By the year 2020, earth’s wildlife will share the planet with 7.6 billion people. In the face of mounting pressures, we all share a responsibility to protect the wild species and places on which all lives depend.

Our goal is to conserve the world’s largest wild places in 15 priority regions, home to more than 50 percent of the world’s biodiversity. We have a new strategy and a new look. Our logo—a stylized W—stands for wildlife.

We cannot do this work alone. We need a collective approach that meets the scale of the challenge. We need you, our supporters, to join us, unified by a shared promise to save wildlife.

The great apes of Africa and Asia are our closest living relatives. Gorillas, orangutans, and chimpanzees share more than 97 percent of their DNA with humans. Like us, these species are intelligent, self-aware, and social. In the wild, great apes help preserve natural forest systems by dispersing seeds and creating clearings in the trees that invite in sunlight and promote renewal of the forest. However, they are losing their habitats, and face hunting and disease threats. WCS is the only organization working to protect all four subspecies of gorilla, Asia’s orangutans, and chimpanzee and bonobo habitat.

This WCS Progress Report provides our generous supporters with select updates and insights on recent activities to counter the threats to one of the most endangered species groups in the world.
**Habitat loss**
Like countless other species, the pressure on great apes builds as human population grows. Many great apes live outside of protected areas, where the extractive and agricultural industries are increasingly leaving these species without sufficient habitat and food sources.

**Our Response:** We work with governments to ensure that key great ape habitats are legally designated as protected areas. We then support management of these protected areas to keep poachers and illegal loggers and miners at bay. We do this largely by training and deploying rangers, and arming them with the GPS-based law enforcement program, called SMART.

**Hunting**
People living in great ape habitat hunt these animals for both subsistence and commercial reasons. Additionally, poachers target infants—obtained by first killing the mother—for the illegal pet trade.

**OUR RESPONSE:** We work with partners to enforce national hunting laws and wildlife trade laws that protect all ape species. As part of these efforts, we work with local communities to ensure that they do not hunt apes and that they have access to sufficient land for farms, thereby reducing encroachment on protected forests.

**Infectious disease**
Diseases such as the Ebola virus can devastate great ape populations. Scientists estimate that over the past 20 years, this disease has killed significant numbers of the world’s gorillas and chimpanzees.

**OUR RESPONSE:** As part of our long-term research, we are actively investigating how Ebola is transmitted, which species carry the disease, and how its spread can be prevented. We also run educational programs for local communities on how to avoid contracting Ebola, including by not touching or eating bushmeat.

**WCS Responds to Great Ape Threats**
As our closest living relatives, great apes and humans share many similarities. We each have 32 teeth and opposable thumbs, and, much like human fingerprints, each gorilla’s noseprint is unique. Great apes have been observed creating and using tools, including using sticks to test the depth of water. Young great apes often pass the time by playing, and are even known to laugh. Yet despite all of our connections to these social and intelligent animals, they face many serious threats.

**Sources:** *Mammals of Africa, Vol. 2*, Primates and *International Union for Conservation of Nature*
Orangutans in Sarawak Receive Major Boost

Based on a recent major announcement from Sarawak, Malaysia, orangutans are poised to receive a major boost. In August 2015, the Chief Minister of the state of Sarawak issued a video statement highlighting the government’s intention to protect orangutans and other fauna and flora in this biodiversity-rich region.

The minister announced a series of groundbreaking actions to protect Sarawak’s 1,800 to 2,500 orangutans, including efforts to limit new logging concessions and oil palm plantations in the state, which would significantly reduce land clearances that are harmful to orangutan habitats. WCS played a key role by informing the decision and crafting the terms of this policy declaration.

During his statement, the chief minister welcomed and encouraged assistance from the scientific and conservation community to ensure the protection of Sarawak’s great natural heritage. To help achieve this goal, WCS signed two major agreements with agencies within the Government of Sarawak to promote and implement conservation projects in various protected areas through scientific research, education, information sharing, and training.

Since this announcement, the state’s enforcement agencies have stepped up their efforts to stop the destructive practices that convert orangutan habitat to commercial plantations.

Wildlife Crimes Unit Thwarts Orangutan Trader

The extraordinary biodiversity found within Indonesia makes the country a hotbed for poaching and wildlife trafficking. Since the 1970s there have been more than 3,000 confiscations of illegal pet orangutans in Sumatra and Borneo, yet there were hardly any prosecutions prior to WCS involvement. WCS helped catalyze the first-ever arrest and successful prosecution of a Sumatran orangutan trader in 2012.

Our Wildlife Crimes Unit is providing technical support to Indonesian authorities so that this illegal industry no longer goes unpunished.

This year, the team helped ensure that one more orangutan trader’s operation was shut down. At the time of arrest, the trafficker was attempting to sell a one-year-old female orangutan being transported in his knapsack. The individual later admitted to illegally sourcing other wildlife through a hunters’ network and local dealers in Aceh and North Sumatra. He also shared that his trade network extended as far as Java. The investigation later revealed that the trafficker had traded numerous other live animals illegally, including orangutans, golden cats, porcupines, slow lorises, siamangs, gibbons, hornbills, and baby crocodiles. In addition, this trader illegally sold animal parts such as hornbill casques and the skins, claws, and teeth of Sumatran tigers—a Critically Endangered species. He was sentenced to two years in prison for these crimes.

While such criminal activity is occurring far too frequently within Indonesia, this case and many others like it are confirmation that the government is increasingly committed to ending the wildlife trade and preserving the country’s natural capital. These cases also serve as a major deterrent for other traffickers, as they show that this activity now has serious consequences.

There is more good news. The orangutan rescued during this case is currently being rehabilitated in Sumatra and will eventually be returned to the wild. The Sumatran orangutan is a distinct species, listed by the IUCN as Critically Endangered.

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Efforts to protect the Republic of Congo’s western lowland gorilla population received a huge boost in February 2015 with the launch of the Ndoki Foundation, a partnership between WCS and the Government of Congo. Under the terms of the foundation agreement, day-to-day management of Nouabale-Ndoki National Park is delegated to WCS. While we have worked alongside the Government of Congo in Ndoki for many years, this new agreement gives WCS more power to strengthen the park’s management structure, which is good news for the gorillas, chimpanzees, forest elephants, and other iconic animals protected within the park.

The new agreement also strengthens WCS’s mandate to develop ecotourism in Congo, which will facilitate the development of long-term, sustainable options to finance the national park and raise awareness of our efforts to conserve western lowland gorillas. Ecotourism development is focused on two sites within Ndoki: Mondika and Mbeli Bai. Mondika currently boasts two groups of habituated western lowland gorillas, and visitors can spend up to an hour tracking the gorillas through the forest, observing their behavior in close quarters. In Mbeli Bai, visitors can observe wildlife from the top of a spacious platform on the edge of a swampy clearing, where gorillas regularly come to feed on herbs and sedges. Mondika and Mbeli Bai make Ndoki one of the only places in Africa where visitors can reliably see western gorillas in the wild, offering both the adrenaline rush of tracking gorillas at close proximity in the middle of the rainforest, as well as uninterrupted viewing of multiple groups of gorillas from the comfort of an observation platform. Furthermore, Ndoki is home to substantial populations of chimpanzees which visitors can also observe closely in their natural setting.

In conjunction with our ecotourism development efforts, WCS plans to continue our long-term scientific research at both Mondika and Mbeli Bai to improve our understanding of gorillas in the wild, and to ensure a minimal ecological footprint as a result of expanded tourism activities.
A Conversation with Dr. Inaoyom Imong

Inaoyom Imong is WCS’s Director of the Cross River Landscape. Inaoyom has worked for WCS’s Nigeria program since 2004. He obtained his PhD at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany, focusing on the spatial ecology and conservation of the Cross River gorilla. This year Inaoyom was a recipient of the prestigious Whitley Award.

What inspired you to become involved in Cross River gorilla conservation?

INAOYOM IMONG: As a young boy growing up in a forest community in the Cross River region, I had the opportunity to observe wildlife in their natural habitat when I accompanied older relatives on hunting expeditions. I was inspired by the biodiversity of the forest when I was very young. When I graduated from university I had a chance to study bushmeat markets within the Cross River state. This gave me the opportunity to witness the magnitude of the local hunting and deforestation problems. At that point I knew that I wanted to be in conservation, and I knew that I wanted to make a contribution to protecting great apes and other wildlife.

What are the biggest challenges?

II: The main threat to the Cross River gorilla is hunting, but there is also habitat loss. Historically these gorillas were targeted by hunters for a variety of needs, but more for commercial reasons as time passed. Now, while Cross River gorillas are not specifically targeted by hunters, occasional isolated killings still occur. Considering that the population is so small, just one Cross River gorilla killed is a significant loss. After hunting, habitat loss as the forest is cleared for agriculture has also become a problem here.

What progress has been made?

II: The conservation challenges are still huge, but we have had some great progress, especially in terms of protected area creation. In Nigeria, all the Cross River gorilla populations now occur within protected areas. Recently, two new protected areas were established on the Cameroon side. Law enforcement effectiveness has increased with more patrols using advanced technology and satellite trackers. Our program is now transitioning to the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) system for enforcement and monitoring. We are increasingly partnering with protected area authorities and forming stronger collaborations, including those between Nigeria and Cameroon. We are also working closely with local communities, as they have the closest contact with Cross River gorillas and their habitat.

What is the future trajectory for Cross River gorillas?

II: We’ve made a lot of progress in raising public awareness of Cross River gorillas compared to 10 to 15 years ago. Now, there is much more support among local communities, state and national governments, and international organizations. Not long ago, these animals were thought to be extinct in Nigeria; but now people are more cognizant of the species and are contributing to their conservation. Due to increased law enforcement, restricted consumption, and broader awareness of gorilla conservation, Cross River gorilla hunting has reduced substantially. We now believe these animals are no longer specifically targeted by hunters. This is all positive. I think that if we continue the work we are doing there is a good chance that the Cross River gorilla population will begin to recover. These animals have vast areas of remaining habitat for their population to grow.

What has been your most memorable experience working with Cross River gorillas?

II: The part of the work that I enjoy most is going out into the forest and seeing these animals in the wild. I have been working and studying the Cross River gorilla for many years, but I have only seen them twice in the wild! Seeing the Cross River gorilla was a wonderful experience like no other. It was extraordinary to see these animals that were once thought to be extinct. My other fond memories include working alongside the local people who live near these gorillas and next to their habitat.
Saving Cross River Gorillas

The Cross River gorilla is classified as Critically Endangered due to hunting, habitat loss, and habitat fragmentation. Today fewer than 300 remain, spread across a remote mountain landscape spanning the Nigeria and Cameroon border. As explained in our conversation with Inaoyom Imong, WCS has established a comprehensive Cross River gorilla plan focused on law enforcement and monitoring, public awareness, transboundary collaboration, community engagement, and land management. We are also exploring possible integration of REDD+ carbon credit programs.

WCS is currently in the process of rolling out monitoring technology to all gorilla sites within the Cross River landscape. This application, called SMART, will allow field patrols to better record and analyze all data collected, including evidence of gorilla activity and poaching. Field staff and project managers have all been trained, SMART is currently being tested, and the system has already been implemented at one site. By the end of 2015, SMART will be launched at all Cross River gorilla sites in Nigeria, and plans are in place to expand its use to Cameroon.

To complement our law enforcement operations and our hands-on educational initiatives, WCS launched a new local radio program, called “My Gorilla—My Community,” in Nigeria. This show aims to raise awareness among the local populations about the conservation status of their gorillas and promote positive attitudes and behavioral change toward gorillas and toward people’s use of the forest. Season one of this broadcast ran from April through September 2015 and helped local people better understand why these animals and their habitats should be protected.

In Cameroon, where Cross River gorillas also occur outside protected areas, WCS is expanding our existing community-led Gorilla Guardian program and Village Forest Management Committees to create community forests in areas adjacent to established protected areas. WCS will co-manage these forests with the communities to provide protection within corridors that connect gorilla populations.

With successful conservation and local community awareness and participation, the outlook for Cross River gorillas is increasingly positive. Significant areas of forest still exist throughout the Cross River gorilla’s range and our analysis shows that the landscape could support a much larger population if poaching could be eliminated. WCS efforts are making a difference; reports show that while hunting is still occurring in gorilla range, most hunters are not primarily targeting the gorillas themselves. We are pleased to share that in 2014 we had no reports of any Cross River gorillas killed and evidence shows that hunting in both countries is declining.

Grauer’s Gorillas in Decline

WCS conservation scientists in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo have been conducting surveys of Grauer’s gorillas in the country’s Kahuzi Biega National Park, as well as an occupancy study throughout the rest of the subspecies’ range. Sadly, initial results indicate that since 1996, the total population has declined by 80 to 95 percent in the park and the same trend is likely across its range. These results could move the Grauer’s gorilla from Endangered to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

The decline is primarily due to two factors. First, armed militia groups have been operating in Kahuzi Biega and the surrounding region since 1996, using the gorillas’ forest habitat as cover to hide from DR Congo’s military and police. Second, there is an abundance of small-scale artisanal mining sites within the park, which are controlled by the militia groups. WCS has found that at these sites—where workers are not officially employed by any company and work independently—no food is locally produced, so the miners consume bushmeat. They source this bushmeat from around the mining sites, and have admitted to targeting gorillas and chimpanzees as they provide more meat than smaller animals.

A multifaceted approach is urgently needed to save the Grauer’s gorilla from extinction. WCS plans to combat the startling decline of this subspecies by establishing more ranger posts around the park and strengthening patrol training. In addition, a pilot initiative for “legalized artisanal mining” is being planned within community-managed lands that contain gorillas, which will provide more controlled structure and alternatives to bushmeat. We also hope to engage local communities through educational programs and initiatives to discourage ape hunting as a viable option for food. Other initiatives include working with communities to establish an additional protected area to the west of Kahuzi Biega, which would conserve a significant remnant of the global Grauer’s gorilla population.
A core component of WCS’s strategy is collective impact. To accomplish effective conservation, we partner both locally across field sites as well as with world leaders and influencers in environmental protection. One of our closest allies in our great ape conservation work is the Arcus Foundation, a leading global foundation dedicated to the idea that people can live in harmony with one another and the natural world. Both of our organizations recognize that collaboration is essential to accomplishing our shared vision. Arcus is one of the world’s most important champions for great ape species. The clear goals within their great ape programs dovetail with the objectives of WCS’s great apes initiatives.

The Arcus Foundation is committed to:

- Integrating socioeconomic development and conservation activities in landscapes where great apes live.
- Improving respect for and recognition of the intrinsic value of apes.
- Building an integrated and coordinated ape conservation movement.
- Growing recognition and consideration of apes in larger adjacent conservation movements.

For eight years, Arcus has supported a wide spectrum of WCS’s ape conservation activities across both Africa and Southeast Asia. Through our partnership, Arcus and WCS have improved the lives of apes worldwide by strengthening law enforcement and monitoring, increasing community participation in natural resource management, researching Ebola transmissions, and working with governments to establish formal protected areas for great ape habitats.

Currently, the Arcus Foundation generously supports these WCS projects:

1. Strengthening collaboration between Nigeria and Cameroon for the conservation of the Cross River gorilla and Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee
2. Improving health laboratory capacity in the Republic of Congo in order to understand and mitigate the threat of Ebola to great apes and people
3. Studying chimpanzees in the Fouta Djallon Range of Guinea
4. Hoolock Gibbon Conservation in the Hmamant Wildlife Sanctuary of Myanmar
5. Bornean orangutan conservation in the Lanjak-Entimau area of Sarawak, Malaysia

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