

Africa: Great Apes Are Humans' Closest Relatives, but Many Are Endangered By Illegal Trading. Here's What Needs to Be Done

Great apes are humans' closest relatives in the animal kingdom. As much as 98.8% of their DNA is shared, but while the number of humans living on the planet is increasing fast, other great apes are in decline. Five out of the seven species are now critically endangered.

The UN has estimated that about 22,000 [great apes](#) disappeared from their natural habitats between [2005 and 2011](#). Adults are mostly killed, their meat and [body parts sold](#) for bushmeat, traditional medicine or, in some cases, traditional ceremonies.

Babies and juvenile apes, on the other hand, [command a much higher price alive](#). They are also easier to smuggle across borders. Seizures and confiscations of illegal animal trades are rare and often poorly documented.

Part of the problem is great apes are very attractive. Ever since the first animals arrived at European zoos, [these species have been popular with visitors](#). Some, like [Barcelona zoo's white gorilla Snowflake](#) or [Twycross zoo's "PG Tips chimps"](#), even became celebrities.

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Through the decades, great apes have remained an acquisition target for some zoos and [animal attractions](#), sometimes by dodging the rules. The desire to keep "exotic" animals as pets also remains a key driver of the illegal [global wildlife trade](#).

Social media has made the illegal trade in great apes much more efficient: sellers and buyers can use [online platforms](#) to exchange messages about prices and transport.

For years, conservation NGOs such as the [Jane Goodall Institute](#), [Traffic](#) and the [African Wildlife Foundation](#) have been warning about the threat of extinction for great apes. Now a [great ape enforcement taskforce](#) - set up by member-nations of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of [Wild Fauna and Flora \(Cites\)](#) - is being established to try and tackle the escalating illegal trade.

The convention was formed 50 years ago to create rules for a legal trade in wildlife and to stem the decline in wild animal populations. Under Cites, commercial trade in great apes is effectively banned. But it has been long known that the [complex, paper-based permit system can be avoided or ignored](#).

The illegal trade of live great apes is not a simple logistical exercise. These animals are agile, clever and strong, even when young. They need ongoing care and can make noises that may reveal them hidden away in cargo. But for years, these transactions have been made easier by [weak law enforcement](#), [lack of capacity of government departments](#), and [widespread corruption](#). Falsifying and [laundering documents to pretend these animals are traded legally](#) is another route.

What are the problems?

So why are governments not doing more? First, the organisation meant to provide oversight and monitoring of wildlife trade - the Cites secretariat - is underfunded. While the legal global wildlife trade market is [valued at US\\$220 billion \(£164 billion\) a year](#), the secretariat has an [annual budget of about US\\$20 million](#). And like most international treaties, it is reliant on the collaboration of its 185 state members, with all the complexities of international politics.

State governments also don't treat the illegal wildlife trade as high a priority as illegal drugs, [weapons or human trafficking](#) - despite the [well-known connections between these](#). And many still operate an outdated permit system developed in the 1970s, instead of the [proposed electronic version](#) which would provide much better protection against fraudulent permits, faster and transparent reporting, and increased collaboration with customs officials.

Moving apes around

There are, however, legitimate reasons to transfer great apes internationally. Moving second-generation, captive-bred animals from one registered zoo to another would be a typical example. Getting an export permit showing the animal as captive-born is one of the easiest ways to transport great apes internationally.

But this can also be used as a loophole. In the late 2000s, some 150 chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas were reportedly exported [from Guinea to China](#), although there is no known facility in Guinea breeding either species. In this case, high-level corruption was a key factor: in 2015, Ansoumane Doumbouya, then head of the Cites management authority in Guinea, [was arrested](#) and sentenced to 18 months in prison for selling fraudulent export permits. He was later pardoned by the [president of Guinea](#).

In September 2025, Cites officials visited one of the largest private animal collections in the world. [Vantara](#), India's wildlife sanctuary turned mega-zoo, was hailed by some as an amazing story of love and care for wildlife. But the Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa, a national network of [30 South African organisations](#), has been increasingly concerned about the fast-paced imports of over 2,000 wild animal species from all over the world. Vantara now reportedly keeps close to [150,000 animals](#), more than any other well-known zoo.

In a recent investigation, the Indian Supreme Court absolved [Vantara from any wrongdoing](#) in relation to animal imports. But after this ruling, the Cites secretariat also visited the zoo. Its [recent report](#) raised significant concerns about several issues relating to animal transportation involving Vantara.

Vantara [has claimed](#) that Cites gave "a clean chit" to the facility, and that it had noted that all animal transfers to the facility were "fully legitimate and transparent, in accordance with Indian law".

The Cites report said chimpanzees were imported from the Democratic Republic of Congo and also Middle Eastern countries (via the United Arab Emirates) as captive animals. As far as the author is aware, none of these countries are known to breed chimpanzees in zoos or other captive facilities.

Even more worryingly, a bonobo from Iraq, a mountain gorilla from Haiti, and a Tapanuli orangutan from Indonesia were also acquired. There are few recognised zoos globally which breed bonobos, and none breeding either mountain gorillas or Tapanuli orangutans. There is only a single male [Tapanuli orangutan](#) kept in an Indonesian zoo. Based on the [Zoological Information Management System](#), the global zoo database, there is currently no mountain gorilla in zoos worldwide.

More generally, Cites has called on member countries affected by the great ape trade - both as a source and destination - to [implement additional measures](#) to prevent any illegal transfers. The International Union for Conservation of Nature, the world's largest conservation alliance, [has also called for](#) "international action to protect wild great apes in their natural habitats, with a focus on addressing poaching and illegal trade".

Introducing a modern electronic permit system and carrying out more enforcement would be important first steps to tackling these crimes. Otherwise, these species that are so close to humans will disappear in front of our eyes.

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