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Illicit Financial Flows and the Illegal Trade in Great Apes



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Criminal networks of poachers, suppliers, dealers, wholesalers, and consumers make up the multi-million dollar industry in live great apes, their bushmeat, and their body parts, and investigators are missing intelligence and enforcement opportunities on these illicit financial flows. The live trade is the most significant in terms of value, and the markets for bushmeat and body parts are linked with the highest impact on the survival of the four species—bonobos, chimpanzees, and gorillas in Africa and orangutans in Indonesia and Malaysia, all of which are endangered species. Dealers are the most important actors in the illicit supply chain: they order or buy live infants and juveniles from poachers, farmers, and laborers and apply their specialized knowledge and connections to transport the animals safely, either to wholesalers in places like the UAE and China or directly to consumers. Researchers, investigators, and other experts have generally succeeded in establishing intelligence on this trading pattern, but they have not yet made similar progress identifying the values, payments, and financial transfer mechanisms involved. Addressing this gap, as well as overcoming a larger issue of political will to tackle the illegal great ape trade compared to some other wildlife crimes, should greatly benefit the larger campaigns against transnational crime and money laundering and against the destruction of these species.

Table 1. Estimated Average Annual Retail Value of the International Market for African Great Apes, Live Infants and Juveniles (in U.S. dollars)

Species	No. Traded*	Value Range
Bonobo	7	\$147,000 to \$301,000
Gorilla	14	\$560,000 to \$2.1 million
Chimpanzee	92	\$1.4 million to \$6.4 million
Total	113	\$2.1 million to \$8.8 million

*Source: *Stolen Apes: The Illicit Trade in Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Bonobos and Orangutans*

Thousands of bonobos, chimpanzees, and gorillas are killed each year to fill the demand for pets and attractions, bushmeat, and ceremonial body parts, generating significant revenue for those who make up the illicit supply chains. The average annual retail value of the international market for live infants and juveniles may be up to US\$2.1 million to US\$8.8 million (for these three species), based on published data. Experts estimate that an average of around 7 bonobos, 14 gorillas, and 92 chimpanzees enter the live trade annually,¹ suggesting a possible international market value of US\$147,000 to US\$301,000 for bonobos, US\$560,000 to US\$2.1 million per year for gorillas, and US\$1.4 million to US\$6.4 million for chimpanzees. These figures reflect the price the international buyer pays and include amounts for the animals themselves, payments for transportation to

¹ Daniel Stiles et al., eds., *Stolen Apes: The Illicit Trade in Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Bonobos and Orangutans*, A Rapid Response Assessment (Arendal, Norway: United Nations Environment Programme; GRID-Arendal, 2013), 8, <https://www.grida.no/publications/191>. The report estimated the number of great apes involved in the illegal trade by extrapolating data on the recorded legal trade.

the destination (including fraudulent authorization), and fees for the people facilitating the trade. Specialized illicit networks, often with direct or tacit support from senior government or military officials, smuggle the products and the money with minimal disguise and adapt to take advantage of new connections to poachers and to buyers. Money changes hands along the supply chains using cash in local currencies, wire transfers that are largely in US dollars, online payment services, and other systems. The combined domestic market for bushmeat from gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos may be worth as much as US\$650,000-US\$6.0 million per year, but the existing literature does not indicate what happens to this money at the higher levels. We found even less data and information on the trade in body parts and were not able to calculate a reliable estimated range for the annual domestic value.

Table 2. Estimated Average Annual Retail Value of the Illegal Market for Orangutans, Live Infants and Juveniles (in U.S. dollars)

Species	No. Traded*	Value Range
Orangutan	146	\$277,000 to \$10 million

*Source: *Stolen Apes: The Illicit Trade in Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Bonobos and Orangutans*

Orangutans on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo in Indonesia and Malaysia—Asia’s only great apes—are losing their battle for survival due to habitat destruction from commercial plantations, the killing of adults of the species, and the selling of orphaned infants on the black market. The illegal market for baby orangutans is thriving with consumers buying an estimated 146 on average per year and possibly spending US\$277,000 to as much as US\$10 million in total.² This reflects the *domestic* and *international* markets for infant and juvenile orangutans. The buyer pays the supplier’s account in the buyer’s country or transfers it electronically using a platform such as WeChat,³ and the supplier pays the dealer for his or her role in cash in his or her local currency.⁴ Trafficking orangutans sometimes involves organized gangs that are not specific to this trade, but most often the illegal trade in orangutans involves networks and individuals who specialize in the wildlife trade business, particularly in the case of foreign sales.⁵ Some experts we interviewed indicated that a small market for bushmeat from the adults of the species does exist, but we did not find or receive data to be able to calculate how much money this business may be worth. Demand for and supply of orangutan body parts is extremely limited, likely because there is not a strong demand to use them in traditional medicines, ceremonies, or rituals.

² Stiles et al., 8. The report estimated the number of great apes involved in the illegal trade by extrapolating data on the recorded legal trade.

³ Interview with Andrea Costa, Elephant Action League, interview by Channing May, Skype, August 29, 2017.

⁴ Interview with Daniel Stiles, interview by Channing May, Skype, September 15, 2017.

⁵ Dominique Mosbergen, “The Dark Story Behind That Cute Baby Orangutan ‘Thumbs Up’ Photo,” *Huffington Post*, March 2, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/orangutan-thumbs-up-photo_us_58b79de5e4b023018c6cfd33; Questionnaire completed by Dr. Ian Singleton, Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme, September 2, 2017.

The illegal trade in great apes is a lucrative and low-risk business for those operating at the middle and upper levels, and governments are doing too little to address this problem. These values and dynamics have depended on large gaps in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) enforcement, public and private sector corruption, insufficient resources for investigators in developing and developed countries, local community challenges, and abuse of social media and financial service companies. Governments, CITES, Interpol, the United Nations (UN), the World Customs Organization (WCO), and civil society organizations can increase their effectiveness in combatting the illegal great ape trade by closing information gaps, by increasing the legal risks and consequences for traffickers, dealers, and high-level consumers, and by focusing more investigative resources on the money from the illegal trade that is in the formal financial system. None of these policy or enforcement changes will “fix” the problem of the illegal trading of the world’s great apes. Rather, they represent additional lines of effort to make it harder and harder for participants in the illegal great ape trade to stay out of jail and to make enough money to be worth the risk of fines, asset seizures, and imprisonment.