

TESTIMONY

OF

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**And**

**MANAGER OF CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS  
ZOO ATLANTA**

before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION,  
WILDLIFE  
AND OCEANS**

**COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

on

**H.R. 1760  
THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE GREAT APE  
CONSERVATION ACT OF 2011**

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to testify this morning on this very important piece of legislation, HR 1760--the reauthorization of the Great Ape Conservation Act Act.

My name is Tara Stoinski, and I am the Pat and Forest McGrath Chair of Research and Conservation at the The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund has as its mission the conservation and protection of gorillas and their habitats in Africa. We are committed to promoting continued research on the gorillas and their threatened ecosystems and to providing education about their relevance to the world in which we live. In collaboration with government agencies and other international partners, we also provide assistance to local communities through education, health, training and development initiatives. Our tag line is saving gorillas, helping people because we feel that only integrated solutions to conservation that intimately involve and engage the local human population will save gorillas and other biodiversity.

I also serve as the Manager of Conservation Partnerships for Zoo Atlanta, which is a member of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA). I currently serve as the chair of the AZA's Ape Taxon Advisory Group, which has oversight over all apes living in AZA institutions.

AZA represents over 210 professionally-managed and accredited institutions which draw over 142 million visitors annually and have more than 8 million zoo and aquarium members. Our institutions dedicate millions of dollars annually to support scientific research, conservation and education programs that focus on, among other things, the devastating effects of the loss of vital species habitat and the illegal trade in endangered species parts and products.

The Fossey Fund wishes to commend the foresight of this Subcommittee and the Full Committee in the establishment and maintenance of the Multinational Species Conservation Funds—which include African elephants, Asian elephants, rhinos, tigers, marine turtles and great apes. AZA also wishes to commend the US Fish and Wildlife Service for the exemplary manner in which they have administered these funds. Unlike many government grants programs, this funding effort has put real dollars into the field in real time, with a minimum of bureaucratic delay or red-tape. In addition, the Service has been able to leverage these scarce Federal dollars with over three times that amount in matching and in-kind contributions.

### **HR. 1760, reauthorization of the Great Ape Conservation Act**

Regarding the legislation before us today, I would first like to thank Congressman George Miller for introducing this important bill and for all of his efforts in support of fisheries and wildlife conservation. I would also like to extend my sincerest appreciation to you, Mr. Chairman, for your excellent leadership in this area as well.

Mr. Chairman, the magnificent animals featured in the Great Ape Conservation Act of 2000 are still in great peril today. The IUCN (World Conservation Union) Red List categorizes all great apes as either Endangered or Critically Endangered, which means they face a 'very' or 'extremely' high (respectively) risk of extinction in the wild. Critically Endangered great apes include the Cross River gorilla subspecies (numbered at only 250-280 individuals), the Mountain

gorilla (at 800 individuals), and the Sumatran orangutan (at 7334 individuals). To graphically illustrate the urgency of this situation, here are the most recent estimations concerning population estimates for gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, and gibbons.

**Gorilla:** For the Western gorilla, including its two subspecies, the total population numbers between 94,500 and 110,000. For the Eastern gorilla, including its two subspecies, the total population is estimated at less than 10,000.

**Chimpanzee:** The chimpanzee and the four subspecies comprising it now collectively number between 100,000 and 200,000. Chimpanzees are now extinct in 4 of the 25 countries they once inhabited.

**Bonobo:** The bonobo only occurs in one range state—the DR Congo. Bonobo population numbers are estimated to be between 10,000 and 50,000 today.

**Orangutan:** The orangutan is comprised of two species, the Bornean and Sumatran orangutan. The more numerous Bornean orangutans, including three subspecies, number between 45,000 to 69,000. The Critically Endangered Sumatran orangutan is estimated at only 6,500 individuals.

**Gibbon:** Twelve species of gibbons, small apes found across Southeast Asia, are listed on the IUCN Red List. Two species, the Hoolock gibbon and the Black gibbon, are classified as Endangered and two species, the Javan gibbon and the Eastern Black Crested gibbon are categorized as Critically Endangered. Current population numbers for gibbons are still unknown.

The estimated population numbers I have listed are just that—estimates. Most global population estimates are extrapolated from small surveys because it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate population numbers and monitor trends for forest-dwelling animals. In some areas, civil conflict has prevented this important survey research. But one thing is certain: ape populations across the world are declining—and they are declining rapidly.

### **Threats:**

Threats to the great apes are numerous. For the African species, including gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos, diseases such as Ebola hemorrhagic fever and the commercial bushmeat trade are, by far, the most serious threats. Ebola is only one of at least 100 infectious agents that are shared between humans and great apes. In 1994 and 1996, in northeastern Gabon, western lowland gorillas and chimpanzees were nearly wiped out during human Ebola outbreaks. In a recent epidemic in northwestern Congo, Ebola is blamed for over 130 human deaths and over 600 great ape deaths—over half the great ape population for the region.

Bushmeat is an economically important food and trade item for thousands of poor rural and urban families in West and Central Africa and other regions of the world. Virtually uncontrolled access to forest wildlife, rising demand for bushmeat, lack of economic options for rural communities, the absence of affordable protein substitutes, and the opening up of frontier forests have resulted in a commercial level trade in wildlife that is literally emptying the forests. We are

facing what is now popularly referred to as the “Empty Forest Syndrome,” where the trees may be left standing but the endemic wildlife is long removed. And if the essential wildlife—the predators, the prey, the seed spreaders, the natural fertilizers—are gone, the question of ecological balance becomes paramount.

However, disease and the bushmeat crisis represent only two of the many threats to the world’s diminishing great ape populations. Habitat loss and degradation are equally serious threats to the orangutans and gibbons of Southeast Asia. Until its recent protection, Sebangau National Park on the island of Borneo had been degraded by intensive logging. The 1995 population level of 13,000 orangutans consequently shrank to only 6,900 today, which is still one of the largest known populations.

Added to these are the threats that plague great apes everywhere—conversion of habitat to agricultural lands, the illegal pet trade, mining, forest fires, and civil conflict. Exploitation of forests for commercial logging and mineral prospecting mean that new access routes are extended into ape habitat, leading to increased bushmeat hunting and capture of animals for the illegal pet trade. Degradation of forest habitat also results in small, unconnected patches that isolate ape populations from each other and put them at an increased risk of extinction from chance demographic factors. The capture of infant chimpanzees, orangutans, and gibbons for the pet trade and entertainment industry frequently involves killing the mother and other adults. Orangutans sold as pets can yield more than \$10,000 (U.S. dollars), but it has been estimated that five animals die for every one that is traded.

Underlying and exacerbating these threats is the fact that great apes have very slow reproductive rates. Most apes do not reach sexual maturity until between the ages of 8 and 15, and can only bear young every 4 to 8 years. This means that ape populations simply cannot recover from the devastating threats they face on a multitude of fronts.

Mr Chairman, HR 1760 represents a Congressional commitment to continue to address the desperate plight of the great apes. The Great Ape Conservation Act is a proven formula designed to enhance programs for the conservation of great apes by assisting efforts in many worthwhile endeavors. Chief among these are: 1) to address the conflicts between humans and great apes that arise from competition for the same habitat; and 2) to promote cooperative projects among government entities, affected local communities, non-governmental organizations, or other persons in the private sector. These two criteria are essential because it is only through local action, local education, and local support that realistic solutions for saving the great apes can be devised and implemented. If one looks at the projects that have been funded to date under the Great Ape Conservation Fund, we see that this mandate has been fully implemented. We highly recommend that it be reauthorized at its current appropriation level of \$5 million.

### **Programmatic Support of The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund**

The Great Ape Conservation Act has been critical in helping the Fossey Fund achieve its goal of saving gorillas and helping people. In the last six years, the Fossey Fund has received over 1.3 million dollars in funding from the Great Ape Conservation Act. The Fossey Fund’s work began

in Rwanda in 1967 when Dr. Dian Fossey founded the famous Karisoke Research Center to study and protect the magnificent mountain gorilla. Karisoke has operated continuously over the last 44 years—making it the world’s longest running gorilla conservation program—and the Great Ape Conservation Act has provided us with critical funding to maintain this long-term, daily protection presence. Our work is paying off—a census conducted in 2010 showed that the mountain population has increased from a low of 250 individuals at Dr. Fossey’s time to 480 individuals. This change of fortune for the mountain gorilla cannot be understated—it is the **only** known wild great ape population in the world that is increasing, and our results clearly show that it is the high level of investment in protection over four decades that has enabled its remarkable recovery.

The Great Ape Conservation Act has also enhanced Karisoke’s education programs focused on building conservation and science literacy and capacity in Rwanda. These programs include developing conservation curriculum for primary and secondary students, forming youth environmental clubs, supervising university students, and educating local leaders about the benefits of wildlife conservation.

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Great Ape Conservation Act funding has been instrumental in developing a grass-roots program for community conservation outside of national parks, in which local people manage their own natural resources and are empowered to protect their biological heritage. Using the gorilla as a flagship species, nine of these community reserves have been established, which provide gorilla and overall forest protection over a region of nearly 2.5 million acres, an area roughly the size of Connecticut.

In both Rwanda and eastern DRC, the Great Ape Conservation Act has permitted the Fossey Fund to expand our health and development activities for the local communities that share their environment with the gorillas. These activities focus on treating intestinal parasites in humans living near protected areas; rehabilitating rural health clinics; building capacity through training medical personnel; and increasing access to clean water. We estimate that over 400,000 people in Rwanda and eastern DRC have benefited from these programs.

It is important to recognize that funds designated for ape conservation protect many species beyond the apes, including our own. Apes live almost exclusively in the tropical forest of Asia and Africa. Tropical forests cover only 7% of the world’s surface yet they contain an estimated 50% of the world’s biodiversity. Africa’s Congo basin, which is home to all three species of African great apes and represents 18% of the world’s remaining tropical forests, is estimated to contain 10,000 species of plants, 1,000 species of birds, 700 species of fish, and 400 species of mammals. These complex ecosystems support not just their own biodiversity but humans as well. For local human populations—and over 100 million people live in the Congo Basin alone—they are a source of food, shelter, water and income. These forests also serve as the world’s pharmacy—roughly 25% of today’s medicines originated in the rainforest. They perform critical ecosystem services, both locally and globally. At the local level, they prevent soil erosion and regulate rainfall patterns. Globally, they act as the lungs of the planet, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. By storing carbon dioxide—which is a greenhouse gas—forests play a critical in mitigating global climate change. Roughly one fifth of green house gas

emissions are in the form carbon dioxide that is released as a result of deforestation. Thus, investment by the US government and taxpayers in protecting apes and their tropical rainforest homes is more than good environmental stewardship; it is an investment in our own future.

Our experience at the Fossey Fund is clear. We have seen that support from the American people for local action to save great apes inspires and motivates Africans – it brings the conservation struggle to their doorstep, focuses on an animal icon they themselves respect, and empowers them to do something meaningful for their forests, for their mountains, and for their communities. This grass-roots approach directly links African and American hearts and minds in a common goal – that we can make room on our planet for our children, for gorillas and other great apes, and for the majestic forests in which they live.

The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund strongly supports HR 1760 and encourages its swift passage out of the Committee and movement to the House floor.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on this important wildlife conservation measure.