



Industrial oil palm expansion in great ape habitat in Africa

A Policy Statement from the Section on Great Apes (SGA) of the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group

We, the members of the Section on Great Apes (SGA) of the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group, are a team of experts engaged in research, management, monitoring and conservation of the great apes. Although we recognize the importance of the oil palm industry for socio-economic development, we are deeply concerned that the rapid development of industrial-scale oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) plantations in tropical Africa at the current time is taking place in the absence of strategic land-use planning and without sufficient consideration for the negative environmental and social impacts it can cause.

In Sub-Saharan Africa there are two subspecies of western gorilla *Gorilla gorilla* (the western lowland gorilla *G. g. gorilla* and the Cross River gorilla *G. g. diehli*), two subspecies of eastern gorilla *Gorilla beringei* (the mountain gorilla *G. b. beringei* and Grauer's gorilla *G. b. graueri*), and two species of chimpanzee, the bonobo *Pan paniscus*, and the robust chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes*. The robust chimpanzee has four recognised subspecies: the eastern chimpanzee *P. t. schweinfurthii*; the central chimpanzee *P. t. troglodytes*; the western chimpanzee *P. t. verus*; and the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee *P. t. ellioti*.

All African apes are highly threatened by poaching, deforestation and habitat loss, and disease. The mountain gorilla and both western gorilla subspecies are Critically Endangered, while Grauer's gorilla and all chimpanzee species and subspecies are Endangered¹.

In South-east Asia, the establishment and expansion of oil palm plantations endangers wildlife^{2,3} and results in the direct killing of orangutans^{4,5} and even the local extinction of their populations^{6,7,8,9}. Large-scale agro-industrial development has caused deforestation, forest fragmentation, peatland degradation, biodiversity loss, forest fires, carbon dioxide emissions^{10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18}, and a range of social issues¹⁹. Oil palm is the most productive (per hectare) commercially grown vegetable-oil crop, but despite this, the economic benefits of oil palm development for tropical countries are offset by negative and costly impacts on the environment. The SGA believes that many of these negative impacts are avoidable or could be mitigated.

The SGA calls for the appropriate national authorities and national and international stakeholders to insist that plantation development in Africa is undertaken in a manner that ensures equitable economic development, poverty alleviation, and the maintenance of ecological integrity. This includes avoiding forested areas that contain populations of chimpanzees, bonobos or gorillas.

Based on the spirit of agreement in the Kinshasa Declaration on Great Apes²⁰, we also urge:

- African government institutions to undertake national and transnational strategic spatial-planning to maximize economic returns without jeopardizing environmental resources and functionality;
- African government institutions to create policy frameworks, supported by relevant legal instruments, to ensure that environmental and social concerns are sufficiently addressed in all agricultural and industrial development projects;
- African government institutions and producers to establish new concessions and expand existing concessions in degraded ecosystems that can be considered "long-term degraded" – land that is ecologically degraded, principally through





anthropogenic activity such as agricultural expansion, and which has resulted in a reduction in vegetation cover, standing biomass or species diversity²¹; incapable as such of supporting significant populations of great apes*;

- Producers to consistently comply with relevant social and environmental laws;
- Producers to comply with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) initiative by becoming members of RSPO, implementing and operationalizing the RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C), and protecting High Conservation Values (HCV) and High Carbon Stocks (HCS) through comprehensive assessments that are third-party peer reviewed by internationally accredited reviewers and made accessible for public scrutiny;
- Government institutions to support this process by suspending oil palm concession development until HCV and HCS areas are identified;
- Producers to implement and enforce NO KILL policies for great apes and other wildlife in their concessions;
- Producers to take responsibility to not just set aside HCV and HCS forest, but to also facilitate effective protection of these forests and their wildlife, requiring governments, therefore, to develop regulatory frameworks that makes such protection possible;
- Purchasers of crude palm oil (CPO) originating or operating from Africa to undertake due diligence in identifying the source companies and plantations of the product they are buying, and demand these companies provide evidence that their permits are fully legal and they are operating in full compliance with all relevant national laws;
- Purchasers to preferentially select RSPO-certified producers and to be transparent with regard to the companies from which they are purchasing CPO, and to make such information available to the public;
- Financial institutions to terminate partnerships with producers that are not RSPO compliant, unless they are using other internationally-recognized standards such as IFC Performance Standards; and
- The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) to monitor existing P&C, strengthen protocols and procedures, and engage independent third-party auditors/reviewers to review RSPO-approved HCV assessments.

Further, we urge government organizations, the Interprofessional Palm Oil Association (AIPH), and other palm oil advocacy groups to work with IUCN and other partners to strengthen current RSPO standards and identify important conservation areas to be exempt from oil palm development in Africa.

* This definition of “long-term degraded” does not include secondary forest, forest that has been selectively logged, or recently cleared/degraded land or land that has not qualified as High Carbon Stock forest, since at least one African great ape, the chimpanzee, may use such forest. Instead, it refers to land where oil palm development would not have negative impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem integrity in general, and may even contribute to a partial recovery of some ecological functions.

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Plantation of young oil palms adjacent to natural forest © Fauna & Flora International

