

Brief Communication:

A New Task Force to Address the Impacts of Industrial Development Projects on Apes

One of the greatest threats to primates and their habitat across the globe is industrial development projects, including hydroelectric dams, mines, and associated infrastructure such as powerlines, pipelines and roads. While in many cases these projects provide much-needed development, for example by extending the electrification network in developing countries, too often these projects are conducted without any regard for the local population and the environment. This can put livelihoods at risk and destroy the very resources upon which many people depend, for example through the pollution of water sources. In addition to negative impacts on people, these projects can also have devastating and irreversible impacts on primates and other wildlife, and their habitats. Given the significant overlap between mineral resource reserves, planned infrastructure and hydropower project's locations and ape ranges, the cumulative loss of great and small apes as a result of these kinds of projects can amount in the tens of thousands.

One of the most visible impacts of such projects is the deforestation associated with the project footprint, which can remove important ape habitat. However, often more significant are indirect impacts, such as facilitating access to remote areas through the creation or improvement of roads, and the influx of people usually associated with such projects. This in turn typically exacerbates existing threats to apes through an increase in hunting, deforestation, habitat fragmentation and exposure to infectious diseases.

The responses of apes to impacts from industrial development projects are difficult to quantify, which impede the numbers and level of confidence with which mitigation measures can be proposed. However, long-term research into the ecology and behavior of these species has helped us anticipate potential impacts and devise appropriate mitigation. For example, chimpanzees are territorial and



Early stages of the Bumbuna dam project in Sierra Leone, circa 2004. Photograph by J. Wallis.

when forced into the home range of a neighboring community, fatalities are likely to occur. Therefore, a project will require robust baseline data to identify the territory boundaries of chimpanzees overlapping with the project area to understand, for instance, where avoidance of project activities is needed in order to prevent pushing one community into another community's territory.

Given the scale of the threat of industrial development projects on apes and their habitats, the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group (PSG), Section on Great Apes (SGA) and Section on Small Apes (SSA) launched the ARRC Task Force in 2015. The acronym stands for the task force's goal, which is to assist development projects to follow international best practice standards that require that projects adhere to the "mitigation hierarchy" which first seeks to avoid (A) critical habitat to threatened species. If this is not possible, these projects must do all they can to reduce (R) impacts through appropriate mitigation activities. If there are still residual negative impacts on threatened species and their habitat because of project activities, then companies are required to restore (R) habitat where possible, and then contribute positively to their

conservation (C) to compensate for those residual impacts. Avoid, Reduce, Restore and Conservation (ARRC) are therefore the four main pillars of protecting threatened ape species from the negative effects of these projects.

In reality, however, not every stage of this hierarchy is systematically followed. Environmental concerns are often not a priority or are considered late in a project development cycle (e.g. after the negative impacts of exploration activities have already occurred), competing with project financing and design, so avoidance and minimization of negative impacts are often not achieved. Furthermore, few government policies in ape range countries require projects to follow the mitigation hierarchy, and thus there are gaps in national capacity and application of law designed to ensure that mitigation is truly taking place.

Until recently, the ARRC Task Force provided ad hoc advice to companies wishing to adhere to best practice standards. Then, in January 2019, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) took the unprecedented step of requiring that clients consult with the IUCN SSC, Primate Specialist Group's Section on Great Apes on any projects that will impact great ape habitat. The IFC's exact wording is "GN73. Special consideration should be given to great apes (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees and bonobos) due to their anthropological significance. Where great apes may potentially occur, GN17 the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Primate Specialist Group (PSG) Section on Great Apes (SGA) must be consulted as early as possible to assist in the determination of the occurrence of great apes in the project's area of influence. Any area where there are great apes is likely to be treated as critical habitat. Projects in such areas will be acceptable only in exceptional circumstances, and individuals from the IUCN SSC PSG SGA must be involved in the development of any mitigation strategy." Therefore, any projects applying for funding from the IFC, or one of the banks aligning with its standards, is now required to consult with the ARRC Task Force first to seek advice for collecting accurate baseline data and developing appropriate measures, to ensure impacts to apes are either avoided or kept to a minimum.

While this represented a tremendous opportunity for the ape conservation community to engage with governments, industry and banks to avoid and reduce impacts on critical ape habitat, the scale of the task quickly became overwhelming for a volunteer task force. In February 2020, the Arcus Foundation generously provided a grant to support the activities of the ARRC Task Force over the next

three years. The task force has since been formalized, with the constitution of a Steering Committee and establishment of policies and underlying principles to guide its activities. The task force draws on the expertise of a body of 200+ ape experts who are members of the SGA and SSA, among other IUCN programs.

To date the task force has engaged with almost 20 projects and activities have ranged from providing advice to mining projects about survey methodologies, to advocacy concerning hydroelectric dams that should be avoiding critical ape habitat. The task force also plans to conduct independent audits of projects considered to be putting apes at risk. The task force is compiling a database of development projects taking place in ape habitats, and plans to scale up by using this information to contact additional projects to let them know about the existence of the task force. The task force also plans to reach out to range state governments especially since the best way to balance development and conservation goals is through early intervention using land-use planning and careful project design to avoid the negative impacts on apes in the first place. The task force is also committed to collaborating with partners in ape range states and building national capacity to respond rapidly and appropriately to such projects. The task force hopes that early and continued involvement of conservationists will increase the likelihood that ape habitat will be avoided from the outset, that appropriate mitigation is put into place for reducing both direct and indirect negative project impacts. The hope is that by bringing scrupulous attention to specific development projects after financial closure, the task force will help to ensure that monitoring and management plans are effectively implemented, and that otherwise the companies and financing institutions are held to account. The task force continues also to look for opportunities to focus on ways in which projects would not only do less harm to apes but also contribute positively to their conservation. Protecting ape's forest habitats ensures continued ecosystem services for people, is the best investment for decreasing carbon emissions to fight climate change, and will decrease the risk of future pandemics too.

More information may be found on the task force website (<https://www.rrctaskforce.org/>). Please do get in contact regarding any development projects in ape habitat that you are aware of, or any companies that may wish to engage with us to do less harm to apes and their habitats.