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UN-backed meeting concludes with call for stronger measures to protect gorillas



31 March 2011 – A United Nations-backed meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, has concluded with a call for better enforcement of laws to protect endangered gorillas in 10 African countries.

The two-day meeting that ended yesterday, organized by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals under the UN Environment Programme (UNEP/CMS), was the first ever gathering of UN agencies, governments in the region, local wildlife authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and global experts to tackle wildlife crime that threatens gorillas.

Participants reviewed current conservation activities affecting the four sub-species of gorillas in East and Central Africa, and discussed solutions to address the major threat of commercial poaching for bushmeat and live trade in gorillas.

“Joint efforts to apply wildlife law are important because gorillas play a key role in the ecology of Africa’s forests,” said CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema. “Their loss has an impact on the health of the whole ecosystem and, by extension, on everyone who lives in or benefits from these forests.”

According to a news release issued by UNEP/CMS, local, national and international law enforcement efforts are essential to protect gorillas and their rainforest habitat.

The UN is already working closely with INTERPOL and national governments to curb the trade in live apes and bushmeat, as well as the illegal harvesting of timber. INTERPOL offered its

global network of national offices to help combat wildlife crime relating to gorillas and other endangered species.

“A global response is required against environmental and wildlife crime,” said Bernd Rossbach, the Director of INTERPOL’s Specialized Crime Unit.

“In this endeavour, it is important for all countries to work through a multi-disciplinary approach that also uses INTERPOL’s established National Central Bureau network and its Environmental Crime Programme to communicate intelligence and to provide support in capacity- building efforts,” he added.

The meeting stressed the need to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies, collaboration between governments and coordination with UN missions, such as MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

MONUSCO assisted with transferring orphan gorillas to a sanctuary in July 2010 to combat the illegal cross-border trade in baby gorillas.

The CMS Agreement on the Conservation of Gorillas and their Habitats, which came into force in 2008, provides the framework for regional cooperation in the long-term protection of gorillas in the 10 countries of the Congo Basin, ranging from Nigeria in the west, to Angola in the south and Uganda in the east.

So far it has been signed by six States, namely the Central African Republic (CAR), the Republic of Congo, DRC, Gabon, Nigeria and Rwanda.

Collaboration among regional countries is already bearing fruit, according to UNEP/CMS, which noted that while gorilla populations across Africa are in decline, the numbers of two small populations of mountain gorillas in Rwanda and Uganda are on the rise.

CMS continues to support regional efforts, which were initiated during the Year of the Gorilla in 2009 to fight the illegal trade in endangered species. Earlier this year, Gabon, assisted by the charity Conservation Justice and partially funded by CMS, achieved what might be the biggest arrest related to ape poaching yet in Africa.

Thirteen heads and 32 hands of gorillas and chimpanzees were confiscated from five wildlife smugglers, along with the remains of elephants, leopards, lions and other endangered species. The smugglers are all awaiting trial in Gabon.

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