

## **Great Ape Survival Project**

**Intergovernmental Meeting: 5-9 September 2005**

### Statement by the United Kingdom

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The United Kingdom echoes the thanks of others to his Excellency the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo for hosting this very important conference. I very much welcome this opportunity to address the governments of range states as well as donor governments, other distinguished partners, and observers to the Great Ape Survival Project Partnership.

We commend the range states and other partners for their efforts so far to conserve great apes, and urge them to continue their efforts with a renewed sense of purpose after this meeting.

Great apes are of enormous importance to people around the world. They are vital to their own ecosystems – as those who manage forests where great ape populations are disappearing can tell us only too clearly.

But they are much more than that. Globally, they are species that people can and will engage with very readily.

If we want to persuade people that it is important to care about biodiversity and the future of our wildlife, there are no better ambassadors than great apes.

And they are irreplaceable. Once a great ape population is lost from the wild, it can never be replaced by animals bred in captivity. They are – as befits our closest animal relatives – very social creatures, with such complex systems of communication, established social hierarchies, and even what we can recognise as political systems.

These complicated societies can never be replicated – so every great ape population that is lost, is lost forever.

I have been privileged enough to see for myself this week the true greatness of these creatures. I visited a sanctuary for our closest animal relatives, the bonobos – where for every orphan taken in by the sanctuary and raised so carefully and lovingly by the dedicated staff, many more bonobos had lost their lives.

I was also most fortunate to visit Kahuzi Biega National Park where the impressive ICCN rangers guided us into the habitat of the eastern lowland gorilla, which is at such great risk. This experience was informative in more ways

than one – for, besides being a valuable experience in its own right, it showed how much can be done with very little, and how vital effective park management is, not just for forests and animals, but for their local communities.

It would be difficult to underestimate the economic importance of great apes to their home countries – and most importantly to the people who live closest to them – people who are all too often living in the most desperate poverty.

I have also seen first-hand the threats to our great apes. They are disappearing at an alarming rate. Despite being protected in every country they inhabit, they are under ever-increasing threat from human expansion, hunting for bushmeat, palm oil plantations, poaching and the live animal trade, and from logging and mining.

To the NGOs who join us in these efforts, I say this: You cannot blame people who are struggling to survive each day for eating whatever food they can find – however unpalatable it may seem to those with different sensibilities and different priorities.

Neither can you blame them for trying to make a day-to-day living from the forests, when means of making a living are so scarce – however wrong it may seem to us.

That is why every conservation effort we make should – and indeed it must, if it hopes to succeed – ensure that it includes local people in its purpose, and involves them in its operations.

The message for those of us who are persuaded of the importance of wildlife, for its own sake and for its many benefits, is that we must always think in terms of how we can help people, as well as help animals. In the end, we can only persuade people to protect wildlife if it is in their own interests.

To the range states: the great apes are an important part of your futures. They, just as much as timber and minerals, are natural resources, and as such are central to the economic development of your nations. Agreeing the declaration today is not enough on its own. It is important that your forestry codes and mining codes are implemented and enforced rigorously, and that you make your national parks and nature reserves as safe as

possible. With sufficient security – for the apes, and for people – the whole world is at your doorstep.

And I have something to say, also, to the donor states. The United Kingdom has put in more than any other single nation to this project, and we commit other funds to many projects that are beneficial to great apes. It is our experience that relatively small amounts of money can go a long way.

One shining example is the £10,000 from our Flagship Species Fund that was dedicated to giving park rangers at Kahuzi Biega the equipment, the infrastructure, and the knowledge they need to provide adequate security and ranger-based monitoring of gorilla populations. That money has gone towards anything from adequate shelter for rangers and GPS systems to such basic necessities as rucksacks, raincoats, jungle boots, and rations. I have seen for myself the fine work that those rangers do, and their capacity to do so much more with the right tools.

We very much welcome the European Union's contribution to GRASP, as well as their continuing funding for Virunga National Park, building on the UK's Darwin

Initiative Project to help train park rangers in effective enforcement and monitoring of biodiversity.

The money they have given there will show a rapid return, and increase security for local people and for visitors.

We would like to see more of those small projects, which create such disproportionate benefits for animals and for communities. I will be returning to my own government knowing how important and effective these small grants can be, and looking for opportunities where I can do more.

There is, of course, a much bigger picture. The ambitious, detailed package for Africa that was agreed at the G8 summit at Gleneagles in July is an investment in the future of this continent – home to most of our great ape species – that sends a message that when people benefit, so does the environment.

It is coming from that perspective that we support this Declaration. It stresses not only the importance of the apes themselves, but their cultural, economic, and ecological value, and joins us with a shared purpose to protect them.

In the next two weeks the Millennium Review Summit will meet to discuss progress to date on the Millennium Development Goals. We should send a signal to the Summit that the GRASP partnership is committed to these goals, and indeed going further for great apes. We must aim to reverse the downward trend in great ape populations.

It is an attainable goal; but achieving it will mean we need to focus on much more than the great apes themselves.

Conference, it must be about educating local communities and making sure they are involved in developing the solutions for their own area.

It must be about ensuring that people see the economic benefits of protecting their wildlife.

It must involve greater efforts against poaching and illegal logging and mining, as well as building enforcement capacity among park rangers so that they can make their parks increasingly secure and safe.

And it must involve sustained governance in forestry and mining – to ensure that the economic potential benefits of these fertile lands can be realised, but not at the cost of these precious creatures.

The situation for these animals and their habitats is desperate. There is no room for complacency.

The Kinshasa Declaration must be an important step. It will be if we leave this place with the renewed sense of purpose that comes with the knowledge that we *can* save the great apes of the world, but only by implementing the action plans, by finding solutions as well as problems, and by giving the political priority this cause demands.

Thank you.