

Sendje's story

Brigid Barry



Until a chimpanzee is 18 months old, it does not let go of its mother. So who does an orphaned chimp cling to?



Faced with rejection, hunters will ultimately realize that endangered apes are not worth catching.

I first heard about Sendje when I saw two dead adult chimpanzees in the bushmeat market in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. That was not an unusual sight – but this time, one was a lactating mother. Then I heard about a live baby chimp being driven away from the market; a taxi driver was going to try to sell it to foreigners. That night, a group of Europeans at a disco bought Sendje because they felt sorry for her and thought they might return her to the forest. But without her mother, she would have starved or quickly been taken by a predator or scavenger.

Her new owners soon found they couldn't look after her and brought her, by now semiconscious, to me. Chimpanzees drink their mother's milk for up to 18 months, so I revived her with powdered milk supplemented with vitamins and calcium. Within a week her coat regained its sheen, and she became quite active.

Young chimpanzees are demanding, needing up to three feeds and three diaper changes during the night. And for its first 18 months, a chimpanzee does not let go of its mother or another member of its community. Sleeping with a furry creature through a sweaty tropical night and having to shower to the constant accompaniment of ear-piercing screeches and bites are just two things a chimp-sitter must get used to. And I couldn't take Sendje out of the house in case people thought I was interested in buying other captured wildlife.

A friend working for an American oil company helped find two daytime chimp-

sitters and a garden with plenty of trees for Sendje to climb. By night, the same friend and I took turns taking care of her. But this could not go on; by the time she was two or three, Sendje would be very strong – and actually dangerous.

What hope was there for her? There are no animal sanctuaries in Equatorial Guinea and no way of reintroducing her to the forest. After much research and discussion with primate experts, we finally found the Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue Centre in neighbouring Cameroon, which agreed to take her.

Vaccinations were administered, and export and import papers processed; moving protected species between countries is highly regulated. Sendje finally made the journey in the oil company's executive jet. If she remains healthy, she could live at the sanctuary among other chimpanzees for 50 years, and might even become a mother herself. But she can never return to the forest life she knew.

The well-meaning people who bought Sendje did save her from the cooking pot, but they also unwittingly contributed to the trade in orphaned chimps. If hunters are rejected often enough by potential customers, they will eventually realize that endangered apes are not worth capturing. It would also help if the laws protecting endangered species were enforced. If these things were to happen, Sendje's sad experiences could be among the last of their kind for one of our nearest biological relatives.

Extinction ahead Chimpanzees

It's hard to work out just how many chimpanzees – which share more than 98 per cent of our DNA – are left; reporting is inaccurate and incomplete. But their numbers have been crashing, and even the most generous estimates place their numbers worldwide as no bigger than the human population of Bonn, Germany. They are clearly endangered and could well soon be extinct in the wild. Habitat loss, the pet trade and hunting for bushmeat are the main culprits.

TOTAL ESTIMATED CHIMP POPULATION

1900: 2 million



1960: 1 million



2003: 172 000-301 000



ESTIMATED CHIMP POPULATION IN REPUBLIC OF EQUATORIAL GUINEA

1989-90: 990-2 450

Source: World Atlas of Great Apes and their Conservation. UNEP-WCMC, 2005.

