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UN-backed environmental initiative aims to save the gorilla



22 May 2009 – A United Nations-backed initiative has been launched aimed at halting the destruction of the habitat of the East African mountain range gorilla threatening the extinction of humans' close relative, the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) announced today.

The 2009 Year of the Gorilla (YoG) partnership is supporting a project enabling local residents in areas endangered by increasing demands for fuel – not least the Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – to buy low-cost, fuel-efficient stoves.

Other measures needed to target the reduction of charcoal production include solar cookers, tree-planting on farms and the widespread use of fuel-efficient stoves, UNEP said in a news release. Further cause for concern to the agency is the signing of land deals by many gorilla range States with foreign companies for agriculture, including bio-fuel production.

UNEP said that on top of destroying the habitat of numerous species through forest degradation, palm oil – an edible oil found 10 per cent of supermarket products and increasingly seen as a profitable bio-fuel – has a higher carbon footprint than the fossil fuels it replaces.

The agency noted that the erosion of forests not only threatens gorillas, it also intensifies climate change with tropical trees in undisturbed forests absorbing nearly 20 per cent of the carbon dioxide released by burning fossil fuels, or some 4.8 billion tons each year.

“Stopping the current overexploitation of natural resources is a key element of any strategy leading to a sustainable way of living,” said Robert Hepworth, UNEP Executive Secretary of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals ([UNEP-CMS](#)).

“The forests and woodlands of Africa must play a central role in efforts to avoid dangerous climate change,” added Mr. Hepworth. “There is a strong scientific case for carbon finance to make significant contributions to gorilla conservation, as gorilla range States would benefit financially from protecting their forests.”

In addition, an influx of relatively well-paid workers who can afford to frequently eat meat has prompted a boom in the bushmeat trade and the decline of gorilla populations.

UNEP said that together with other great apes, the survival of gorillas is also threatened by disease and epidemics, mining and the effects of armed conflicts.

The Year of the Gorilla is a joint initiative of UNEP-CMS, the UNEP/UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Great Ape Survival Partnership ([GRASP](#)) and the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA).

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