

Expert: Congo's 'forest hippies' dying out

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KINSHASA, Democratic Republic of Congo (Reuters) -- Pygmy chimpanzees dubbed "hippies of the forest" for resolving conflicts through sex rather than violence are dying out faster than ever in post-war Democratic Republic of Congo, a conservationist said on Tuesday.

Bonobos, the rarest of all the great apes, are being killed in large numbers by bands of gunmen two years after the vast central African country's most recent war officially ended.

"In 1980, there were about 100,000 bonobos in Congo. In 1990 there were thought to be 10,000," Claudine Andre, founder of the Lola ya Bonobo [Bonobo Paradise] sanctuary just outside Kinshasa, told Reuters in an interview.

"Since then we have had two wars, their habitat has been occupied and the post-conflict period has been even harder, so I fear for what the situation is now," she said, adding that she was still receiving orphans after the war.

Experts warn bonobos, one of man's closest relatives, could die out within 50 years from poaching, logging and disease.

Hundreds of conservationists and policy makers from 23 nations are in Kinshasa this week to map out a survival plan for the world's gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans and bonobos.

"Bonobos are the species of great ape that is most likely to disappear," Andre said, calling to the orphaned chimpanzees through a fence separating the thickly forested sanctuary from the encroaching outskirts of the crumbling capital.

Only found in remote corners of Congo -- a vast and inaccessible country that has been torn apart by a decade of war -- the "forgotten ape" is said by scientists to be one of the least hostile primates.

"The bonobo's outlook is to search for peace," Andre said. "All their conflicts are resolved peacefully, often through sex. They are the hippies of the forest."

Threats

There are around 150 bonobos living in captivity in total but Andre hopes to rehabilitate and release some of her 43 orphans back into the wild.

Congo's last war officially ended in 2003 but the process of disarming thousands of fighters in a country the size of Western Europe and integrating them into the national army is faltering, leaving many gunmen near bonobo habitats, armed and hungry.

A well-organized bush meat trade and crippling poverty in the forests compound the threat to the apes.

"[Bush meat] is demanded by the urban population and as the people in the forests have no option, they are chopping down trees to make charcoal and trapping animals for bush meat," Andre said.



A bonobo looks at its hand in the sanctuary near Kinshasa in this picture from April.

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“ People ... have no option, they are chopping down trees to make charcoal and trapping animals for bush meat. ”

-- Claudine Andre

"If man destroys his closest cousin, he might destroy all animal species," she added, as a group of young bonobos drank from a bottle, ate bananas and had sex in a cage behind her.

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