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## Scale of gorilla poaching exposed

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A target for poachers

**An undercover investigation has found that up to two gorillas are killed and sold as bushmeat each week in Kouilou, a region of the Republic of Congo.**

The apes' body parts are then taken downriver and passed on to traders who sell them in big-city markets.

Conducted by the conservation group Endangered Species International, the investigation helps expose the extent of gorilla poaching in the country.

It fears hundreds more gorillas may be taken each year outside the region.

The group began its investigation by going undercover, talking to sellers and traders at food markets in Pointe Noire, the second largest city in the Republic of Congo.

Over the course of a year, investigators visited the markets twice a month, recording the amount of bushmeat for sale.

"Gorilla meat is sold pre-cut and smoked for about \$6 per 'hand-sized' piece. Actual gorilla hands are also available," says Mr Pierre Fidenci, president of Endangered Species International (ESI).

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Mr Pierre Fidenci, president of Endangered Species International

"Over time we got the confidence of the sellers and traders. They gave us the origin of the

gorilla meat and it all comes from a single region."

The team then undertook an expedition to travel to the source of this meat, a forested area called Kouilou, which lies along the Kouilou River around 100 to 130km from Pointe Noire.

Using the same boats that ferry the gorilla meat downriver to the city, the investigators travelled upstream, taking photographs and recording interviews with villagers which revealed the extent of the gorilla poaching.

The investigators also undertook field surveys to ascertain the size of the population of wild western lowland gorillas living in the region.

"According to interviews and field surveys, we think we may have about 200 gorillas left in the area," says Mr Fidenci.

"But we estimate that 4% of the population is being killed each month, or 50% in a year. It is a lot."

The poachers particularly target adult gorillas of reproductive age which carry the most meat.



A poached gorilla made ready for transportation

With such heavy hunting, the researchers believe gorillas could disappear from the region within a decade.

"During our mission we observed killing of gorillas in the wild. In less than one week and a half in one particular area we had two adult gorillas killed for their meat," Mr Fidenci says.

All the meat appears to be consumed in Pointe Noire rather than being exported.

"The gorilla meat goes to the nearest, biggest and most profitable place," says Mr Fidenci.

"Our study has disclosed the horrific scale of the endangered species market in the Republic of Congo, especially endangered gorillas sold as meat."

Overall, ESI estimates that at least 300 gorillas are sold to markets each year in the country.

### **Crosshead**

Western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) are one of two subspecies of Western gorilla, the other being the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*).

Western lowland gorillas are considered to be critically endangered, as their population has

fallen by more than 80% in three generations.

Between 100,000 and 125,000 western lowland gorillas are thought to survive across their entire geographic range which spans several countries.

But the dense and remote forest habitat in which they live often makes it difficult to reliably estimate the population size.



This adult gorilla's hand was amputated, likely to be sold as a superstitious charm. Mr Fidenci hopes to go back to Kouilou to find out more about the remaining gorillas living there and to find a way to conserve them.

"We intend to stop the killing in the area by providing alternative income to locals and working with hunters not against them. We hope to conduct conservation awareness with educational programs with other NGOs and to create a gorilla nature reserve."

"We need to tackle the problem where it starts, right there where people and gorillas live."

Currently, little is done in the country to prevent the poaching of bushmeat, Mr Fidenci says.

"Enforcement does not exist. Even though there are existing laws which protect endangered wildlife against such activities."