Zoos don't need gorillas – gorillas need zoos

MEDIA RELEASE FROM WAZA : World Association of Zoos and Aquariums

Following a recommendation by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), the Wildlife and National Parks Department for Peninsular Malaysia has decided to send four confiscated gorillas known as the "Taiping Four" to the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa. While certain interest groups challenge this decision, WAZA maintains that there was no better option.

The Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) for Peninsular Malaysia has informed the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and the National Zoo of South Africa that the Government of Malaysia has finally decided to send the confiscated gorillas known as the "Taiping Four" to the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa (Pretoria Zoo). This decision was made taking into account a recommendation by WAZA. To respond to certain criticisms, WAZA wishes to make the following comments: WAZA and its members are deeply committed to species conservation and animal welfare. WAZA's Code of Ethics requires that obtaining animals from the wild should be reduced to a minimum, and that each importation must be in full compliance with the relevant national and international legislation. The two zoos involved in the illegal transfer from W. Africa to Malaysia of the gorillas aren't WAZA members.

It is WAZA's stated policy to support international conservation treaties. Consequently, the WAZA Executive Office assisted the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in the fact finding and suggested that Pretoria Zoo would be a suitable place to accommodate the animals in case they would have to be confiscated and could not be returned to their country of origin. On WAZA request, Pretoria Zoo submitted documentation allowing the authorities to make an informed decision.

Basis for WAZA's recommendation:

· The keeping of gorillas is expensive. Any institution receiving them should have a solid financial basis. Pretoria Zoo is the National Zoo of South Africa. It has a well administered budget, and the costs exceeding the revenues from gate fees etc. are covered by the National Government.

· Any facility accepting animals from a country outside the species' natural range should be able to guarantee lifetime care. Pretoria Zoo was established in 1898, and has been continually and extensively renewed. It is thus a very a long-term operation whose further existence is ensured by the fact that is government-owned and that it receives a very large number of visitors.

· Lowland gorillas are endangered in the wild. Every year about 3000 gorillas are slaughtered for the illegal bushmeat trade. The maintenance of viable breeding populations in human care is therefore of utmost importance. For this reason, an international studbook is kept under the auspices of WAZA, and two of WAZA's Association Members (AZA and EAZA) operate co-ordinated *ex situ* conservation breeding programmes. In 2002, the total of animals under control of the WAZA Network was 825 gorillas kept by 144 zoos. Of these, 388 gorillas in 56 zoos belong to the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP), which also includes Australia, and 373 gorillas in 53 zoos to the North American Species Survival Plan (SSP). Pretoria Zoo has always registered its animals in the International Studbook. The only gorilla currently at the zoo is a loan from the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP). The zoo cooperate with both studbook and EEP.

· Pretoria Zoo employs not only dedicated and experienced animal keepers, but also two fully salaried staff veterinarians and a veterinary nurse. The zoo has its own animal hospital, it can count on the cooperation of the world-renowned Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty, which is only a few minutes drive away, and there are numerous human medicine institutes and hospitals in Pretoria, which could be consulted if necessary.

· Animals taken out of their original range may attract pathogens, often without becoming clinically ill themselves. This may be a problem for the wild population if the animals would be returned to their home land, and would have to be addressed by adequate veterinary expertise and appropriate quarantine facilities. Pretoria Zoo, apart from having the veterinary experience and facilities available, lies outside the gorilla's range, i.e. no disease could be transmitted to wild gorillas.

· Those who promote the transfer of the gorillas to a sanctuary instead of a zoo claim that a strong message needs to be sent to zoos to the effect that illegal trade in gorillas will not be rewarded. WAZA is not aware of any of its member zoos having accepted gorillas from illegal sources within at least the past twenty years. 73% of the gorillas currently kept by zoos are born in human care, many of them are second or third generation animals. Only nine gorillas from the wild were added to the studbook during the past ten years. This includes animals confiscated by the authorities and subsequently entrusted to a zoo pursuant to article VIII.4 of CITES.

· The Taiping gorillas have to tell a story by which they would promote CITES and conservation in general. However, for telling a story, an audience is needed. Pretoria Zoo has an attendance of 600,000 to 800,000 visitors per year forming a huge audience. In addition, there are a number of outreach activities. South Africa is often blamed for having allowed the transit of illegally traded CITES specimens. Having the four gorillas at Pretoria Zoo in combination with the activities envisaged will help to create awareness among the general public, but also among airline personnel, customs officers, border veterinarians etc. and thus help to prevent similar cases in future. · The visitors meeting the gorillas at Pretoria Zoo may be disposed to donate money for gorilla conservation. Pretoria Zoo will undertake to establish a Gorilla Conservation Fund subject to official audit and to scrutiny by CITES. This fund will be used to support conservation projects in the gorilla range states of West and Central Africa.

Sanctuaries, seen by certain interest groups as the preferred option for the future housing of the "Taiping Four", could hardly give the same guarantees for a long-term keeping of the animals, could not provide better facilities and care, and would not be able to reach a very big audience. They keep their animals in cages or enclosures too; they are not designed for receiving animals from *ex situ* sources; they may have problems with the keeping of fully-grown apes, and they prevent the animals in their care from breeding. Sanctuaries are primarily intended to take care of orphaned animals collected or confiscated locally, and WAZA fully recognizes that they can fulfil a very useful role from an animal welfare and, to a certain extent, species conservation standpoint, and encourages zoos to continue to cooperate with and to support sanctuaries also in future. Those who oppose the transfer of the gorillas to Pretoria Zoo argue that sending victims of one zoo's misconduct to reward or award another zoo would not be acceptable, and they suggest that zoos want to purchase gorillas for economic profit. These arguments are not pertinent, as they are based on an antiquated understanding of justice implying a collective guilt of zoos, and a complete lack of understanding of the relevance of keeping gorillas in a zoo.

Of course, gorillas are high profile species, and opening a new gorilla exhibit or adding a group of gorillas to the collection will always result in an increase of visitor numbers. However, zoos having given up the keeping of gorillas to make more space available for other species and have seen no negative impact on visitor numbers. It should also be noted that most zoos keeping gorillas are non-profit establishments operated by governments, foundation, charities or non-profit companies, and that any financial surplus would be reinvested into the operation or used for conservation.

Zoos can do without mammoths, without sabre-toothed tigers and without dodos. Zoos could also do perfectly well without gorillas. In fact 85 % of the zoos organised in the WAZA Network don't keep gorillas, and most of them have no intention of ever adding this species to their collection. On the other hand, the gorillas with their steadily decreasing population and shrinking habitat may have to rely on a healthy zoo population in order to survive as a species in the longer term.

WAZA is the only global association for zoos. It promotes stewardship of the natural world by encouraging members to bring people close to living animals, applying and advancing *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, science and education, and setting standards of excellence in animal welfare and environmental responsibilities. WAZA unifies close to 200 major zoos (institutional members) and 16 regional or national federations representing another 800 zoos and aquariums. For further information please contact Peter Dollinger, Executive Director, WAZA, Executive Office. Email: waza.director@bluewin.ch.

N O T E : WAZA requested that two points be added to this article for ZOOS' PRINT

1. WAZA is committed to cooperate with the CITES Secretariat at Geneva and the National CITES Authroities, in particular that we would assist CITES in the fact-finding in the event of suspected illegal transactions of CITES specimens.

2. Any zoo purchasing illegal animals will bring the zoo community as a whole into disrepute.

Just say NO !

In visiting zoos and speaking with zoo personnel in various parts of South and South East Asia, it is obvious that many, many zoos are still obtaining animals with animal dealers who are obtaining animals from the wild or from other dubious sources. Zoos should be informed that if they are caught with such animals or are sending such animals out, they can face serious consequences, some of which are :

1. Being cheated by the animal dealers who may not live up to their part of the bargain or who may send animals of uncertain origin
2. Being targeted by the international press
3. Being blackballed by the International zoo, wildlife and conservation community
4. Being censured by your own government* and local colleagues with integrity
5. Being forced to surrender animals for which your zoo or your government has paid large sums
6. Being part of an international crime community which "launders" wild animals with lies and passes them off as captive-born. This means that you are not only not contributing to conservation but are yourself one of the "bad guys" who is responsible for the decline in wild animal populations.
7. If you are a member of WAZA and a few zoos in these regions are, having your membership withdrawn.

The WAZA Welfare and Ethics Policy is printed on the following pages.

If you are in communication with animals dealers and wish to find out their reliability, you can write to us at ZOO and we will check with several international sources and get an assessment of the individual or company you are dealing with. We will not mention your zoo. We would like to suggest an international "black list" for animal traders so that zoos can understand what they are dealing with.

* Also we know that governmental authorities sometimes put pressure on zoo directors to obtain animals through wrong channels. The governments will happily dump the director in the toilet when bad press begins. Do not bend to the wishes of your government. They do not understand. Contact someone -- WAZA or ZOO or someone you know is sympathetic to the this problem. We can find ways to put subtle pressure and perhaps take the pressure off of you. *Sg. Editor Emeritus*