

A primate baby, dependent on its mother, will still try to hold onto her body when she is shot by hunters. When such juveniles are still alive, they are often taken home by the hunters as toys for their children, or they try to sell them. Those orphans - "by-products" of the bushmeat trade - often die after a few days due to diseases, malnutrition or starvation. But what happens to those that survive?



Gorilla orphan

"Lying on the dirty floor - huddled together - there was a six month old gorilla female. The "owner", a hunter, said he brought it home three weeks ago (after he shot its mother) for his children to play with. Initially he tied a rope around the waist of the gorilla and then tethered her to a pole. The rope had cut deep in the flesh, and the wounds were infected. The man said that the animal had been very lethargic in the last 10 days so he had untied the rope. The children had lost interest in playing with the apathetic primate and it was obvious that the gorilla would soon die."

The story of the gorilla female "Mbinda" from a small village on the border between Gabon and the PR Congo was published by the Swiss photographer Karl Ammann in October 1994 in the journal "BBC Wildlife".

He had tried for years to find somebody to publish his photos of the slaughter of wild animals, but mostly faced rejection - they were too cruel. Only the pictures of the ape orphans were considered "acceptable" and were published under the title „The bushmeat babies“.



The purchase of orphans for their "rescue" is problematic. Foreigners sometimes pay comparatively high prices out of compassion, which in turn increases the supply. Ammann was able to convince the poacher to exchange Mbinda for the value of 2.5 kg of meat. He supplied her with substitute milk and took her to a rescue centre in Brazzaville.

In contrast to Mbinda, the majority of ape orphans do not survive. If they do, they are traumatised for a long time. Chimpanzees are more robust than the very sensitive gorillas. There are many documented cases of chimpanzees that were kept chained up for years, vegetating in someone's backyard. In Cameroon alone, 200 illegally kept chimpanzees there are reported.

Attempts to release these formerly captive chimpanzees or even re-introduce them to their natural populations have failed. A release would have the danger of disease transmission to their wild conspecifics and the competition for food, as well as aggressive encounter, is highly problematic. Orphaned chimpanzees can only be released into areas where there are no conspecifics, for example on islands, where they are under some control.



On this island in Uganda, orphaned chimpanzee were released. They were fed from the boat three times a day.



Fates of chimpanzee orphans.



Of approximately 2,000 ape orphans each year, about 50 individuals obtain a place in one of the rescue centres which were set up in Africa, often with the financial support from animal activists from America or Europe. One centre in Brazzaville has set itself a goal to re-introduce their gorillas long-term back into the wild. It is unclear if this goal will be achieved. In 1997 the staff had to flee together with some of their orphans from the war. A handful of adolescent gorillas had to stay at the introduction site of Lefini, and are said to be still alive!

But:

☞ Orphanages cost money.

Great Apes live to around 50 yrs old. Food, keepers, maintenance costs - this all has to be financed the long term. Governments of African countries therefore often ignore the orphan problem - and do not confiscate bushmeat-orphans - even though they have legal authorisation.

☞ Orphanages become quickly "overbooked".

Most orphanages are full to capacity. Additionally: The current residents are now reaching, or will shortly reach, sexual maturity. The centres then also have to provide shelter for the offspring.

☞ Orphanages don't affect the causes of the problem.

Orphanages can play an important role in environmental education. For example the background of the fate of orphans can be explained to people - especially children - by using the animals as a direct example. It is hoped that in doing so people will reconsider some of their traditions.