

Thank you Mr Chair for allowing us this opportunity.

Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, honoured guests, colleagues.

I would also like to thank the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for hosting this meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a very important week, not just for great apes, but for the people who live near them, the countries that are their homes, and everyone who works to conserve and protect them. Great apes are very special animals – their intelligence and compassion, their similarity to us, and their keystone role in forest ecosystems all make it imperative that we protect and preserve them.

However, preventing the extinction of these species is not simple and, as has been recognised here, ensuring their long-term survival is not a goal that can be achieved by one organisation, or even one country. Neither is it a goal that can be achieved by the efforts of disparate, unconnected agencies – however genuine, well conceived and worthy. It is a goal that can only be achieved through partnership and unity of purpose.

When I first heard the idea of GRASP, five years ago, to me it made perfect sense. After decades of work to conserve the great apes, with many organisations, large and small, giving them the highest priority, all but a handful of tiny populations were still in decline. Clearly the approach that we had then was not working. It may have been *slowing* the decline in some areas, but it was not lifting the threat of extinction. Something more was needed.

After many years hard work, we are now all gathered together under GRASP. If ever there was a chance to prevent the extinction of the great apes, that chance is here, and now.

This then is our opportunity to join together, to agree the way forward, and to work as a team for our common goal. However, we must, when the circumstances demand it, be willing to sacrifice some of our individual pride, to set aside our individual agendas, and to work not for ourselves but for the team, for the Partnership, for the apes.

I have seen many changes in GRASP over the years, but its essential spirit has stayed the same since it was first presented to UNEP by Ian Redmond, in April 2000.

Subsequently it was Rob Hepworth at UNEP, now with the Convention on Migratory Species, who recognised the importance of GRASP's partnership approach. It was because of his dedication, so ably supported by Melanie, that the Great Ape Survival Project was taken on by UNEP and launched in Nairobi in September 2001. In those early days, the project was steered by UNEP priorities, and Born Free was contracted to provide a permanent Technical Support Team to raise awareness of the new initiative among all the stakeholders.

As more and more stakeholders became involved, the shape of the project changed to match its inclusive philosophy and soon thereafter it became clear how GRASP had to develop – with the creation of a free-standing structure through which the many Partners could fully participate in the decision-making process.

So now it is time to ensure that the reality lives up to the idea. Now we need to walk the talk. I might even say, 'ask not what GRASP can do for you, but what you can do for GRASP'. The Partnership *is* the Partners, and anyone who wants GRASP to work but who stands back should hold themselves responsible if it fails.

Born Free has worked with UNEP since GRASP was first launched in 2001, and many of the range State delegates here may first have heard about GRASP through my good friend and colleague Ian Redmond. Working under contract to UNEP, we have nevertheless co-funded all our GRASP activities. Over the last four years we have put more than two hundred thousand dollars into the work of the Technical Support Team. We have brought on board private sector companies such as Britannia Airways and the Dorling Kindersly publishing group. We also support several primate projects on the ground in DRC, Cameroon, and in Uganda.

Mr Chairman, esteemed delegates. If we want to save the great apes, we all have to make an extra commitment. That is why Born Free has come to this meeting with a pledge of an additional twenty thousand dollars of new money for great ape conservation plus an additional donation to support the CITES Great Ape Task Force missions. We are not a large organisation, but we recognise that everyone has to do more if we are to achieve our goal. We must all convert words into actions.

However, right here, right now, some of the greatest threats to the great apes are cynicism, scepticism and apathy.

One of the richest men in the world, when asked to contribute to great ape conservation, reportedly responded by simply asking 'what is the point?'. He had lost faith in the ability of the conservation sector, the range states, the international community, humanity at large, to achieve this goal regardless of how much money was available. We can now challenge that lack of faith. When we are asked how the great apes can be saved we must answer, with one voice, they can be saved through the Great Apes Survival Project. We must answer without hesitation, without scepticism, without reservation.

That is why I ask everyone here to lay these feelings aside, to acknowledge the necessity of the GRASP mission, and to put their support – financial, technical, political and *personal* – behind this historic initiative.