

I had never heard of the Cross River Gorilla, the critically endangered subspecies of the Western Lowland Gorilla, endemic to the forest of Southwest Cameroon... I had never been to Africa; so while I expected the unexpected, the profound impact of the people, especially the children, came as an unexpected surprise.

As I deboarded the plane, the humidity was overwhelming, but not as overbearing as the self-appointed baggage handlers at the airport! After the chaos of customs, I was relieved that the impending riot I had imagined was brewing outside, was in fact a sudden outburst of yelling and running due to Cameroon's Indomitable Lions scoring in a semi-final soccer game.

Unfortunately, no one had arrived to meet me at the airport after two hours, so I relied on the kindness of a stranger who spoke enough English to assist me in getting to a nearby hotel. Although I was off to a bumpy start, nothing could have compared to the 8 hour drive to the village of Bechati. The road was unforgiving; riddled with potholes for the first half of the trip, unpaved the second half... Three in the front & four of us in the back of a pickup truck that got stuck in a rut and temporarily broke down along the way.

The terracotta clay of the road against the vibrant greens was breathtaking. As we drove through several other villages, we were greeted with enthusiastic pleas for sweets. "White men" in the village tend to attract a lot of attention; so by the time we had arrived, a small contingent of curious children had congregated outside of our sleeping quarters. Keeping their distance, they were soon joined by several other onlookers. Although the national languages of Cameroon are French and English, there are over 250 distinct native languages, which can not be understood from one village to the next. Since they were mainly younger children, who hadn't yet attended school or had only just begun to learn English, there was a language barrier. Consequently, we relied on the universal language of song, dance and games (& candy!) in order to communicate with one another!

Once we arrived at base camp, we pitched our tents & settled in for the evening. Most likely, the chimps & gorillas were preparing their nests for a good night's sleep as well. After breakfast, we began our climb up the steep slopes of the mountainside, which proved to be quite a challenge; however, despite the rugged terrain, we were able to ascend several hundred feet above sea level. Our field guide discovered the faint tracks of chimps, which we followed to an area where there had been apparent activity, a short distance from the nesting site of at least nine chimpanzees. These nests could be distinguished from the lone gorilla nest we came upon the following day by their smaller size, and because they were high in the trees as opposed to being lower or on the ground. The gorilla tracks could be easily identified by the distinctive imprint of the ape's knuckles.

We had been informed that there would be little chance of seeing the apes in the wild, due to the fact that they are so rare and elusive, and prefer dense forest. Because it was also the dry season, the leaves crunching beneath our feet made it impossible to sneak up on anything. Apparently, we did come close as we encountered presumably the same group of nine chimps' nests in a different location, two days later. On this occasion, we

could also hear their vocalizations in the distance, and again later that evening, perhaps as they were constructing their nightly nests.

From 2004-2007, systematic transect methods were employed to assess the distribution, threats and opportunities for the conservation of great apes in the border region of Nigeria and Cameroon. Recent studies have concluded that fewer than 250-300 Cross River Gorillas and less than 3000 Nigeria-Cameroon Chimpanzees remain. The Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF) has partnered with the African Conservation Foundation to implement the Western Cameroon Great Apes Program in an effort to establish community wildlife reserves to protect the ecological and genetic connectivity between great ape populations. Current threats to their survival include, agricultural encroachment; commercial logging, habitat and great ape fragmentation, and primarily hunting, trapping and the illegal trade of bush meat.

Our expedition focused on conducting great ape surveys and collecting census data, as well as raising awareness through community education. In order to survey an area, we conducted random searches while recording any observations, nests, feeding signs, habitat and tree species, elevation, GPS coordinates, and other relevant information. The fearless leaders of our surveying team were a field guide and three field workers from the ERuDeF office. Jacob, our field guide, is a converted hunter, as are several of the current field guides working in cooperation with the ERuDeF staff. One former local hunter stated that in the past he had successfully killed many gorillas and chimps that were crop raiding on his land. He continued, "Now that I know how few are left, I want to be a ranger and work hard to get them back." We also encountered a man with some of his family members who had come into the forest to harvest plantains or palm oil. Although unprovoked, he adamantly defended his responsibility to support his 8 children and his ailing elderly mother, as well as their dependence on the forest for survival. This brief interaction only reinforced the fact that implementing alternative livelihood strategies, in addition to incorporating sustainable forest management practices, is critical to the success of this program.

Therefore, community education and raising awareness are key components of this project. Consequently, ERuDeF staff have conducted community meetings, video sessions and art contests, and are in the process of developing teacher workshops and curriculum for local schools. I had the opportunity to visit a Bechati middle school and speak about the role of zoos in conservation. Affecting attitudes toward great apes and encouraging empathetic relationships between children and wildlife is a prerequisite to co-existence and the protection of the apes and their habitat. Being immersed in the indigenous communities of the highland rainforest, including meeting and interacting with the local chief, teachers & principal, and children of the village, left a lasting impression and was truly an *unexpected* highlight of my experience in Cameroon.