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Protection boost for rare gorilla

By Richard Black

Environment correspondent, BBC News website



The Cross River is a subspecies of the western lowland gorilla

The government of Cameroon has created a new national park aimed at protecting the critically endangered Cross River gorilla, the world's rarest.

Takamanda National Park, on the border with Nigeria, is home to an estimated 115 Cross River gorillas.

The total population of the subspecies is thought to be less than 300.

The news comes as governments of 10 gorilla range states gather in Rome for the first meeting of a new partnership aimed at protecting the primates.

The Gorilla Agreement was finalised in June, and brings together all the countries where the various species and subspecies are found.

“ Getting the agreement signed was a great conservation achievement ”

David Greer, WWF

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) helped establish the Takamanda park, and believes it will help curb the hunting and forest destruction that have brought Cross River numbers to such a minuscule level.

"The government of Cameroon is to be commended for taking this step in saving the Cross River gorilla for future generations," said Steven Sanderson, president and CEO of WCS.

"By forming this national park, Cameroon sends a powerful message about the importance of conservation."

Gorillas should be able to move freely between the Takamanda reserve and Nigeria's Cross River National Park just across the border, helping to repair

the fragmentation of habitat which can isolate tiny wildlife populations.

Communal benefits

Two years ago, with most gorilla populations falling, environment groups and concerned governments initiated a process designed to bring all the countries where the animals live into a new conservation deal.

The Gorilla Agreement, formulated under the UN Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), is the result.

Among other things, member governments have pledged to ensure suitable habitat is protected, co-operate with each other, restrain the spread of the Ebola virus, raise awareness of gorilla conservation and minimise conflict between the animals and human populations.



[Diary: Protecting mountain gorillas](#)

On Saturday, the 10 member countries hold their inaugural meeting in Rome. "Getting the agreement signed was a great conservation achievement," said David Greer, co-ordinator of the African Great Apes Programme with conservation group WWF.

"It is now time for action. Together, we will look specifically at what steps each government will take to ensure gorillas have a secure future in the wild - through direct conservation action in a way that also benefits local communities."

This is a crucial aspect of the agreement. An estimated 15,000 people, for example, make a living from the flora and fauna of the Takamanda forest; without involving them in conservation initiatives, it is unlikely that the downward slide of Cross River gorillas could be stopped.

Other threats such as conflict would ideally be addressed under the agreement. Unrest in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has brought armed conflict to Virunga National Park, rendering conservation impossible and raising the chances of primates being shot for food.

A coalition of groups, including the UN Environment Programme and the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, has declared 2009 the Year of the Gorilla in an attempt to raise awareness about the animals still further.

Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk