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Stanley Johnson outlines plans to prevent the extinction of the planet's great apes, and argues that their survival could mark a step towards saving mankind itself



Stanley Johnson is a broadcaster, journalist and an environmental campaigner

The family of great apes, which includes gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orang-utans, was once numbered in the millions. Now there may be as few as 350,000 left worldwide. Farming, logging, civil war, forest fires, illegal hunting and disease have taken their toll. Whole species or sub-species, for example the Sumatran orang-utan, could become extinct within two decades.

Now, at the 11th hour, it seems that the alarm bells are ringing. The survival of the great apes may yet become one of the great iconic issues of our time, a measure of just how seriously we are taking the battle to save the planet.

On September 12th this year, the *Independent* devoted its entire front page, two inside pages, and an editorial, to the international agreement on the conservation of the great apes signed in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The authors described the agreement

as being "on a par with the 1982 whaling moratorium and the 1997 Kyoto protocol on climate change". It was a chance to halt the "remorseless jungle slaughter" of the great apes, which on the trends they identified would otherwise kill them all off within a generation.

Over the last two years, I have had the good fortune to work with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as it laid the groundwork for the Kinshasa meeting. *En passant*, I had the opportunity to see gorillas and bonobos in the DRC, chimpanzees in Uganda and, most recently, orang-utans in Kalimantan, Borneo. It was abundantly obvious that species are under tremendous pressure, and that the best chance of progress was through concerted action by the range states, donor countries and non-governmental organisations.

When Kinshasa was put forward as a possible venue for the first-

ever intergovernmental meeting on the survival of great apes, the idea seemed irresistible. The DRC is home to three out of the four great apes, and the bonobo exists in the wild only within the DRC. Once the initial steps had been taken, President Joseph Kabila personally invited the heads of neighbouring African countries, and ensured that the Congolese authorities accorded the event the highest priority.

Credit too, of course, must go to the United Nations. Klaus Toepfer, the former German environment minister who now runs UNEP, had already launched the United Nations Great Ape Survival Project (GRASP) at the world summit on sustainable development in 2002. He quickly realised that the Kinshasa meeting could ensure that the initiative truly prospered.

The meeting which took place in Kinshasa in September 2005 had a double objective. First, to raise international awareness of the plight of the great apes. Second, to strengthen the institutional arrangements for dealing with this issue.

So what precisely are the key points of what the *Independent* has called the Kinshasa Agreement?

First, a global strategy for the conservation of great apes and their habitat. The global strategy outlines the overall goal of lifting the threat of imminent extinction facing most populations of great apes; to conserve in their natural habitats, wherever they exist, wild populations of all species and subspecies of great apes; and to make sure that their interactions with people are mutually positive and sustainable.

David Brinn



Stanley Johnson pictured with an orang-utan: Sumatran orang-utans could be extinct within two decades

Second, a detailed constitution for GRASP, providing a framework where the best scientific advice can be given on conservation priorities and project proposals put forward for funding.

Third, a work plan for GRASP covering the next two years.

Fourth, a high-level political statement on the future of the great apes.

The Kinshasa declaration is not, of course, in itself a legally binding treaty, but given the framework within which it was negotiated and the status of the participants, many of whom were of ministerial level, it is certainly not devoid of moral authority.

Some key paragraphs are worth noting. The signatories:

- pledge to do everything in their power to ensure the long-term future of all great ape species;
- reaffirm their commitment to ensure GRASP has the capacity to realise its



Chimanku, a Grauer's gorilla from the Kahuzi-Beiga national park in the DRC

- full potential;
- resolve to set the target of securing a constant and significant reduction in the current loss of great ape popu-

lations by 2010, and to secure the future of all species and subspecies of great apes in the wild by 2015; and

- invite the international community to provide effective and coherent support, including funding, to assist efforts made by the great ape range states.

Efforts to save the great apes have to be seen within the context of other development priorities, including poverty reduction. But in Kinshasa at least, there was no sense that such efforts were out of place. On the contrary, the role of the great apes as flagship species, vital to the maintenance of forests and ecosystems, was endorsed resoundingly.

Saving mankind's closest relative, with whom we share 98.5 per cent of our DNA, is a necessary, though not sufficient, step towards saving mankind itself. ■



it's time
parliament
changed
its Act.

ensure the Animal Welfare Bill
ends the use of wild animals in circuses
please sign on to EDM 468



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