

TALKING GORILLA STORIES IN EKONA LELU VILLAGE, MT. CAMEROON: A REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANE VALUES IN WEST AFRICA.

The Wildlife Protectors Fund has made exceptional progress in Africa during the past six months. Our WPF/GF Field Coordinator, Penny Fraser, has organized resources and initiated plans in a half dozen vital areas. Results are already in from a fascinating pilot study conducted with villagers in the western province of Cameroon. Again we have evidence of the profound impact the story of Koko and her kitten can have on people of all ages. There can be no doubt that humane values are strengthened by the telling of these tales. This report summarizes the discoveries of our Research Associate, Rita Lysinge, who went to the village of Ekona Lelu on the slopes of Mount Cameroon to learn about the people's perceptions of gorillas, and to tell them stories about Koko and Michael, the gorillas who talk sign language.

Rita is a native of the area and has worked in these settings for years with the Mt. Cameroon Project: a very successful conservation effort which is being restructured into the Mt. Cameroon Biodiversity Conservation Centre located at Limbe Botanic Gardens. On June 19th, Rita made the hike up the mountain to Ekona Lelu for the first of a series of new interventions in conservation values education.

Ekona Lelu is one of the oldest settlements on the mountain. Most of the people are subsistence farmers, growing mainly cassava, plantains and yams. The village is 7 km from the nearest town at the base of Mount Cameroon, and can only be reached by continuous climbing through a stony and winding road. Their buildings are made from wooden planks; most are in disrepair, and just two houses and the community hall have cement floors. There is one primary school with classes 1-3, and a number of small churches within the village. Most young children have to walk 5km down the mountain on a daily basis to receive education. If children want to continue to secondary school, they then have to move to a different area, usually living with relatives or friends. Life is very hard in Ekona Lelu, and the people are committed to making a better life for themselves and their children.

The study was done with three different groups: children, hunters and adults. Some highlights will be reported here.

The Children's Session was intended for 10 to 12 year olds, but many younger children appeared at the community hall early, eager to take part. These youngsters remained to watch the proceedings, and join the discussion with their older cohorts. These discussions were all conducted in the unique Pidgin English dialect that is common in the western region of Cameroon. More than 20 children participated.

What is a Gorilla? Half the children had never heard of the gorilla, and none had ever seen one. The other half reported that gorilla was a very wild animal living far off in forests that are difficult to reach. Some said they would like to see gorillas, not loose, but in the zoo where they are protected inside a cage and can not harm people. A few of them questioned whether people eat gorillas, and if they do how do they manage to kill it when it is so wild.

Koko's Story. When the children were done talking, Koko's Kitten was narrated to them in Pidgin. Each child followed the story very carefully, while looking at the pictures in the book. Their reactions were energetic and imaginative:

- I like Koko's story because it teaches us how we can live with other animals, how man can live together with animals, how it is possible that you can stay with a wild animal at home and it will not harm you.
- It is important to be kind to all animals because they feel like us.
- Koko is intelligent being able to say what she wants, communicate about her thoughts. She is kind in the way she lived with her kitten; she is particularly very interesting in her behaviour and character that are similar to those of a human being.
- Gorillas should not be killed in the wild, should be brought to the town to live with people or be kept in the zoo.
- Because of Koko's story, we would obviously feel sad if we saw someone killing a gorilla. Even though people kill them, they will always exist, since those living keep on reproducing.
- It is very normal for people to talk about gorillas; it's good that people who know about animals like this should help inform others who do not, and teach them how they can be protected.

The children had questions. As we have found in Africa and worldwide, children who read and hear about Koko want to meet her, and to become friends with other gorillas. The children of Ekona Lelu wondered if other wild animals, like the Lion, could be taught to behave like Koko. Their interest and imagination piqued, we expect to find the story of Koko being told and retold on Mt. Cameroon when we return there in a few months to assess the endurance of the intervention.

The Hunters Session. As with the children, this session began with an open question asking the hunters to say what they know about the gorillas, based on either their experience or stories heard. A few hunters said they know the gorilla very well and gave the following descriptions for it: "looks like a human being, and it is a very wild animal." One hunter said he last saw it seven years ago in the thick forest, while one said he saw it two weeks ago. They agreed that it is found far off in their forest, that you can hear them calling a few kilometres away, and that they move in groups of about 20. They regretted however that the gorillas have decreased in number due to sickness and hunting pressures.

The conversation changed when other hunters, who were blocked by rain, joined the team and brought a different opinion. These men identified four distinct animals – the gorilla, chimpanzee, baboon, and drill. After serious arguments they realised the first

group of hunters had been talking about the chimpanzee and the whole group confirmed they had never seen a wild gorilla but had heard of stories about it from their grandparents. This is what they said was told to them:

- The gorilla has the shape of a man and does things exactly like people do. For example, it was often seen gathering firewood in the forest, well arranged and tied in a bundle. It was not aggressive or harmful, but if someone took the gorilla's wood, it would follow after the person and make sure it got back its wood.
- Most interesting was the story that the gorilla was very kind and intelligent, because whenever he left his wood in the forest and did not see it on return, he would walk directly to the person who collected it and pick just what belonged to him. Even more fascinating was the story that, if the gorilla arrived at the guilty person's home and the wood had been burnt, it collected the ash from the wood and left without causing any problem.
- Physically, the hunters had been told by their grandparents that the gorillas very strong, stronger than man and all the other animals in the forest with that shape (chimpanzee, baboon, drill).

This wonderful legend about the kind and intelligent gorilla differs from other stories which depict the greatest of apes as dangerous and brutal. It corresponds with the real life story of Koko and Michael, and with observations of wild gorillas as relatively peaceful animals that are aggressive only when severely threatened. The hunters were very interested to hear the narration of Koko's Kitten in Pidgin and examine the different photographs shown in the book. Some of the remarks they made at the end of the session were:

- Koko is intelligent being able to learn how to communicate using sign language, and being able to express her feelings. She is friendly and playing with her kitten
- She is loving and can also feel pain so that she was greatly affected by the death of her kitten.
- We are happy with Koko's story. It shows that there are animals in the bush who can be trained to behave like humans so that they are able to live with people and communicate effectively.
- Koko is gentle, and not harmful as we might think an animal like that should be.
- Koko is very interesting -- the strange things that she does and how she does them.
- The gorilla has feelings like men and can express this freely; it would feel pains if affected physically.

The hunters exhibited clear understanding of the problems people face managing captive gorillas. Even though they now understand that it possible to live with gorillas, they are of the opinion that they should be kept in the zoo where people have been trained on control and maintenance. "Those who might like to have them as pets have a very slim chance. They would not even be able to sustain it." However, even though gorillas are considered intelligent and sensitive, the hunters think it is normal for people to kill gorillas for bush meat: it can be very delicious, and would also provide a greater quantity of meat than the chimpanzee. As is true in many societies, humane feelings towards certain animals is not sufficient to stop all people from hunting and eating those animals. Two of the hunters volunteered to go to other villages and tell the story of Koko. We intend to help them innovate an effective conservation values process that will ultimately keep apes and all endangered species off the African menu.

Adult Villagers Session. A reading and discussion session with village leaders evoked stories and reactions that were quite similar to those of the hunters. After hearing Koko's Kitten, this group began to discuss the complex issue of hunting gorilla mothers and their babies. These people felt that it is normal to see people kill the gorilla, so long as it is in the forest. What makes it troublesome is the fact that it looks like a human being physically and does the kinds of things we do.

One man said: "If we see it being killed, we would not be happy because of the stories our parents told us – that when you meet a gorilla with her baby and you attempt to kill it, she will start feeding the baby and beg with open hands as if to ask 'why do you want to kill me, is this not how your mother fed you before you became strong? So why do you want to kill me now and leave my baby to suffer?' "

Like the hunters, these villagers think the gorillas will always exist, if hunting is controlled. Otherwise they will vanish like other animals have, due to extensive hunting. They think gorillas must be protected but are conflicted as to why. Many villagers believe it is important to know and talk about gorillas, since they were created naturally by God. But the question of whether God created another animal that is so much like us for us to eat, or for us to love and protect as our family, is yet to be decided.

Conclusion. Koko's story was well received in the Ekona Lelu village. It has generated a lot of questions and imagination about what the gorilla is, as well as interest in other related animals. The people are very open to more sensitisation on issues related to wildlife and their environment. We are planning to continue this promising intervention, helping villagers around Mt. Cameroon and in other forest areas of Africa to work in their own ways to develop the attitudes and skills they need in order to understand and support the protection of endangered wildlife.

Summary Report -- August 1, 2002

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