

The Bushmeat Campaign of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria.



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Three years ago a presentation was made to the annual conference of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) on the threat to wildlife from the bushmeat trade (the trade in wild animals for food). As a result, it was agreed to form an EAZA Bushmeat Working Group and to mount a campaign against the illegal and unsustainable sectors of the trade. This campaign, in which EAZA has been strongly supported by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), has led to the Roundtable Discussion in the European Parliament sponsored by Robert Evans MEP and Anders Wijkman MEP, and to the presentation of a petition against the trade to the European Parliament. 1.9 million citizens of EU countries and candidate countries signed the petition.

The EAZA campaign focuses on the bushmeat trade in West and Central Africa for two reasons. Firstly, while consumption of wild animals for food is not confined to those areas commercialisation of the trade in West and Central Africa has led to far higher hunting rates than elsewhere in the world. Secondly, the zoo community is most concerned about the threat posed by the trade to the African great apes, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos, which are exhibited in any zoos across Europe.

The campaign had three elements:

1. Raising awareness of the bushmeat crisis among zoo visitors.
2. Raising funds from zoo visitors for projects helping to address the bushmeat trade.
3. A petition calling for the European Union to support and encourage African leaders to address the illegal and unsustainable sectors of the trade in their countries.

The focus of the campaign is against the illegal and unsustainable use of wildlife, which includes the hunting of great apes and other protected species. It is not suggested that all hunting of wild animals for food should stop.

The bushmeat issue is not just about saving the great apes, or saving wildlife. It is also an issue for people. Wild animals are a vital food resource for many people, particularly for forest dwellers. How can it possibly benefit a country, and particularly its rural poor, to have their forests depleted of tomorrow's meal?

The fact that some species are still common is no defence against the effects of overhunting. The world's most numerous bird, the passenger pigeon, was hunted to extinction in North America. The last bird died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.

The other speakers at the Roundtable discussion give presentations on how the bushmeat trade affects both wildlife and people. We also explain what we believe the EU should do to help developing nations overcome the bushmeat crisis. This should be achieved through persuasion, encouragement and capacity building.

It is important to remember, however, that this is not the first time that the EU has been asked by the conservation and animal welfare communities to act on the bushmeat issue. In 1996 a resolution was passed by the EU-ACP Joint Assembly calling for a series of measures to help control the bushmeat trade. Over the past five years almost nothing has been done. Indeed the trade is now, if anything, worse than in 1996. During those five years an estimated 5 million tonnes of bushmeat have left the Congo Basin. Over 3,000 gorillas are estimated to have died in northern Congo. Over 4,000 gorillas have died in Cameroon, perhaps as much as one third of that country's gorilla population. In Democratic Republic of Congo it is estimated that 80% of the eastern lowland gorillas have died. This dreadful picture is mirrored for chimpanzees, forest elephants and many other threatened species.

Here in 2001 we are asking the EU for many of the measures agreed at the 1996 EU-ACP Joint Assembly to be implemented. We cannot afford another five years of inactivity. We ask the EU to act before it is too late for the gorillas and chimpanzees, our closest biological relatives.