



EAZA statement on gorilla management

No male gorilla has been culled nor are there any immediate or medium-term plans to do so.

Amsterdam 29 November 2021: The European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA), the organisation responsible for the care and welfare of gorillas in accredited European zoos, regularly holds in-depth internal discussions to prepare for any eventuality. This necessarily means presenting viewpoints and plans that we hope will not have to be implemented. It is therefore with extreme disappointment that we have seen the willful misrepresentation of these discussions in print and social media presenting them as a plan that will inevitably be implemented. This is not true. It is also misleading to suggest that EAZA requires its Members to carry out culling on a mandatory basis – these are independent institutions with their own agency. Nonetheless, we do not apologise for discussing difficult issues, and should any of the measures mentioned in the internal report leaked to the Guardian need to be considered we will do so transparently and with respect for public opinions. To suggest otherwise, as various individuals and organisations have done, is plainly dishonest and **we demand their immediate retraction.**

The Reality of the Gorilla EEP and its plans for maintaining a sustainably and healthy population

The EAZA Ex situ Programme (EEP) for Western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) was started in 1987 and is a very well-established programme of the Association. At the beginning of 2021, the EEP population consisted of 463 individuals (213 males, 250 females) at 69 institutions.

Due to decades of professional management the gorilla population is demographically stable and as genetically diverse as possible. The care and welfare of all individual gorilla has always been and will always be a vital criterion for the EEP. Our Members holding gorilla have trained staff that work with the individual animals daily, making expert choices to optimize their welfare. These members of staff have close bonds with these animals and dedicate their professional lives to their care. We will not stand for them being maligned by the media, or vested interests aiming to dismantle the beloved public institutions they work for.

The EEP has published EAZA Best Practice Guidelines for the management and care of gorilla in zoos that are publicly available on the EAZA website, which give an accurate picture of the high level of welfare and expertise we expect from our Members.

In 2021, EAZA convened a panel of *ex situ* experts (gorilla experts from zoos, rescue centers, sanctuaries) and *in situ* experts (gorilla experts working in the field) to evaluate the role of the species in our institutions. They used the IUCN SSC Guidelines on the Use of Ex situ Management for Species Conservation to assess conservation and other roles for the population

The key role identified for the Western lowland gorilla EEP is **conservation education** – in other words, raising public awareness of the issues facing gorilla and other animals struggling to survive in diminishing habitats, with an emphasis on sustainable consumer behaviour and habitat protection; this role is related directly to others, which include **advocacy, fundraising, conservation research, and functioning as an insurance population** so that suitable animals can be selected for reintroductions as and when needed and possible.

EAZA supports reintroduction of gorillas provided there is a conservation need, and that the plans for such a project are supported by local and international *in situ* experts. Such projects must follow the IUCN SSC Guidelines on Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations, and we must ensure

that the *ex situ* population management programme remains sustainable and diverse after the removal of animals from the population for reintroductions. A clear plan must be provided by those initiating the project, and there must be a realistic chance of success.

EAZA has previously worked on reintroduction projects and can confirm that all gorilla selected for reintroduction came from EAZA zoos participating in the EEP. Indeed, it is EAZA zoos that have, with the support of their communities, developed the programme under which healthy, genetically diverse gorillas are available for reintroduction.

In order to (continue to) reintroduce gorilla in the future it is important to ensure that the population remains demographically stable and as genetically diverse as possible, while maintaining good animal welfare. In this context it is important for the programme to manage the number of births. Contraception is applied in females as a measure to slow the birth rate, however, it needs to be carefully managed as there are a number of potential negative impacts including the denial of opportunities for maternal behaviour, and the imbalance of harem groups that habitually have a number of infant animals present.

Gorillas live in harem groups of a dominant male with several females and young animals of both sexes. The main challenge for the EEP is that, with a 1:1 male:female sex ratio at birth, there will always be many more males in the population than places for harem group leaders. The EEP's strategy to house males in functional social groups can be achieved in two different ways: primarily within harem groups, and within bachelor groups where this is not possible. There is a limited number of males that can remain within a harem group, and not all bachelor groups are socially stable over the long term.

The EEP intends to maximise the number of harem groups by reducing the average number of adult females per group. Due to the equal sex ratio at birth, increasing the number of harem groups alone will never be sufficient to house all males. Therefore, additional solutions are needed to avoid a problematic situation in the next years with too many adult males that cannot become harem group leaders, cannot stay in a bachelor group and for whom a solitary long life is a welfare concern and not desirable.

Castration is a management tool that has been applied since 2011. Castration allows males to stay in their social group after the age where they would usually be expelled from the group by its leader. Long-term research has been initiated to scientifically evidence the benefits and impacts of this solution. Another management tool that the EEP want to investigate is whether selective abortion, could be feasible in gorillas. This option is not yet available and is only in an initial discussion phase at the moment.

One remaining option could be culling, which is a subject of exploratory conversations among the EEP as reported in the leaked document. So far, **culling is not recommended and this is unlikely to change over the short to medium term**. The decision to cull any animal is never taken lightly. We strongly reject the misleading suggestion that there is a black and white choice between culling and reintroduction; there is no direct connection and, if at all, **culling would never be a consideration if there are good alternative options available**.

Because we have the highest possible level of responsibility for the care of all the animals in our institutions, we believe that it is necessary to make plans for all eventualities, including many that we hope will not occur. Any responsible organisation caring for animals should, we believe, plan honestly for the future, and we would be remiss not to record those discussions faithfully in our internal documents.

Some attention has been given to the aspect of the possible public reaction to a cull of gorillas and its effects on zoos. **This is categorically not the highest consideration for EAZA Members when considering culling animals.** Nonetheless, it would be equally dishonest for EAZA to pretend that awareness of differing views on topics such as culling does not exist at all; we believe that we can make a difference to the conservation of nature and the connection of our communities to it, and we commit to the highest levels of transparency and respect for public opinion in any such decision. This transparency is not achieved by hiding behind platitudes or ignoring biological facts, and we believe that we owe it to our communities to discuss the issues honestly with them to ensure that any action we take is understood, and where possible, supported by the public.

In closing we would like to stress that EAZA zoos that have provided €12,591,891 and close to 8,000 staff hours to *in situ* conservation projects for gorilla and other great apes in the past five years alone. Additionally, EAZA is itself a strong campaigner for saving gorilla and other great apes. In 2001 the EAZA Bushmeat campaign collected over a million signatures from concerned citizens which resulting into the EU critically assessing grant applications from countries where this practice impacts wild gorilla. The EAZA South East Asia campaign contributed significantly to the EU's decision to implement mandatory labeling of palm oil in food products, saving habitats for apes. In 2010-2011, the EAZA Ape Campaign raised over €580,000 that was distributed over 24 field projects including gorilla projects in Nigeria, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Effective species conservation is a complex challenge, requiring integrated *ex situ* and *in situ* solutions that use the latest scientific evidence to take into account all possibilities. EAZA stands fully behind this approach and takes the responsibility for species in our care extremely seriously.

For press inquiries, please contact info@eaza.net

EAZA is the Membership organisation of over 400 of the most progressive zoos and aquariums in Europe and Western Asia. Responsible for the administration of the 400 state of the art EAZA Ex Situ Programmes for population management, EAZA is a force for collaboration in conservation, education, and research.