

November 2009

Africans' Opinions on the Commercial Trade and Consumption of Bushmeat



AT A CONFERENCE I ATTENDED in Namibia earlier this year, a speaker from another African nation stated that illegal poaching for bushmeat is the most critical issue that currently affects Africa's wildlife. Indeed, serious conservation issues exist in Africa regarding the poaching of legally protected, endangered, and vulnerable species and the general unsustainability of the continued illegal taking of wildlife. An international market for *bushmeat*, the name used to describe meat derived from wildlife in Africa, exacerbates these problems.

Over the past two years, Responsive Management has been working with the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force on a qualitative research project funded by TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network; the Wildlife Conservation Society; and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to examine issues related to the demand for bushmeat and how messages and programs can be developed to help curtail it.

Mark Damian Duda
Executive Director

The Bushmeat Crisis Task Force (BCTF) began work with Responsive Management in July 2007 on a qualitative research project involving a series of focus groups conducted throughout the United States in major metropolitan areas. The focus groups were conducted with Central and West African expatriates to the United States to determine their awareness of and attitudes toward the illegal trade and consumption of bushmeat.

The term *bushmeat* can refer to any number of non-domesticated species, including elephant, gorilla, chimpanzee, antelope, crocodile, rat, porcupine, and many others. Some of the species listed as endangered or vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature that are affected by the

bushmeat trade are African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), Western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) and chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*), bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus*), and mandrill (*Mandrillus sphinx*).

According to BCTF, wildlife declines caused by the unsustainable harvesting of bushmeat are taking place throughout sub-Saharan Africa. This affects ecosystem integrity, because animals help to maintain the forest; it also affects local human populations, because they rely on wildlife for food and income. Bushmeat harvesting and trade have also been correlated in some studies with the origins of HIV/AIDS, Ebola hemorrhagic fever, foot-and-mouth disease, and many emerging infectious diseases.

In addition to assessing general attitudes within the focus groups, BCTF was interested in exploring feasible and appropriate ways to address the bushmeat crisis, including protein alternatives/food substitutes, conservation education, law enforcement, and public outreach.

Responsive Management and BCTF designed and implemented a pilot focus group with African community members living in the Washington, DC, area. The pilot group allowed the researchers to test the focus group questions and methodology and to establish a baseline for African community members' general awareness and understanding of issues related to bushmeat. The group included both male and female participants, although the disproportionate contributions from men during the discussions prompted the researchers to separate several of the later groups by gender.

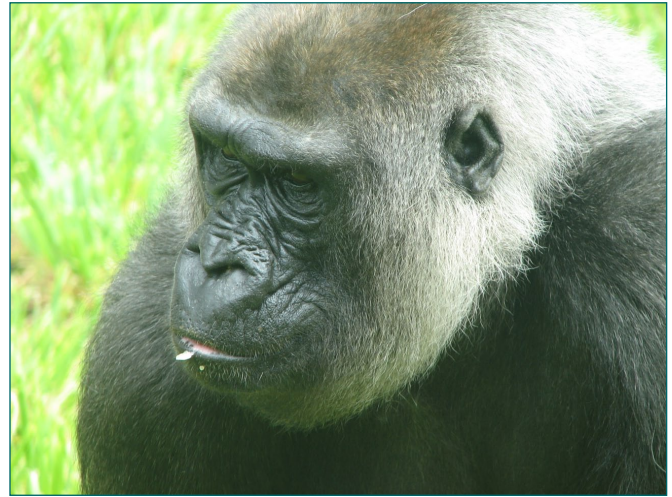
- The pilot group demonstrated strong awareness of the concepts of conservation and species endangerment; most participants appeared to recognize the importance of sustainable wildlife management as the primary means of ensuring the survival of various African species as food sources.
- Regarding the potential for disease risks in bushmeat consumption, there was generally unanimous agreement that animals found dead could be carriers



African Forest Elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*)

of disease. However, participants were significantly less likely to believe that animals harvested in the wild could transmit diseases.

- Participants held a variety of understandings regarding U.S. Customs laws that affect wildlife and food imports, as well as the consequences of importing wildlife or food illegally. This disparity in response suggested the necessity of follow-up on this topic in later groups.
- The pilot group emphasized that acknowledgment of bushmeat as a major source of both sustenance and income for many Africans would have to be a component of any planned education/awareness efforts.



Western Lowland Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*)

- The pilot group provided some important perspective on the basic semantic implications of the term *bushmeat*. For the participants, *bushmeat* might imply common species such as the brush-tailed porcupine or cane rat, threatened or endangered species such as gorilla or bongo, or even common game species within the United States (e.g., white-tailed deer).

Two additional series of focus groups followed the pilot group: three groups were conducted in New York City in September 2008, one of which included only women (the other two groups had both men and women participants); and three more groups were conducted in Atlanta, GA, in June 2009 (one male-only group, one female-only group, and one with both men and women). As before, all participants were predominantly Central and West African expatriates to the United States. These focus groups confirmed a number of earlier findings and added substantially to the researchers' understanding of Africans' views on bushmeat.

- Some focus group participants said that bushmeat was very important to them culturally, particularly because it is a delicacy consumed by friends and family on special occasions. Participants placed great value on traditional cultural practices, including respect for community elders, local languages, and the preparation and sharing of traditional food. A few participants described African food as an important means of social connection, whereas others felt the nutritional value of home-cooked traditional foods was higher than the comparatively fattening or otherwise unhealthy nature of food in America.
- Most participants in the focus groups had eaten bushmeat at some point in their lives. Descriptions of bushmeat frequently addressed its fresh, unique taste, which was commonly attributed to the healthy diets of free-ranging animals. Many felt that meat sold in



Bonobo (*Pan paniscus*)

American supermarkets was not as tasty, and said that the animals were “full of chemicals.”

- In the same way, game meat in the United States is not viewed in the same way as African bushmeat, because American animals were considered by many participants to have poorer diets than African animals.
- In general, the groups appeared to reflect a moderate demand for bushmeat in the United States; a number of participants were eager to share places where they could purchase bushmeat in the United States. However, others were more reluctant to discuss their own consumption patterns and sources, stating that they did not go out of their way to purchase bushmeat.
- For the most part, African community members in the New York City and Atlanta groups did not appear to be highly concerned about disease risks associated with bushmeat consumption (this echoed a similar finding in the Washington group). Many joked that the only way to get sick from bushmeat would be to overindulge. Interestingly, a number of participants in the Atlanta groups noted that disease risks sometimes are present in bushmeat, but that such concerns are routinely overlooked in much the same way that people who smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol overlook the risks inherent in those practices.
- Although many participants’ views on wildlife were essentially utilitarian (i.e., that animals exist first and foremost for humans’ use and benefit), many African community members felt that long-term sustainability of natural resources was important and shared concerns for negative consequences of waste. However, some expressed skepticism for the urgency

that conservationists say is needed to conserve wildlife. In addition, “bushmeat” and “wildlife” are perceived as very different things and not as two forms of the same thing.

- A few participants in each of the groups discussed personal experiences trying to bring food (sometimes bushmeat) into the country through U.S. Customs. Much of the discussion on this topic addressed the outcomes of these scenarios. Many felt that they were being discriminated against simply because they were African, noting that people from other cultures were allowed to bring in foods from home, but that Africans were not.
- A major concern among focus group participants was how to effectively communicate to native Africans the importance of conservation and sustainability, especially when pressing issues like hunger and poverty are more immediate concerns for many Africans. Regarding perceptions of the credibility of various news sources, focus group participants appeared most likely to consult friends and family (particularly parents, grandparents, and siblings) and trusted community members such as pastors or church members. There was skepticism over the trustworthiness of major news outlets and the Internet in general; for the latter, many participants said that because anyone could contribute or post something on the Internet, the credibility of information found there was questionable.
- Some focus group participants showed frustration with the American stereotype that all Africans live among wildlife—many had never seen wildlife outside



Mandrill (*Mandrillus sphinx*)



Bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus*)

of a zoo, if at all, and underscored that they did not “live in the jungle amid lions”; they were proud of their cities, buildings, cultural offerings, and wildlife. Some participants had grown up in villages, however, and a few of them were hunters.

- Generational differences in perceptions of bushmeat may help to inform future education/awareness efforts. Most of the older group participants reported eating bushmeat somewhat regularly, but younger

participants who were raised in the United States were most likely to have been introduced to bushmeat by parents and relatives in their home country, if at all. However, some younger participants who had recently moved to the United States felt just as strongly about the importance of bushmeat as did older participants.

This research constitutes a first step in understanding the human aspects of the commercial trade and consumption of bushmeat from the perspective of Africans based in the United States. Additional research, including in-depth quantitative studies, will provide further insight and help conservation professionals to develop more effective policy initiatives and communications strategies to resolve this issue and conserve Africa’s tremendous wildlife legacy.

The full report of the third series of focus groups is available at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/Bushmeat_Focus_Group_Report_3.pdf (1.4MB PDF). The full report of the first and second series of focus groups is available at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/Bushmeat_Focus_Group_Report_1_2.pdf (334KB PDF).

Bushmeat Crisis Task Force:

<http://www.bushmeat.org>

TRAFFIC:

<http://www.traffic.org>

Wildlife Conservation Society:

<http://www.wcs.org>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

<http://www.cdc.gov/>

Responsive Management would like to thank Natalie Bailey of the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force for her input, support, and guidance on this project.

Africans’ Comments on the Commercial Trade and Consumption of Bushmeat

“Bushmeat is everything for us. It’s food, selling to buy, you know, to pay children’s school fee, to buy clothes, food we don’t have.”

“[B]ushmeat is very precious. It is very nutritious because they feed only on the forest or in the wild and there’s no food or chemical spray on it. We eat it and it’s very nutritious, unlike the animals that are bred and eat [any kind] of food.”

“[I]f I want something and I know it’s becoming extinct, the fact that it’s becoming extinct doesn’t mean that [poachers] are going stop [poaching] it and not put it in the store. As long as it’s available for me to pay with money I have, I would buy it . . .”

“[W]hen it comes to bushmeat . . . we know various types of animals have different contents of nutrition that they bring to the body. I know when we were kids, some kids

continued

were really, really strong. And we want to know why these were really strong, much stronger than the others, and they said it's because they ate gorilla meat. They used the bones of the gorilla to massage them when they were kids. These kids were exceptionally strong."

"For me, to see the destruction that they put the forest through and everything just to kill one animal, that has really put me off from eating bushmeat."

"Also have to educate the school children, the children from infancy. Just like America educated children about cigarettes, and now they see you smoking, and a little child can come up to you and say, 'Please don't smoke.' We need to educate the kids so that they will be sensitive to animals, and they can teach us and encourage the elders, you know, 'Don't kill the chimpanzee.'"