

FAQ – Great Apes

Who are the great apes?

The great apes include the:

- Bonobo or pygmy chimpanzee
- Chimpanzee
- Gorilla
- Orangutan

All species are listed as endangered by the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species and are protected by national laws. They are humans' closest living relatives, sharing up to 98.4% of their DNA with us.

Like humans, they are highly intelligent, possess self-awareness, can communicate with signs and symbols, make and use a wide variety of tools and form life-long emotional bonds with each other.

How many are there left?

The populations of all species are extremely low, or are falling rapidly.

Bonobos, which are found in only one ecosystem in Congo DR, were estimated at 50,000. However, now, after years of civil war, there may be as few as 10,000 left. This species is the most likely to become extinct if no urgent action is taken.

Chimpanzees, spread widely across Africa, are currently more numerous, but are also subject to hunting and habitat loss.

The mountain gorillas, of the Virunga volcanos, bordering Congo DR, Rwanda and Uganda, have a tiny but relatively stable population of around 700 individuals. The Cross River Gorilla, inhabiting transborder areas between Nigeria and Cameroon, numbers only about 200 individuals, in isolated pockets. Lowland gorillas of the large Congo basin number around 100,000; however numbers are declining fast.

Orangutans total numbers range from 50,000 to 100,000.

Where are they found?

Great apes live in "range states": Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Malaysia and Indonesia. Fifteen of these 23 States are least developed countries in Africa.

The Orangutan is found only in the islands of Sumatra and Borneo in Malaysia and Indonesia (Indonesian Kalimantan and Sarawak, and Sabah of Malaysia), while the other apes are scattered across 21 countries in Equatorial Africa, from Tanzania in the east to Senegal in the west.

Many great apes are protected in over 20 UNESCO-designated sites such as World Heritage and Biosphere Reserves.

What are the threats to ape populations?

Loss of suitable forest habitat, due e.g. to road construction, is the greatest threat to the great apes. More than 70% of the habitat of African great ape species has been negatively affected by infrastructure development. Other threats include:

- clearing of forests for logging or agriculture
- hunting for "bushmeat" or for the pet trade
- habitat fragmentation by encroaching human settlements
- disease caused by pathogens such as the Ebola virus which can decimate populations of apes as well as humans

Why is great apes survival important for humans?

Great apes play a key role in maintaining the health and diversity of tropical forests, which people depend upon. They disperse seeds throughout the forests, for example, and create light gaps in the forest canopy which allow seedlings to grow and replenish the ecosystem. A reduction in ape numbers is a sign that the forests are being used unsustainably.

The forest home of the great ape is vital to humans and many other species, notably as a source of timber and as a regulator of our changing climate. "Great apes form a unique bridge to the natural world," says Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO Director-General. "The forests they inhabit are a vital resource for humans... a key source of food, water, medicine as well as a place of spiritual, cultural and economic value. Saving the great apes and the ecosystems they inhabit is not just a conservation issue but a key action in the fight against poverty."

The great apes share their forest habitat with millions of people living on or below the poverty line in Africa. Poverty and lack of knowledge drive their victims to use wildlife and other natural resources unsustainably. The need to link the welfare of humans and wildlife through a genuine partnership between all stakeholders in these fragile ecosystems is key to empowering local communities and protecting the great apes.

What is GRASP?

The Great Apes Survival Project (GRASP) is a project of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNESCO, where partners from public and private sectors as well as the civil society work together. Launched in 2001, UNESCO joined it as a result of the 2002 "Earth Summit" (World Summit on Sustainable Development). Currently, it involves 23 range states, many donor nations and more than 30 NGOs. GRASP has four patrons, namely:

- Jane Goodall, the celebrated primate conservationist
- Russ Mittermeier, head of Conservation International
- Toshisada Nishida of Kyoto University, one of the world's most famous and longest-serving primatologists
- and Richard Leakey, world famous conservationist and palaeoanthropologist.

GRASP's work notably culminated with the 2005 Kinshasa Declaration.