



Kevin Schafer/ Still Pictures

Relative Importance

ELLIOT MORLEY describes the urgency of conserving the great apes as part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals

The Great Apes – chimpanzees, bonobos, orang-utans and gorillas – are considered to be humankind’s closest relatives. It is hard not to be touched by them – with their prehensile hands, human-like features, their ability to use tools and make plans, and their social interaction – as intrinsically bound with humans. This is borne out by molecular studies that have shown that chimpanzees share more genetic material with humans, about 99%, than with gorillas.

Ironically, these charismatic species have come to the forefront of the world’s attention, and we have increased our knowledge about them, just as their numbers have declined. It is thought their populations may have fallen by as much as 90% since the start of the last century, and they face the real threat of extinction within our lifetimes. This has already occurred at some local levels, taking us a step closer towards total extinction in the

wild. If we allow this to happen, it will be a tremendous loss not just to the local communities, but to the planet.

Symbiotic relationship

Great apes are effective indicator species, helping to inform us about the state of regional and environmental health. As the largest tree-climbing animals, they play a unique role in the ecology of the forest, from their feeding, nest-building and branch-breaking behaviour – thus pruning the trees and opening up light gaps in the forest canopy – to the dispersal of seeds. The symbiotic relationship between the great apes and the forest is vitally important.

When the last of a species dies out, its gene pool is lost forever. If one species becomes extinct, those that rely on it in one way or another (such as for protection or for food) will also be affected. In light

of this, we aim through various government measures to preserve the diversity of species now alive.

All great apes face the significant threat of habitat destruction. In Africa apes are threatened by such diseases as ebola, as well as by pressure from over-exploitation by hunting to feed both the local community and the huge numbers of people engaged in logging. We cannot underestimate the damage that will be done to the ecosystem if great apes are allowed to vanish, or further decline significantly.

Global conservation

The UK Government has been at the forefront of trying to help range states implement programmes that will preserve and enhance great apes’ native biodiversity. The UK was one of the first Governments to signal support for the Great Ape Survival Project (GRASP), jointly managed by UNEP and UNESCO. The project – agreed following the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development – aims to bring world-wide attention to the crisis, raise funds for conservation, and develop a global conservation strategy for all great ape populations. GRASP’s work is key to promoting collaborative working across range states and amongst partners in the developed world to draw up cohesive plans ►

dealing with the complex issues of maintaining great ape populations and helping to reverse their decline.

The UK Government has so far committed £563,000 to GRASP's work. As the largest single country donor, it has demonstrated its commitment to helping GRASP reach its target of raising sufficient money to fund 100 field projects by 2010. It is up to other donors to match this support.

UNEP and UNESCO are organising an Intergovernmental Meeting in Kinshasa in September to take the project further and embed it in the minds of governments and other partners. This is an excellent opportunity for donor countries and the range states of great apes to come together to discuss an effective work plan to take forward our commitment under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to reverse the loss of environmental resources by 2015, and our commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity to achieve a significant reduction in the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010. These are challenging targets, but we must continue committing ourselves to ensure the health of the world's most important forests, and protecting great apes is an achievable step that takes us nearer to our overall aim.

Cultural tradition

The unsustainable trade in bushmeat is one specific issue being addressed by GRASP. Consuming bushmeat is both a livelihood opportunity and a cultural tradition for forest peoples. But the growth in markets and demand in urban areas – coupled with the ease of accessibility into once inaccessible areas, through such industries as logging – has put increasing, unsustainable pressures upon certain species, including great apes. Bushmeat is a good example of an issue that we cannot address simply from only one angle: to do so would be to oversimplify and essentially ignore either the rights of indigenous peoples or the aim to maintain and improve the world's biodiversity. Action across range and donor states is essential.

The increase in illegal logging has placed unsustainable pressures on once plentiful species. The UK was one of 40 countries to sign a ministerial declaration on illegal logging at the African Forest

Law Enforcement and Governance conference in October 2003, so as to continue the process of working closely with range states and address matters at their root cause. Only through promoting sound forest management and governance can we start effectively to protect vulnerable species, whilst ensuring that indigenous people are preserved and their livelihoods, where possible, improved.

The UK Government also works with other countries to promote the conservation of the world's wildlife, and help stop the decline in populations of monkeys and great apes, through our membership of agreements such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The Convention monitors, regulates and restricts trade in around 5,000 species of animals, including all the great apes: more than 167 nations have signed up to implementing it. International trade in animals listed on CITES, including bushmeat derived from those species, is either banned completely or controlled by means of a system of permits.

Pilot project

In October 2004, the UK was instrumental in drafting and proposing an important European Union (EU) resolution on great apes to the 13th Conference of the Parties to CITES. The proposal – which included calls to work closely with GRASP – was adopted, as was an EU proposal inviting the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation to convene an international workshop to examine the bushmeat issue. The UK pledged £20,000 to set up a pilot project to help combat the smuggling of great apes in central Africa, to be jointly managed by GRASP and CITES.

The plain fact is that many of the issues faced by the Africa are intrinsically linked to poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region of the world to have become poorer in the last 25 years. The continent's share of world trade halved from 1980 to 2002, and it is home to 28% of the world's poorest people.

Good work has been done on meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals, but there is still a lot to do. This is why the UK Government has noted Africa as a main theme of its Presidency of the G8. Only by working together can we hope to achieve the eight Millennium

Development Goals and I welcome the significant agreement on aid and debt that was reached at Gleneagles in July.

Great energy

My colleague, the Biodiversity Minister Jim Knight, now has these issues within his portfolio. Indeed this is the first time that biodiversity has appeared within the Ministerial portfolio title. This is no accident, but an acknowledgment of the significance of biodiversity across UK Government policy, both nationally and internationally. I know Jim will take forward these issues with great energy and commitment, reinforced by the support we will give him to sustain and grow the work of UNEP and GRASP.

Biodiversity is the yardstick by which we judge the success of our Department –and our success as a planet. As a developed country, we recognise that we have a responsibility to work with UNEP and others to address the very real threat to biodiversity generally, and to the great apes in particular ■

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