

## Logging Sets Off an Apparent Chimp War

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS (NYT) 780 words

Published: May 13, 1997

LOGGING of tropical forests in the central African country of Gabon appears to have touched off a savage territorial war among chimpanzees in which four of every five chimps die, says a field biologist for the Wildlife Conservation Society.

With an estimated 50,000 chimpanzees, Gabon has until lately accounted for a third to a half of a total African chimp population estimated at 100,000 to 150,000. But the chimpanzee wars have apparently reduced the Gabonese population to about 30,000, and it could ultimately fall to 10,000 if most of the country is logged as now planned, said the biologist, Dr. Lee White. The fear is that the central African subspecies of which the Gabon chimps are members might become endangered, as are two other subspecies in western and eastern Africa.

The findings from Gabon are especially startling because the logging is selective, intended to minimize damage to the habitat of chimpanzees and other animals. No more than 10 percent of the trees in a given tract are cut, Dr. White said at a briefing last week in New York sponsored by the society, which has its headquarters at the Bronx Zoo. Nor is there any hunting in the area studied by Dr. White. And no other large animals like elephants or gorillas appear to have suffered.

But chimps, the animals most closely related to humans, are known to be highly jealous of territory, patrolling and defending borders constantly. Even without logging, violent clashes are known to erupt in which chimps kill each other with their bare hands and feet. In at least two documented cases, large communities of chimpanzees have systematically hunted down smaller ones and killed all members.

What is happening in Gabon, Dr. White believes, is that as mechanized logging operations advance on a continuous front three to six miles wide, their approach frightens the chimpanzees, which are not used to humans and have never encountered anything like big, noisy machines. So they flee — right into the territory of the next chimp community.

When that happens, Dr. White said, “you’re essentially going to kick-start a

chimpanzee war.” The males from the invaded community attack the interlopers, and many die. Then the loggers keep coming. The invaded community itself is displaced onto the next community’s territory. New warfare breaks out, Dr. White believes, “and this process goes on and on and on and on as the loggers move through.”

Dr. White said he and his African colleagues “have a scientific reluctance to shout about this effect,” since they have not actually observed a chimpanzee war in progress. But all signs point in that direction, he said.

First, he said, it is clear on the basis of sampling surveys of chimpanzee nests, scats and actual animals in Gabon’s 2,000-square-mile Lope Reserve that the population of a given community falls by 80 percent immediately after the loggers go through. The surviving 20 percent, Dr. White postulates, filter back to their home range through undisturbed forest after the war.

Second, Dr. White observed chimp behavior suggesting a war atmosphere. In one area where he was surveying the effects of logging, the chimpanzees were extremely agitated, drumming on trees, calling to each other and even rushing Dr. White himself. “On a number of occasions they mobbed me,” he said. “I had whole chimpanzee communities charging to about five meters and screaming at me, and that’s very unusual behavior.” He interprets this as evidence of “a very stressed chimpanzee community, which is exactly what we would expect if this sort of chimpanzee war was going on.”

Why are gorillas not affected in the same way? One reason may be that home ranges of gorilla groups commonly overlap each other and aggression between groups is rare. Dr. White and a colleague, Dr. Caroline Tutin, make this point in a chapter prepared for a forthcoming book, “African Rain Forest Ecology and Conservation.” Another, they say, is that when conflict occurs the mode is different. Gorilla groups depend on a dominant male for protection rather than engaging in group combat.

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20A1FFF3A5D0C708DDDAC0894DF494D81&n=Top%2fNews%2fInternational%2fCountries%20and%20Territories%2fGabon>

**Reprinted by**

---

*Exposing and Challenging Rainforest Consumption*

**R A I N F O R E S T   R E L I E F**

212/243-2394 • [info@rainforestrelief.org](mailto:info@rainforestrelief.org) • [www.rainforestrelief.org](http://www.rainforestrelief.org)