



China's illegal imports of some 150 chimpanzees from West Africa have become a major animal welfare and conservation concern since it first became public some 3 years ago. This trade was still ongoing in 2013. In addition, the CITES trade data for 2010 showed that China had also declared the import of 10 gorillas. As with the chimpanzees, they were supposedly all captive bred in Guinea Conakry, which is not a range country for gorillas. Of course none of these great apes were captive bred and the chances are very high that they were all Eastern Lowland Gorillas from the DRC. It would appear that CITES import permits were issued by China (the trade statistics from China are based on these permits) but Guinea did not report the exports.

A South East Asia based animal dealership in the same time period offered Gorillas ex Guinea for U\$ 37 000.00.

The CITES Secretariat confirmed in several pieces of correspondence that they 'heard rumors about gorillas having also been shipped'. Last year the head of the CITES Management Authority of the DR Congo informed us about a corresponding meeting with representatives of the CITES Secretariat where the following statement was made:

"les Gorilles ,il affirme que c'est au nombre d'à peu près 10"



The representative of the CITES Secretariat confirmed that 'about' 10 wild caught gorillas were exported to China.

In an interview in Bangkok, during the Conference of the Parties of CITES in March 2013 we asked another representative of the CITES Secretariat on camera to clarify the issue concerning the 10 gorillas. No clarification was forthcoming but we thought we had an agreement that establishing the whereabouts of these 10 gorillas was going to be the acid test as far as collecting data, concerning the export of various ape species from West Africa to China and other countries (including bonobos to Armenia), was concerned.

However, despite a range of requests from a number of parties, the CITES Secretariat was not willing to provide any of the information contained in the export and import permits for these gorillas. This was part of a journalistic project filming a documentary for the public ZDF channel in Germany. Whilst in various pieces of correspondence the CITES Secretariat denied having copies of these permits, other documents made it clear that China had indeed sent their copies to the Secretariat in Geneva (presumably copies of the import and export permits which would have been the basis for the listing in the trade data). Of course the name of the importer would have allowed a cross-check as to the whereabouts of these gorillas and if they were still alive or not.

In the absence of any kind of assistance from any of the parties to CITES or the CITES Secretariat themselves, we asked partners in China to start doing some research on the internet. It transpired that Changsha Zoo in South Central China had advertised the arrival of gorillas at their facility with a slogan along the lines that the gorillas were even bigger than their great basketball player and eco ambassador Yao Ming. However when a team of chimp experts visited the zoo towards the end of 2013, to help with the integration of the existing chimpanzee grouping, they saw no gorillas. Gorilla imports were not discussed.

We visited Changsha in January 2014 and brought along the translator who had helped us during the original film shoot investigating the whereabouts of the chimpanzees. At that time we had no problem locating a large number of these young chimps who are now mostly employed in circus type entertainment facilities which is a commercial activity and therefore illegal under CITES. (which appears to be a pattern with many of the zoos in China). She talked to the keeper at the ape housing facility and recorded on camera his comments about the gorillas. While he had not been employed in the zoo at that time, four gorillas had arrived in 2010. His mother worked there in 2010 and he had also heard the story from other keepers since. The female keeper who was in charge of the gorillas when they first arrived became sick and was diagnosed with hepatitis and returned to her home in Northern China. The gorillas were then tested for the disease, two were found positive and all four were then euthanized.

Of note, Changsha Ecological Park still has a range of poster displays showing gorillas, extolling their unique features and comparing them with chimpanzees. These were clearly put up at the time when they expected the gorillas to go on display.



Signs in Changsha Ecological Park advertising the imminent arrival of gorillas



Our investigator trying to meet the management of the park to give them the right to reply to these allegations.

We went to see the management of the Park but nobody would see us to discuss the issue without an appointment. They asked our translator to call their PR department after the Chinese New Year. She started calling as of February 8th but her phone calls were no longer answered. Either that or the party at the other end hung up.

In terms of giving the right to respond, this is all on record and without any response and without any further confirmation from the CITES Secretariat it has to be assumed that these four gorillas were destroyed sometime in 2010 by lethal injection.

We have been here before - In 2001 Egypt drowned an illegally imported chimpanzee and gorilla, citing public health risks.



A young chimpanzee who was drowned – along with a baby gorilla – in a vat of chemicals at Cairo airport in September 2001.

The CITES Secretary General reacted strongly at the time, issuing a press release stating:

“I should like to thank everyone who wrote to the Secretariat to express their concern over events involving the seizure of a chimpanzee and a gorilla at Cairo airport last September.

Upon hearing the news report, I have contacted the Egyptian authorities for information. They have confirmed the drowning of animals that were in the possession of a known wildlife smuggler of Nigerian-Egyptian origin. The Egyptian Minister of Agriculture has ordered a thorough investigation of the case and of how the decision to drown the animals was reached. The CITES Secretariat will be informed of the outcome of this investigation.”

It will be interesting to see if the CITES secretariat will react in a similar fashion in this latest case.

Of course the chance is high that some of the other gorillas also made it to China but that some never made it past the quarantine stage or beyond their original point of import. Similarly, the testing positive of the four may have been communicated to the parties holding the rest following which instructions could have come from higher up to eliminate them too, to avoid any further risk of cross species transmission in the country.

During the above mentioned meeting of the parties to CITES in Bangkok, we also interviewed the heads of both the Scientific and Management Authority of the DRC regarding the export of these apes. While we were told they deplored the illegal exports and would ask for their return under Article VIII of the Convention, they also explained that they would start ‘legal’ exports of apes and other wildlife as scientific exchanges between zoo establishments. After some three visits by DRC officials to China last year, the rumor is that a deal has now been struck between a very prominent and wealthy zoo set up in Southern China and that it will involve the exchange of, once again, two gorillas in return for two white tigers. There are again serious questions associated with these proposed transactions concerning their legality under the rules and regulations of the CITES convention.



*See no evil, Hear no evil, and Speak no evil:
This appears to be the CITES Secretariats
strategy when dealing with Chinese
accountability and transparency.*

Tragically, based on the past track record it has to be assumed that once again neither the CITES Secretariat nor the CITES Standing Committee will investigate these proposed transactions. It must further be assumed that they will also not look into what has been going on in the last few years in terms of ape trafficking to China or suggest that the parties

concerned finally comply with Article VIII of the Convention (which stipulates that the criminals involved in these illegal transactions be investigated and prosecuted and that the apes in question be confiscated and if possible repatriated).

In terms of CITES compliance China today seems to have a very special “hands off” status which enables it to do as it pleases and which is adversely impacting any conservation efforts at the supply end to curb the illegal trade in wildlife. As long as the demand exists and circumventing international conventions has no consequences, the killing and trading will go on.

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