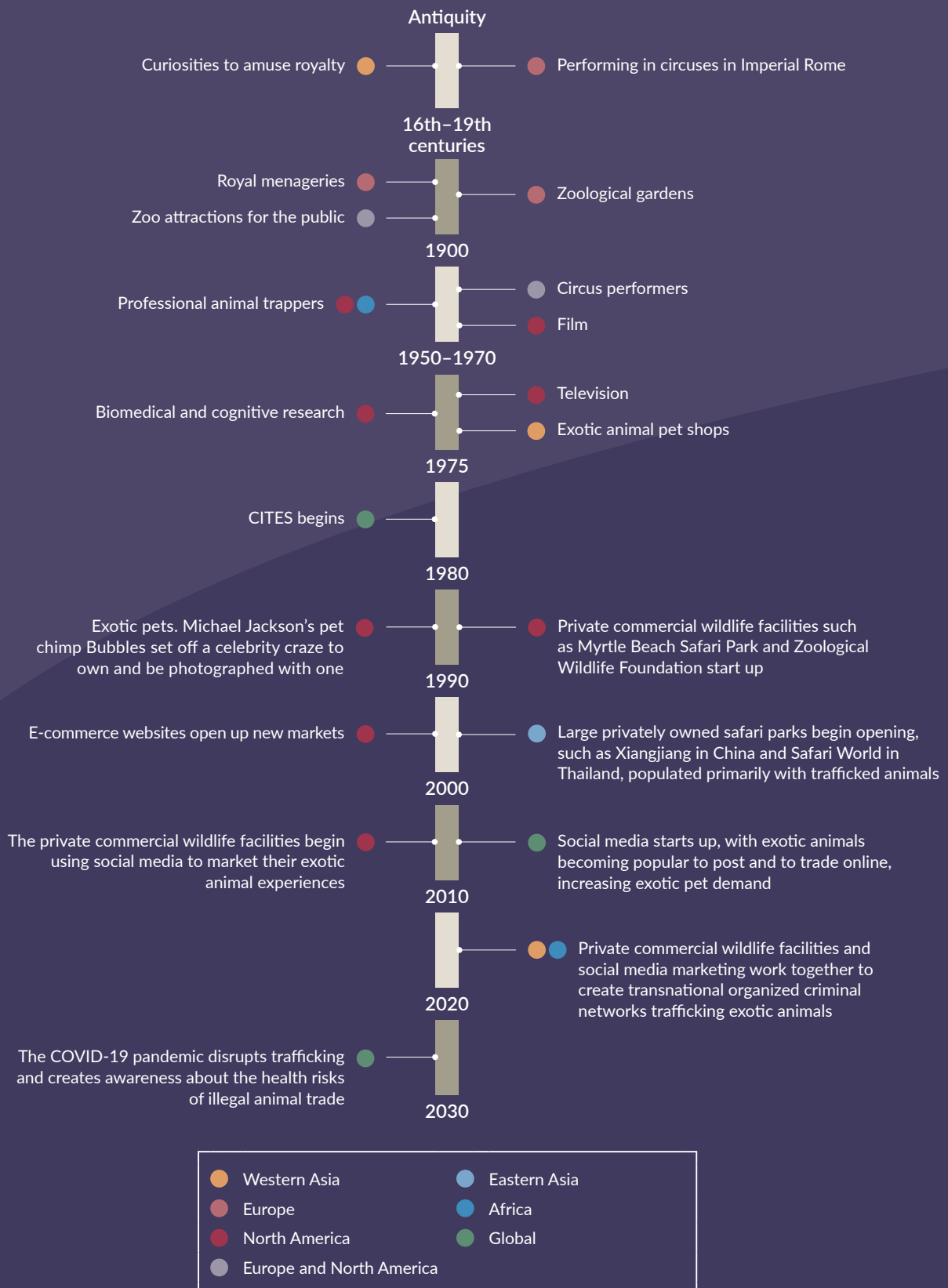


FIGURE 8 The evolution of the African great ape demand market.

Methods of trading great apes

Online trade

E-commerce

E-commerce involves websites dedicated to selling products directly to consumers. These platforms are usually simply services where others have accounts to sell their products. Examples include Amazon, eBay and Etsy. There are also hundreds of websites around the world that specialize in selling exotic animals.

Social media individual account

Any social media user can post content that conforms with a particular platform's terms of service. All terms of service prohibit illegal content as the minimum, which would include advertisements for selling exotic animals that are illegal to buy or sell in the country of any user involved in any transaction. Most terms of service prohibit advertising exotic animals for sale, but enforcement has proven lax.¹⁰⁹ Beginning in about 2014, great ape posts with trade content began disappearing from platforms now owned by Meta. Traffickers became aware that they were being investigated by various individuals and NGOs.

A total of 593 trafficked great apes were seen over a period of fewer than seven years in 17 countries being monitored, constituting only a small sample of those actually trafficked. Up to 2016, many posts blatantly stated 'for sale', or the equivalent, but these have steadily disappeared, as Meta has closed more accounts for violating the terms of service and those remaining have become more cautious. Today, posts are made using a great ape photo or video variously with no comment, an innocuous comment, a WhatsApp number or instructions to message the user directly.

Total traders	Chimpanzees	Orangutangs	Bonobos	Gorillas	Total
131	313	265	6	9	593

FIGURE 9 Social media illegal great ape trade in 17 countries, 2015–2022.¹¹⁰

NOTE: Since 2015, the author has been monitoring 131 individuals in 17 countries with social media accounts that feature great ape trade posts made by either dealers or owners, or both (some dealers have great ape pets). The table presents a summary of these findings.

Social media groups

Facebook and WhatsApp have a facility for setting up a group made up of users who share a common interest. The interest could be exotic animals in general or specific species – for example, reptiles or parrots. On Facebook, the administrators who set up a group have the choice of making it open to the public or else keeping it as a private group, whose members are admitted after making a request.¹¹¹ No posts in these private groups can be viewed by non-members. Members can simply post the image of the animals or plants they are offering for sale and give a contact, which may simply be 'PM me' ('private message', using the Facebook Messenger app). It is assumed that the illegal wildlife sales most often take place in private groups. Facebook states that it 'may review group content (including private groups)', but it is not specified what they would do if they found endangered animals or their products for sale.

With the advent of social media, a global culture of human-exotic animal interchange has evolved.

Meta's terms of service do not allow for the trading of endangered species or their parts.¹¹² A wide range of animal products are also prohibited from sale.¹¹³ Content that attempts to trade in live, non-endangered animals is also prohibited, except when offered by a page, group or Instagram profile representing a legitimate physical entity.¹¹⁴ Known traffickers own pet shops or private wildlife facilities (e.g. zoos, safari parks, conservation centres), therefore they or their associates could, according to these terms, post content related to the trade in non-endangered species kept at these facilities.¹¹⁵

Traditional methods of trading

Accredited zoos and pet markets or shops were the most common sources for a client looking to buy a great ape in the recent past. Until national governments began to seriously enforce domestic laws and CITES regulations, infant chimpanzees and orangutans could be purchased in pet shops in the US and Egypt and wildlife markets in Indonesia and Thailand, to name only a few countries.¹¹⁶ Governments have since tightened legislation and clamped down on these sources, and it is now rare to find great apes for sale openly, even in West and central African open-air markets.

Accredited zoos are the normal sources that those in search of legal great apes approach today. Zoo-to-zoo 'non-commercial' trade is allowed for scientific and educational purposes. Many gorillas, for example, have been supplied from European zoos legally to zoos in China, the UAE and elsewhere in recent years.

These types of legitimate suppliers, however, cannot legally provide great apes for the pet trade or for all the zoos and safari parks that want them. This is where the traffickers have exploited the opportunity to satisfy demand through illegal capture and shipment, usually with no CITES permits or health inspections. The contacts are made through personal networks and word-of-mouth referrals. It is invisible to the outside world, unless an arrest and seizure is made.

Trades are negotiated by great ape dealers in Africa with buyers in demand countries, most often the Middle East and South or South East Asia. Since the 'C-scram' was exposed, shipping has been carried out by straight smuggling, using concealment and mislabelling of documents. Bribes are often paid at airports to facilitate departure and arrival pick-up. Alternatively, great apes may be shipped with CITES permits indicating other species.

Hybrid social media/traditional trading

With the advent of social media platforms in the initial years of the 2000s, a global culture of human-exotic animal interchange has evolved, with videos and photos posted showing men and women playing with dangerous exotic animals, such as lions, tigers, cheetahs and great apes. These interactions were, and still are in a few notable cases, associated with commercial wildlife facilities, some of the first examples being in the US in the 1980s, such as Myrtle Beach Safari Park in South Carolina,¹¹⁷ and the Zoological Wildlife Foundation in Florida,¹¹⁸ which is owned by convicted cocaine dealer Mario Tabraue.¹¹⁹

There are now numerous social media accounts around the world, particularly in the Middle East, whose owners are imitating these popular US accounts by displaying themselves interacting with big cats and great apes. It has become a sign of prestige and high social status to be seen with exotic animals that peers acknowledge are expensive and difficult (and often illegal) to obtain.

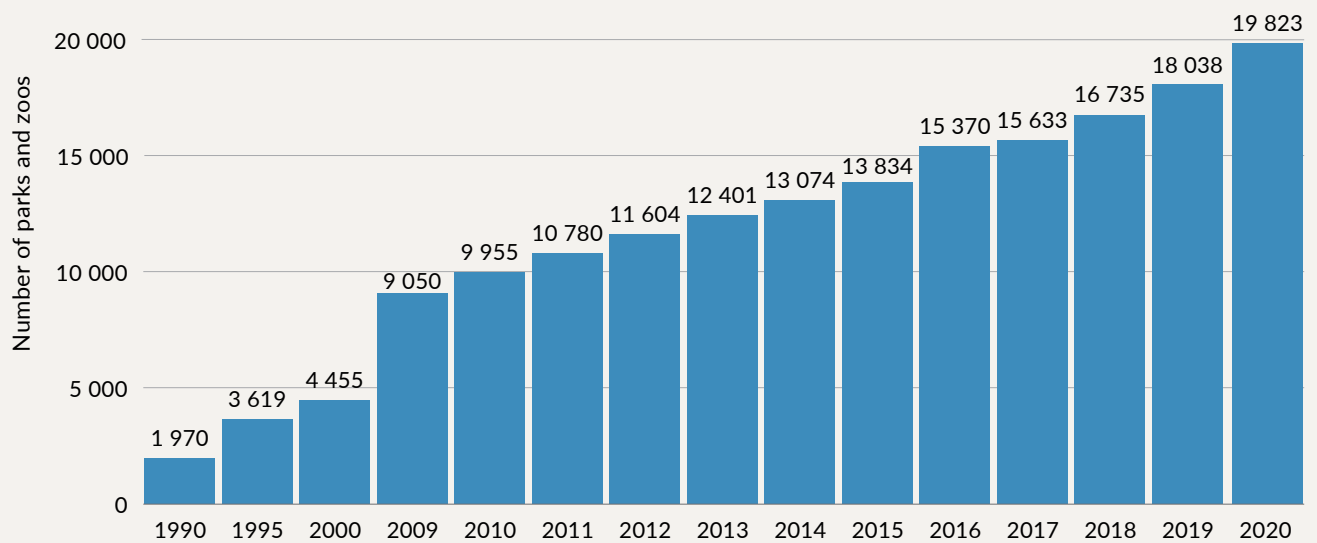


FIGURE 10 Number of parks and zoos in China, 1990–2020.

SOURCE: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/279038/number-of-parks-and-zoos-in-china>.

Demand country examples

How China defies conventions

China is one of the principal destinations in the world for great apes used as photo props and performers in commercial zoos and safari parks. In the 1950s and 1960s, numerous zoos were established in China, in addition to the many smaller zoos in the People's Parks. By 1990, the number had spiralled from a few dozen to 1 970 facilities of various kinds holding animals. Over the next 20 years, the 1990 number soared by 10 times to 19 823 wildlife parks and zoos, according to Statista (see Figure 10).¹²⁰

Zoos in China are often more akin to theme parks than to scientific or educational institutions. They are frequently run entirely on commercial principles, with little emphasis on conservation, and the types of animals on display are determined more by consumer preferences for entertaining wildlife species than by conservation or breeding needs. Zoos and wildlife parks in China have flourished in recent years with the rising demand for theme parks. Before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's theme parks had been projected to welcome 330 million visitors a year by 2020.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the momentum is there, and persistent demand exists for new arrivals, especially big cats and great apes.

Young great apes are irresistibly cute and affectionate, which makes them ideal for visitor interactions and 'selfie' opportunities.

Since 1975, China has declared to the CTD having imported 330 chimpanzees, 16 gorillas and 72 orangutans.¹²² This is almost certainly a vast underestimate, given the number of commercial Chinese zoos offering wildlife entertainment.

Ape Allies in China conducted a chimpanzee survey of the principal zoos in China and documented 187 chimpanzees in 51 facilities as of 2016.¹²³ Since 2016, the CTD reports up to 44 additional chimp imports, making a total of 231. Again, this is likely to be an underestimate, given the enormous number of zoos in China and the popularity of great apes. The survey found many of the facilities to be substandard, with poor sleeping quarters, solitary housing in many cases, and lack of enrichment in barren display areas. Ape Allies findings have been backed up by the case of the 18 chimpanzees sent from South Africa to the Beijing Wildlife Park in 2019, documented by BAT and the EMS Foundation's in their 'Breaking point' report.¹²⁴ In addition to appalling living conditions, many of the chimpanzees were observed to be engaged in circus-style entertainment and commercial interactions with visitors, in breach of CITES trade regulations.¹²⁵

China received a great deal of negative publicity with the release of the UN's 'Stolen apes' report at the 2013 CoP16 in Bangkok, particularly for its close association

with the Guinean CITES MA and the 'C-scram' imports scandal (see box: 'Tricks of the trade').¹²⁶ Guinea was sanctioned with a commercial trade ban until it could demonstrate that it had corrected the faults, but China was cleared of all wrongdoing by the CITES secretariat.¹²⁷ Even after the Guinean corruption had been exposed, China continued to import chimpanzees from other countries (including Syria, Chad, Kuwait and Egypt), using fraudulent 'C' source code export or re-export permits.¹²⁸ The import of 18 chimpanzees from South Africa in 2019 may be the most recent of these, unless the Hartbeespoort facility can offer compelling evidence that the 18 chimps were born there – and that the sires were legally acquired.

Great apes are also used in television entertainment in China, and for a while some Chimelong apes were featured in a TV show with five Chinese pop stars playing their keepers.¹²⁹ Some time later, another Chinese TV show with a chimpanzee received considerable publicity for animal cruelty.¹³⁰

Emirates exploitation

The UAE has emerged in the past two decades as a major destination and transit point in the trading of live wildlife, both for the exotic pet trade and for safari parks. Dubai, for example, was used as the main transit point for the hundreds of animals reportedly shipped by Artur Khachatryan to Armenia.¹³¹ Additionally, the UAE is a major player in the cheetah trade;¹³² surveys of social media accounts in the UAE posting exotic animals indicate that large numbers of people own and trade exotic animals;¹³³ local Emirati newspapers have published numerous articles on the exotic animal trade;¹³⁴ and live elephants have recently been traded from Zimbabwe and Namibia for safari parks in the UAE.¹³⁵ Great Apes have formed an important segment of this exotic animal traffic to and through the UAE from Africa and Asia.¹³⁶

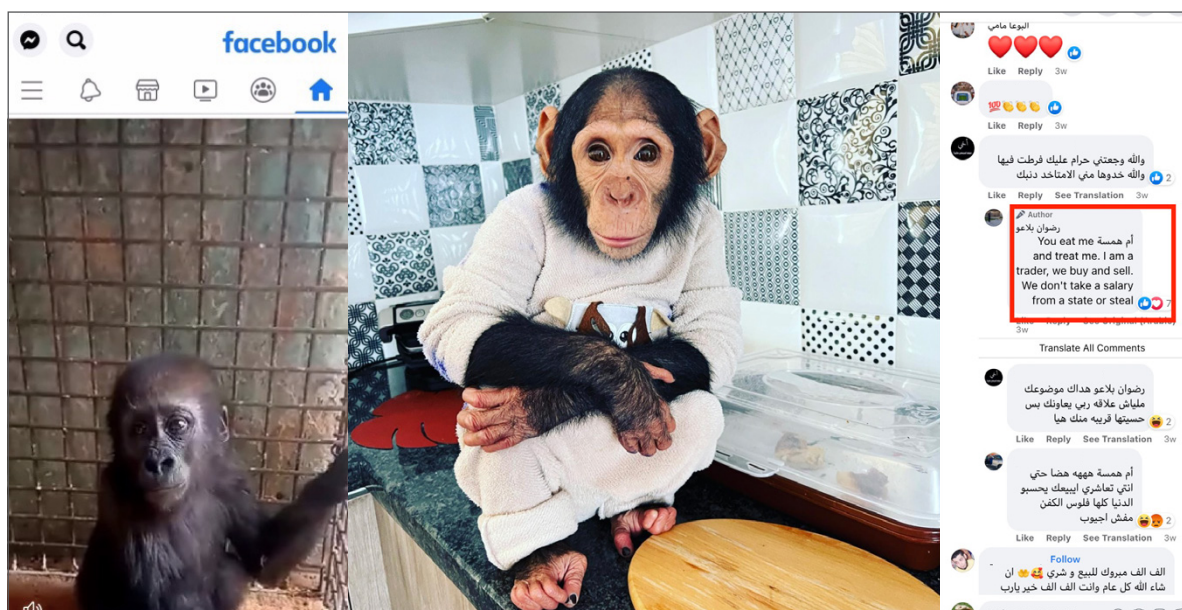
More recently, several private zoos have opened that have, or had, great apes used for visitor interaction and 'selfie' opportunities. Various young great apes appear in posts, remain for some time, then are seen no longer. The origin of these apes is unknown and not recorded in the CTD. Social media accounts of UAE residents have displayed at least 143 chimpanzees, 59 orangutans, two bonobos and one gorilla since 2011. Private messages of great ape advertisements that the GI-TOC has obtained add several more of each species type to the total. Many other protected species are displayed in the posts and are kept in private homes and zoos. The Emirati wildlife dealers have contacts with wildlife people in many other parts of the world, as seen in social media posts, as they communicate with and visit one another.

UAE law enforcement alerted to social media illegal wildlife trade

At the 66th CITES SC meeting in Geneva in 2016, the heads of PEGAS and the Ape Alliance met with the chief of CITES Law Enforcement and the Coordinator of Environmental Security of INTERPOL to discuss the illegal trade in great apes, particularly in the UAE. PEGAS handed over a report prepared jointly with the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), which described in detail five traffickers in the UAE who used social media to trade great apes and cheetahs. INTERPOL subsequently sent the report to the UAE National Central Bureau (INTERPOL national police unit) for follow-up. The CCF heard from an informant in Dubai that the National Central Bureau had warned the dealers that investigators were monitoring their online activities. Rather than take action to reduce trafficking, the authorities warned the traffickers that they were being monitored.¹³⁷ Some of the traffickers named are allegedly acquainted with royal family members, thus political considerations may have been involved.

The Libya link

Libya has recently emerged as both transit and destination country for great apes, with ties to the DRC and the UAE. At least two exotic animal dealers located in Libya (one in Tripoli and the other in Misrata) have been posting images of relatively large numbers of great apes since 2020. In multiple posts on Facebook and TikTok, there appear to be about 10 West African and three central African chimp infants, and two or three infant gorillas. A man who seems by his dress to be West African appears in one of the Facebook posts with the Misratan dealer, who also has posted large numbers of big cats and birds, including African grey parrots, online.



An infant gorilla (left) and a Central African chimpanzee (right) advertised for sale on Facebook. 'I am a trader, we buy and sell', reads the translated comment by a Misratan dealer. This was not seen to violate Meta's terms of service. Photo: Public Meta accounts



Two baby chimps seen at the Samutprakern private zoo in Thailand in 2016.

Photo: Daniel Stiles

ROUTES TO MARKET

Conakry (Guinea), Kano (northern Nigeria) and Kinshasa international airports have been used as main illegal export points in the past, and are probably still being used (see Figure 11). Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Yaoundé (Cameroon) are known also to have been used.

The northern route

Ethiopian Airlines and Turkish Airlines have been favoured for transport by wildlife traffickers because they both have good flight networks in Africa to Middle East and Asian destinations.¹³⁸ As a result, Addis Ababa and Istanbul are common transit hubs, although Cairo (Egypt) and Doha (Qatar) have also been used as transit hubs. Great apes and other contraband destined for the UAE are usually flown to Muscat, Oman, before being transported by road through the Hatta border crossing to Emirati destinations such as Dubai, or onwards to other Gulf countries.¹³⁹ The confirmed Kano to Kathmandu via Istanbul route was demonstrated by the seizure case involving Pakistan national Jawaid Khan in 2016. The photos of the seized chimps are clearly of the Western variety.¹⁴⁰ According to sources, Khan had been using Kano as a smuggling export base for chimpanzees for many years.¹⁴¹ Great ape smuggling, including of gorillas, was active from Kano in the 1990s, connected to Guinea and Cameroon, carried out by a dual nationality Egyptian Cameroonian woman.¹⁴² Turkey is still an active transit and destination point in great ape smuggling, with 17 chimpanzees seized there in 2020.¹⁴³

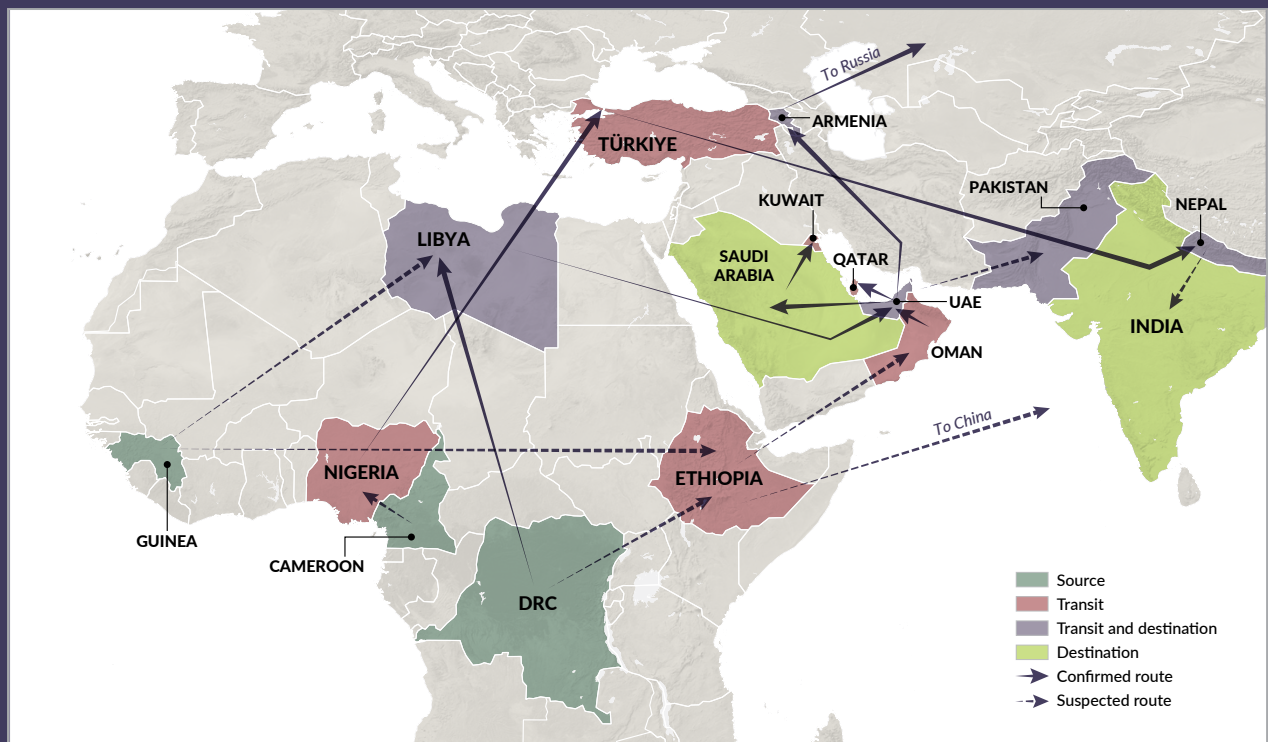


FIGURE 11 Confirmed and suspected primary great ape trafficking routes between tropical Africa and known destinations, 2010–2022.

It is not known what route is used to transport great apes to Libya. Since both West and central African apes have been seen in social media posts originating in Libya, each region probably has its own route there. Figure 11 presents the main source, transit and destination countries in the great ape illegal trade.

The southern route

The routes depicted in Figure 12 are mostly suspected, except for the land route from the DRC via Zambia to South Africa.¹⁴⁴ The Central African chimpanzees could have come from either Kinshasa by air and/or Lubumbashi by road. The Western chimpanzees could have been flown in from any number of cities in West Africa, or with Kinshasa as a transit point. Either chimp type could have come from Entebbe by air as a transit point.

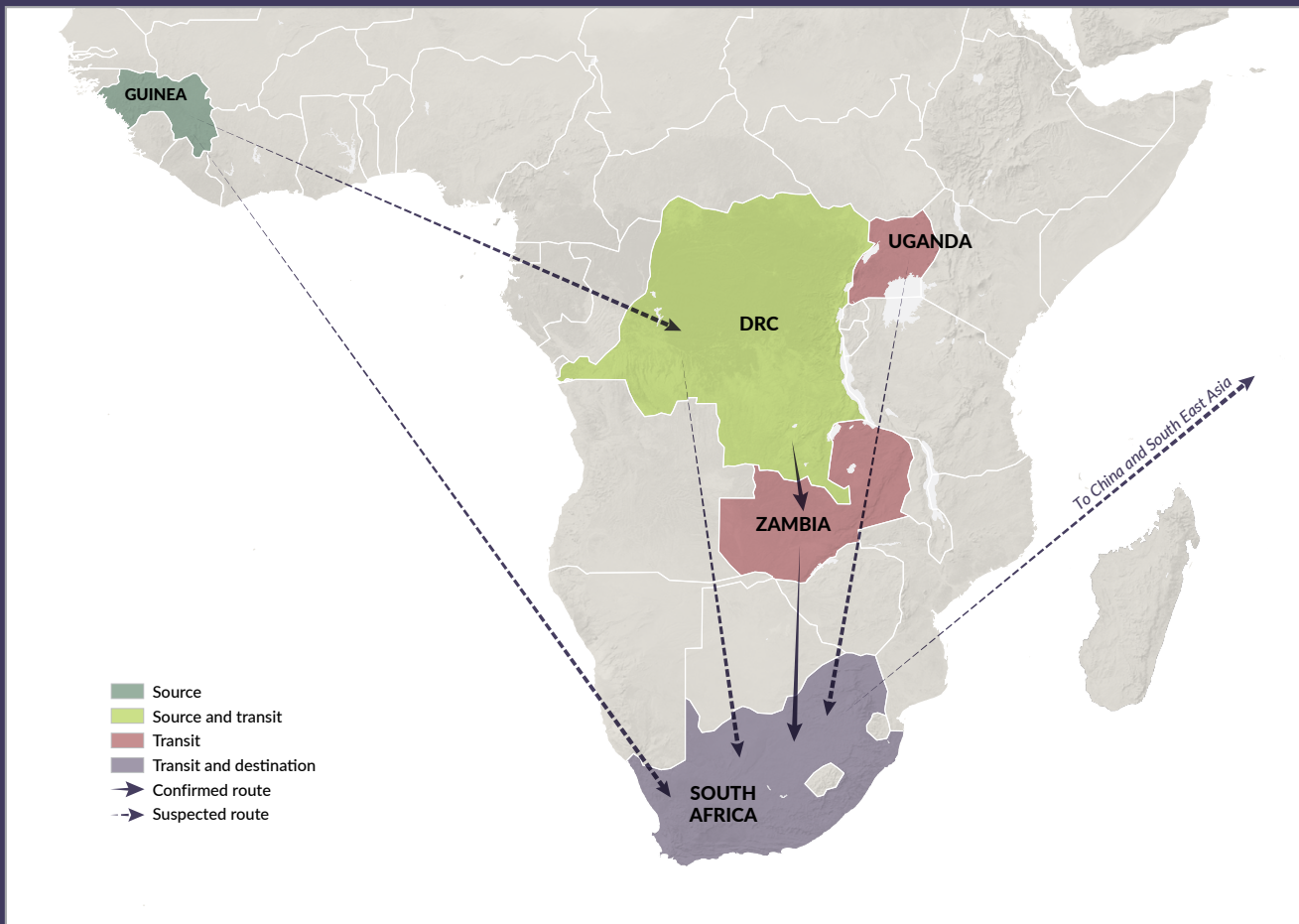


FIGURE 12 Confirmed and suspected primary great ape trafficking routes between tropical Africa and South Africa, 2010–2022.

Each primary node in the trafficking route has other great ape subsidiary routes. These are associated with the trade chain if a financial transaction from seller to buyer takes place. Sometimes the node is simply a transit point with no transaction, indicated in red in Figure 13. Not all routes have solid evidence, such as a seizures, to confirm them. These suspected routes are indicated as dotted-line arrows.

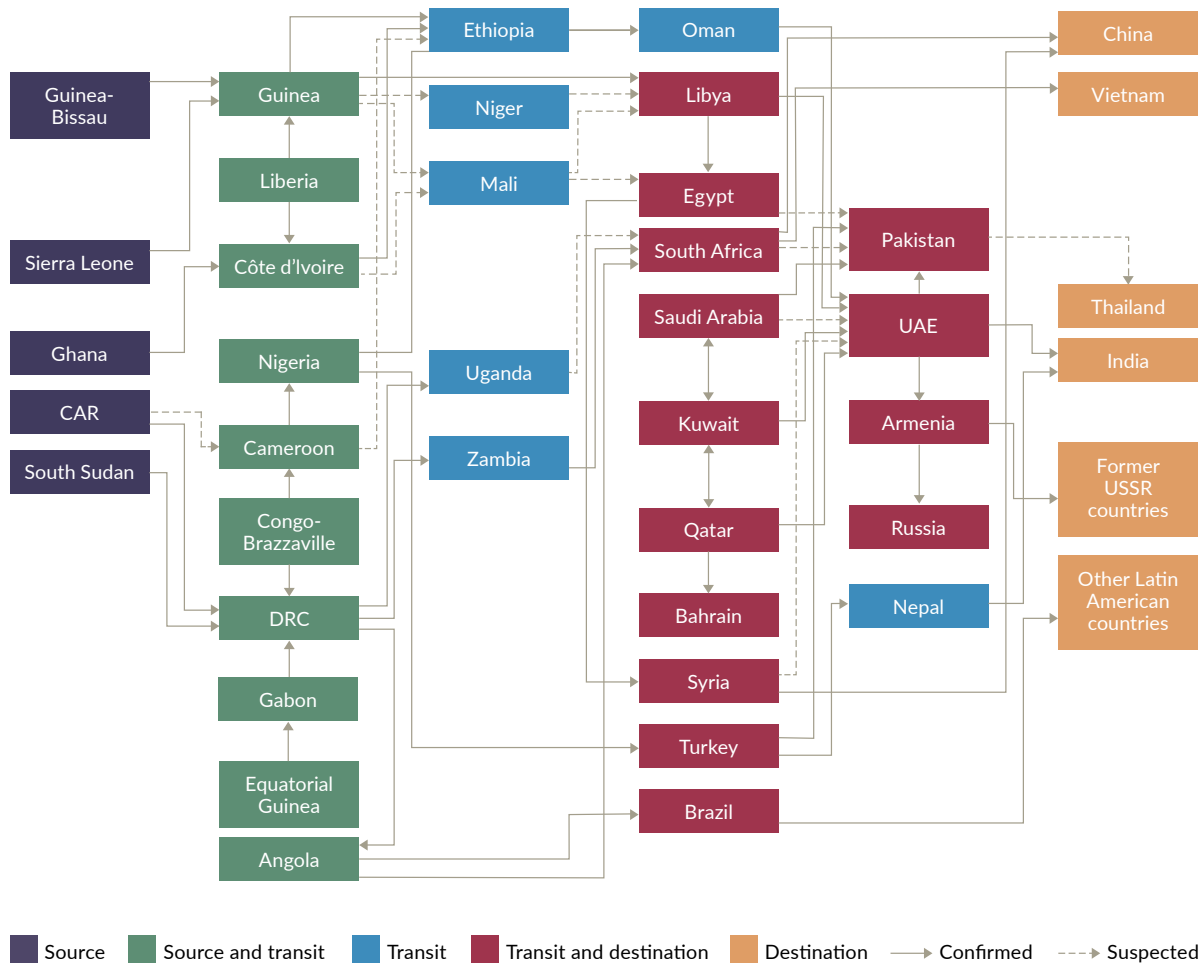


FIGURE 13 Primary and secondary trade routes of great apes from Africa to foreign markets.



Chimpanzees at the Sweetwaters Sanctuary in Kenya, rescued from trafficking, live a secure life in natural vegetation with other wildlife.

Photo: Daniel Stiles

WHAT DOES THE POST-COVID WORLD HOLD FOR GREAT APES?

Supply side

During the COVID-19 travel and transport restriction period in 2020/21, great ape poaching and infant capture in the wild in Africa increased, perhaps as a result of economic hardships brought on by the restrictions. As these constraints ease with the spread of COVID-19 vaccination and control of the virus in most parts of the world, moving great apes captured in the wild will become easier.

The trafficking networks that strengthened during the restriction period, which moved infant apes mainly from Guinea and the DRC to the UAE, may become even more active in future. Certainly the trafficking increase seen in 2022 suggests that this will be the case. When China eventually drops its COVID-19 live-animal import prohibition, latent demand from Chinese entertainment parks could further stimulate ape capture and transport.

South Africa has emerged as an ostensibly 'legal' source of captive-bred great apes, exported with the CITES 'C' source code. The GI-TOC has found through its investigations that not all of the chimpanzees exported from South Africa to China in 2019 may have met CITES criteria for a 'C' source code, rendering some of them illegal to export.

Demand side

Captive wildlife facilities, emulating those first seen in the US, are developing, mainly in the Middle East, but also in South and South East Asia. Many of these facilities desire great apes for tourist attractions, for 'selfie' opportunities and other forms of interaction, including entertainment shows. The owners may increasingly replicate what South Africa has perfected: the breeding facility combined with tourist destination acting as a 'C' source code exporter.

Social media platforms have acquired a greater role in both the marketing and trading of great apes and other exotic animals for the pet trade. Traders, some of whom have cultivated a large following on social media, post photos and videos of great ape infants, often dressed up, and react to enquiries for possible sale by directing the consumer to an encrypted messaging app where

negotiations can be carried out in private. The messaging apps are also used directly to advertise apes for sale to potential buyers whom the trader knows personally.

Captive wildlife facilities are increasingly using social media to market their facilities and show consumers what they have to offer. The facilities call themselves private zoos, wildlife or safari parks, conservation centres or even sanctuaries, but they are commercial and some are known to use social media for both buying and selling illegal wildlife specimens. This appears to be the favoured emerging business model, as exporters can make use of fraudulent CITES 'C' source codes.

Some of these traders have established direct links with the suppliers in Africa, as is the case with the DRC and the UAE.

Mitigation efforts

Breaking up the great ape trafficking networks would require the concerted efforts of national and international institutions responsible for both wildlife law enforcement and great ape conservation. Efforts would have to be coordinated by the supply and demand governments, with support from relevant organizations such as INTERPOL, CITES and other UN agencies (such as GRASP, the UNODC and the World Customs Organization). NGOs such as EAGLE and the IUCN SGA could also make important contributions

To ensure that this coordination is achieved, and subsequent action taken, great ape trafficking must be recognized as a problem that needs addressing. Underreporting of great ape seizures by governments and NGOs, and the lack of a centralized database recording seizures, has resulted in a general misperception

that the illegal trade in great apes is not a problem. This is most detrimentally expressed within CITES, which has resulted in this important organization taking almost no action in recent years to work with partners to control the trade.

At the national level, the main constraint to preventing great ape trafficking has been lack of attention given to illegal trade or, worse, corruption and facilitation of the illegal trade in return for financial benefits. Unless international pressure is put on the governments involved in the trafficking to rectify the situation, the illegal trade will continue.

Unless CITES and other relevant institutions and agencies work together to address the trafficking problem, the future does not bode well for great apes.

Notes

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