CLICK TO LIKE THIS: IS INSTAGRAM A HUB FOR ILLEGAL APE DEALS?

A new investigation probes an unexpected online marketplace for endangered animals, and finds a mysterious and frightening smuggler hanging out there

By Christopher Haslett

On September 9, 2015 I arrived back in Mombasa, Kenya after an investigative mission to Dubai and Egypt for Karl Ammann. Tracking down traders who move chimpanzees, orangutans and other apes across borders in violation of the CITES convention (see sidebar) is a tiring process meant only for the most patient of people. A lonely trail marked by closed doors, denials, hung up phone calls and angry remonstrations that Westerners like us should mind our own business and stay away.

Still, we’d made some interesting finds. One is the existence of a possible super-smuggler of endangered chimpanzees and orangutans who remains completely unknown to the news media, though not necessarily to law enforcers. We now know his real name, but on my return from the Mideast we still had only his nickname, the first half of which – Gorge – I use here. Gorge would still be unknown to us had an Egyptian conservation friend not mentioned him to me in a phone call at the end of August. She knew almost nothing about this man, but he was a foreigner and was stirring resentment among Egypt’s well established exotic animal sellers, many of whom keep their breeding farms in a village near the Giza pyramids. An elder of one of those families was calling our friend repeatedly to complain about this Gorge.

Shady dealers complaining about another shady dealer. When that happens, you know it could be big. And it happens to be a major tool we use to make breakthroughs.

We asked our conservation ally to use her network to shed some light on this character, the second half of whose nickname was that
of a country that just happens to be a conduit for live baby chimpanzees. At the time of writing this, she claimed she was still being stonewalled. People there were “afraid” of Gorge, she told us in one email. Egyptians have been conveying exotic animals, including chimpanzees, from Africa to collectors worldwide for generations. They are experts at it, and have come to see this business niche as an entitlement.

What kind of man scares people like them?

I would eventually come back to Gorge, but in an unexpected place.

**Online and out of control**

Back in Mombasa, I put away my hidden cameras and other investigative equipment and began tying up some loose ends with internet research. At some point I drifted onto Instagram. This website needs no introduction to most people. Launched as recently as 2010, it has become the world’s largest photo sharing site. To most users it is a place to make their family, travel and social pictures look a little more attractive than on Facebook, which now happens to own Instagram.

Gorilla smuggling is an even higher stakes venture than chimps and orangutans. It’s more expensive (partly because many of the babies die) and few people attempt it. Open evidence of it would be rare on the internet, but I took a chance and typed in the #gorilla hashtag. I scrolled through a hundred or more shots taken by tourists in Rwanda and Uganda, and then I saw a picture of a baby gorilla with an unusual caption. It was posted by a pet shop, and the caption read: “Coming soon”.

Surely a joke, I thought. Smugglers wouldn’t go on a huge site like Instagram and basically say: “Hey everyone, we’ll be offering one of the world’s rarest and most iconic mammals, just message us on this WhatsApp number!”

I clicked on the account name, Amazon Pet, and browsed their other pictures. This was no gag. Amazon Pet is a serious business offering a wide range of exotic pets to people in the United Arab Emirates. They proudly tag their animal shots with #mydubai. More than 43,000 people follow their posts. And yes, they’re on WhatsApp, so if you have the bucks, your dream ape is only a few taps away. (This app, we learned, is the favored communication platform of the sellers, who find its privacy and cheapness override the inconvenience of typing out messages.)

Instagram’s endangered animal dealers seem to have no fear of being disciplined by the site’s owner, Facebook.
Even scarier images followed. This same Dubai-based store was posting a truly haunting photo, also reproduced here, showing a young chimpanzee riding atop a luggage trolley at a Mideast airport. Where had it just come from? In what tropical African nation was it stolen, probably after seeing its mother cut down by gunfire as she tried to protect her baby? The owner of this account has an amazing nerve displaying such an image, which is one reason we’re so concerned about Amazon Pet.

As investigators, the Dubai location made sense to us. We’d seen problems there before. Mideast people have always loved keeping animals, with their taste tending toward the exotic. Tropical birds, monkeys and cheetahs have long been fixtures in the homes of wealthy and royal Arabs. Pet apes have also shown up in the mix. “I would guess that almost every palace there has a least a chimp or an orangutan baby. Terrifying!” we were told by a foreign vet who has worked extensively in the Gulf.

What is changing now – and further threatens the survival of some of these species – is the rocketing number of millionaires in the Gulf. Many of them wish to emulate the lifestyles of their social betters. Often the first toys they will buy are a high-end 4x4 vehicle, and a ridiculously expensive and impractical exotic pet, like a lion, chimpanzee or orangutan, to drive around with. Instagram has no shortage of pet ape photos from the Mideast, shocking either for the way they are treated or for the sheer number that some people own. At the foot of this article we’ve presented a montage of some of the worst examples.

While the iPhone cuddles and emoticon-laden captions seem to show real love on the owners’ parts, the horrors that are committed so this privileged group can have their jungle pets can’t be ignored. Conservationists estimate that nine chimpanzees are shot dead to get one baby suitable for selling. Adult chimps are big, strong and aggressively protect their young. (It’s right to ask what the equatorial African source nations are doing to stop the trade. But their enforcement is hobbled by underfunding, corruption and even wars. The well paid, crisply uniformed customs inspectors in the Gulf countries have no good reason not to catch dodgy animal shipments.)

The dismal fate that hangs over these babies shouldn’t be ignored either. Like the pythons that outgrow their
owners’ homes and are dumped in the Everglade swamps, chimps lose their cute appeal as they grow out of childhood. Instagram is awash with snaps of diaper-clad baby chimpanzees and orangutans, showered with toys and treats by their proud owners. Yet chimps should live about 60 years in captivity, orangutans about 50. Where were the older ones? The Dubai Zoo is one facility that has taken in seized animals and cast-off pets. But with this zoo reaching its capacity, it’s doubtful they’ll be able to accommodate the rising tide of cast-offs from the current “baby boom”.

**A bottomless pit**

Back on Instagram, we were finding it hard to wind up our search. Animal investigating has traditionally been a slow process involving plenty of hot, tiring leg work, with perhaps a few “easy” finds on the internet. Now, on Instagram, we were unearthing new owners, buyers and sellers of endangered apes almost by the day. Though designed to show photographs, Instagram has enough elements of a social media site to allow communities to form. Account holders can follow other accounts, and going through these lists we began to trace a circle of pet ape enthusiasts. Or perhaps a cluster of different circles would better describe it, since the diverse people involved here aren’t necessarily one big happy group. The Egyptians’ reaction to the foreign interloper Gorge makes that clear.

We are still far from finishing this online survey: one of the major obstacles we face is that many of the Instagram accounts we want to explore are private. You cannot see their ape photos/offering without requesting to, and our undercover requests have so far been rebuffed. Gorge is known to have an account but – not surprisingly – it’s set as private.

![Stills from an Instagram video showing how a Gulf-based dealer smuggles his baby chimps in fake grain bags](image)

A further challenge is that an online photo of a pet chimpanzee or orangutan is not, in itself, proof that it was illegally acquired. However, veterans like Karl Ammann, who have been studying the trade for decades, know that legal avenues for acquiring these animals are extremely small. It would be legal, under CITES, to buy and import a chimpanzee if it were a second-generation captive bred animal, coming from an accredited breeding facility. But we know that no such facility exists in Africa, and our veterinary contacts in the Gulf have been unable to identify any there. Egypt has at least one facility breeding chimps, but it isn’t CITES-approved (it refuses to allow legitimate foreign conservationists to inspect it) and its babies wouldn’t be legal anyway since they aren’t second generation.

With basically no legal way to acquire apes, it is reasonable to conclude that most of the Mideast apes were illegally gotten. One way to do this would be to bribe CITES officials abroad to issue a bogus export
or re-export permit, stating falsely that the animal was captive bred. But when we went through the CITES database, which should contain records of all CITES-approved ape trades across borders, we found only a handful of imports to Mideast countries in the past decade. This could not explain the many baby chimpanzees showing up on Arabs’ Instagram feeds. The data for orangutans is even more clear cut: not a single orangutan has entered any Gulf state since 2005 with a CITES permit, whether honestly or falsely filled out. And there look to be a lot of orangutans there.

There has to be some other pipeline in use. We’re forced to accept the likelihood that babies are being moved totally outside the CITES system. That is, smuggled. And possibly in the company of many other endangered, CITES Appendix I and II species. Tracing this pipeline is now an urgent priority for us.

And we may already have made a promising start.

**Curious about Gorge**

Gorge (as we’re simply calling him here) continued to tantalize us. We had a first name for him, and a second name that was probably a nickname. But still nothing else to flesh out this mystery man who is vying to dominate international ape smuggling, sowing fear among his competitors as he goes.

Then we had a breakthrough, and this one also came courtesy of Instagram. I spent over 50 hours reading through thousands of comments left under those cute baby chimp photos and videos. One comment – in Arabic like most of the others – was a short blessing with a religious overtone. Helpfully, this writer’s handle looked like a genuine first and last name. And the first name, which is a relatively rare one in the Arab world, was an exact match.

“Worthy of all the good”: Gorge gives his blessing (underlined in orange) to a Qatar dealer promoting his chimps
That still wasn’t bulletproof. I dug further, widening my search by looking at followers, and followers of followers. It was another lucky accident, but a Kuwait pet dealer’s Instagram account had a curious graphic that was a montage of exotic animal pictures, including rare cats and orangutans. And a by-now-familiar name.

A tribute to a man who seemed almost god-like to his junior business partners. Boys put up posters of their sporting heroes. Now we had pet retailers who worshipped a man who could obtain virtually any forbidden animal.

We found more Instagram pet “stores” posting similar tributes to Gorge. So far, they are limited to Kuwait and Qatar. Could this upstart network be the source of the Egyptian dealers’ frustrations? Territorialism is as old as the Mideast, and Egyptians would be unlikely to welcome new competition from a Gulf citizen, especially given the latter’s greater access to wealth.

Gorge’s exact role in the supply of chimpanzees and orangutans to the Gulf countries still needs more light shed on it. However, the video posting with the two chimps left little doubt that he’s a key player. To protect our ongoing investigation we have blurred out the name of the Qatari Instagram account where we found this video (it’s another dealership that really worries us) and we have also obscured Gorge’s full name. But the caption at the top reads: “For Sale Chimpanzee young age of about two months in collaboration with Gorge, Kuwait 120 Negotiable”

The oddness of a pet shop telling interested buyers to talk to someone else – Gorge – instead of going through them didn’t escape us. But it may be a sensible precaution. Leery of entrapment by authorities, Gorge may insist on personally screening all buyers.

“Worthy of all the good,” he proudly comments in Arabic next to the video.

120,000 Kuwaiti dinars equal about US$36,000. That is a further source of concern. Young wild chimps have been fetching around $25,000 in recent years; higher prices may be an indication of pent-up demand, and they
provide greater incentive to everyone along the supply chain, from the wealthy shippers to the ragged, gun-toting Africans who trudge into the forests in search of more baby chimps.

**A footnote – and a call for action**

Since I began this article, Amazon Pet, that purveyor of the most illegal of illegal animals, has announced it will open its first mall outlet in Dubai. We don’t expect baby apes in diapers to be romping in the front window of the shop in full view of everyone. But deals can be finalized in a back room after pictures have been shown and down payments handed over. We will obviously have someone checking this shop.

We will keep one good eye on that gorilla posting. As we earlier noted, baby gorillas still in need of their mothers are exceedingly difficult to transport legally, much less the smugglers’ way in a small, inadequate box. However, what we’ve learned about the Arab Gulf exotic pet people has taught us not to underestimate them. No one would try anything so crazy? The Gulf gang just might.

Finally, Instagram/Facebook have some explaining to do. Why has Instagram been allowed to become a cozy online lounge for people who offer illegal pets and post shocking pictures of them being abused? This can’t be explained away as the natural consequence of a free speech internet. When we searched eBay and Amazon for terms like “chimpanzee” and “orangutan” we turned up only videos and stuffed toys – no offers of live animals. Their past crackdowns seem to have got the message out to animal sellers that they should try elsewhere. Which the sellers have evidently done.

Facebook must now crack down the same way. We recommend the removal of all Instagram accounts appearing to market Great Apes and other CITES Appendix I listed species³. We also recommend banning all pictures and videos that show them as domestic pets. And no account that’s trying to sell things should be allowed to make their photos private.

Because – no exaggeration – apes are dying every week that this goes on.

**References**


CITES sidebar:

CITES and Great Apes

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was drawn up in the 1970s to regulate the cross-border movement of endangered species. Its rules prohibit all exports of wild caught Great Apes, including gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans. Captive bred apes can be exported subject to strict rules: the breeding facilities must be approved, and only second generation apes – grandchildren of the wild caught ones – can be eligible for export. However, if the original breeding stock was illegally acquired, its offspring are disqualified from export. (Sellers commonly reassure buyers by saying their captured animals were bred in captivity.)

CITES is a devolved system that leaves enforcement and reporting to its member countries. Each country is supposed to have a Management Authority (MA) that issues export permits for animals that are legally exportable. But as Karl Ammann revealed in Conakry Connection and other reports, corrupt MAs in African countries with wild apes have allowed these animals to leave with improper permits, after large bribes were paid. The importing countries (who are generally wealthier) should be catching these permit scams; laxity at their end is just as great a problem.

Although CITES does not have its own police force with powers to seize or arrest, the secretariat in Geneva does have punitive powers that are presently underutilized. Under Article 8 of its charter, member countries must arrange for the “confiscation and return” of animals whose method of acquisition violated the rules at any stage. The violation could have occurred even before the animal was born if (as noted above) its parents were obtained improperly.

CITES is also responsible for endangered animals who may have been smuggled without any CITES paperwork, since this can be considered a violation of CITES rules. Article 8 binds its member countries to “prohibit trade in specimens in violation” of the rules.