

Update from the Limbe Wildlife Centre

Written by Simone de Vries, Assistant Project Manager
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Introduction

As most of you know, the Limbe Wildlife Centre is an incredible place. I realized that when I visited the LWC for the first time in 1999. Back then the animals were in good condition, the enclosures were being improved and when I spoke to some of the keepers I was delighted by their dedication and enthusiasm. It was therefore a great honor for me to be appointed the new Assistant Project Manager of the Limbe Wildlife Centre, starting in October 2006. But even though I knew more or less what to expect upon arrival, I was pleasantly surprised by the new developments, the extent of the educational program and the level of professionalism throughout the organization. After four months at the LWC, I feel that I am beginning to have a good understanding of everything that is going on here and it is a pleasure to bring you up to date about this very dynamic organization.

Animal news

(Unfortunately) an interesting variety of animals has been brought into the LWC in the last few months. These include a chimpanzee, a baboon, a putty-nosed monkey, a preuss's monkey, an African grey parrot, an African harrier hawk, a skink, a python, two genet kittens, and seven African civet kittens. With all these newcomers the quarantine facility is full and there is a lot of work for the keepers and veterinary staff. On top of that we have had two drills born in the LWC. All together this brings the number of animals in the LWC to 184, of which 169 are primates.

Tinto Mbu

The new chimpanzee, an infant of around 1½ years old, arrived in October 2006. She is called Tinto Mbu (or shortened to Mbu), after the village where she was found. As is the case with many of the young animals that come into the LWC, her family was killed by a hunter for bush meat. Mbu was put up for sale as a pet, but a local MINFOF field staff member seized her and brought her to the Limbe Wildlife Centre. After a few medical tests had been performed, she was introduced to the infant group that lives in the quarantine facility. In the beginning Mbu was very independent, mostly playing on her own and she didn't like to be held by the keepers. However, in the course of four months she has changed a lot and is now playing with all the other infants and even sits with the keepers every now and then.



African rock python

The African rock python, which is protected under Cameroonian law, was seized by the LWC's Chief Wildlife Officer, Mr. William Atemnkeng, from a medicine man that was using the animal in the market in order to sell his remedies. The first attempt to seize the python was not successful, as the man became aggressive and managed to escape

with the snake. However in his haste to flee he left behind suitcases, containing his magicians tools and clothes, which were seized instead. As we expected, the next day the medicine man came to the LWC to retrieve his belongings. In situations such as this the LWC Management typically tries to explain to the hunter, poacher or illegal owner, why it is important to protect endangered species and in doing so we try to make a friend, rather than an enemy, who will willingly donate 'his' animal. In this way we hope that they will feel pride in donating their animal, and will tell their friends and families of what they have correctly done, rather than feeling spite which will probably lead them back into the bush to break the law by catching a replacement animal.

However, this man could not be persuaded to donate the python, because, he said, he had given it to a friend. He was therefore arrested and put in a cell.

Later he agreed to go and get the snake, accompanied by a police officer and the LWC Chief Wildlife Officer, and the python was seized and the man freed on bail pending an investigation. On arrival at the LWC the python seemed to be in good condition and could have been immediately released back into the wild. Nevertheless, a decision was taken that the python was possibly of more value to conservation if it remained on display at the LWC, where its story could be read by all. It is very important to educate the public about the importance of pythons in the ecosystem, because they are often mistakenly killed by people fearing that they may poison their children. Being able to see the python in an enclosure and to read about the species from the information board will enable many people to become informed about a very misunderstood species. As most people do like to watch snakes (when they are behind glass!) the python is now an important and popular education tool.



The Taiping Four

In December 2006 the staff were all focused on the imminent arrival of the 'Taiping Four'. These four famous gorillas, which are currently being kept at Pretoria Zoo in South Africa, were probably captured in Cameroon in late 2001. Via Nigeria and South Africa, they were smuggled to Malaysia to be put on display at the Taiping Zoo. Since then the conservation community and the Cameroonian Government have been campaigning vigorously to have these gorillas returned to Cameroon. However, in April 2004, a decision was made by the Govt. of Malaysia to send them to live in Pretoria Zoo, South Africa. A further two and a half years of negotiations and discussions followed and finally it was decided that the gorillas would indeed be sent back home to Cameroon to live at the LWC. A date of December the 13th was set for their return and Jonathan Kang, the LWC's Head Keeper, and Felix Lankester, the Project Manager, were flown to Pretoria to oversee the health checks and the eventual transfer. But, at the very last minute, the South African Government announced that they had omitted to complete all of the necessary paperwork and as such the transfer needed to be delayed. Therefore Felix and Jonathan returned empty handed and we are now awaiting further news regarding the fate of the Taiping Four.



Visitors

Christmas and New Year's Day always attract many visitors to the LWC and this year was no exception. On these two days alone 4,181 visitors were counted through the gate. To avoid long queues we had to open a second entrance gate and a separate exit. As is tradition, all of the staff were present to help out and to educate the public. The two days passed without a hitch, and both the staff and all of the visitors had a great time.

Education

Law Enforcement Workshop

The highlight of the last quarter of the 2006 education program was the Wildlife Law Enforcement Workshop, held at the LWC between October 24th and 25th, and funded by Chester Zoo (North England Zoological Society) and Auckland Zoo. The conception of the workshop was borne out of a realisation by those working at the LWC that many of the Ministry of Forest and Fauna (MINFOF) Field Staff did not have a good working

knowledge of the wildlife laws of Cameroon, nor of the species which they were duty bound to protect. As a result wildlife crimes were going unchallenged, endangered species were not being adequately protected, and MINFOF was not adequately performing its protective role as guardian of the environment in Cameroon. To address this problem the LWC designed an education program, aimed at MINFOF Field Staff, which would draw upon three of the LWC's areas of expertise: species identification, knowledge of the natural history of Cameroon, and wildlife law enforcement.



Mr. Ofir Diuri from Last Great Ape Organisation teaching MINFOF delegates about his experiences implementing the wildlife law.

To support the education program the following reference materials were designed and published and were given to each delegate:

- A water-resistant species identification pocket booklet, compiled in English and French, and printed on high quality photographic paper and bound in plastic lamination pouches. The booklets were designed in the style of a field-guide book, and contained photographs and background natural history information on all of the key species of the South West Province of Cameroon. Additionally the CITES and

Cameroon appendix categories, common, vernacular and scientific names, and physical characteristics of each species were given.

- A wildlife law booklet, in English and French, containing all of the wildlife laws of Cameroon.

The workshop was a trail blazer in two ways: it was the first conservation workshop in Cameroon to tackle the issue of wildlife law enforcement, and it was the first time that a wildlife sanctuary in Cameroon has been utilised to train field staff in the art of species identification. Both of these issues, wildlife law enforcement and species identification, are areas in which the wildlife sanctuaries have an expertise and it was refreshing to see this expertise being utilised so effectively to train the very staff that will one day hopefully make the need for sanctuary work a thing of the past.

The success of the workshop was illustrated both by the number of delegates that made the long journey from the field to attend (nearly 100% of invited guests attended) and by the improved knowledge that these delegates took away with them.

This workshop, which due to financial and logistical constraints focussed only on the S.W. Province of Cameroon, was hopefully only the first of a series of similarly themed workshops. In the future, funding permitting, the LWC would like to repeat the workshop for the other provinces of Cameroon where the need for properly trained MINFOF Field Staff is equally urgent.

The Outreach Program

The LWC outreach program for the school year of 2006/7 started in September. The syllabus included an introduction to conservation and wildlife, the impact of man on the environment, the different primate species and the bushmeat crisis in Cameroon. The number of students that have benefited from this program has, once again, increased this year, with the outreach program reaching 1001 students in 8 schools. To make this possible, Ms. Evelyn Besong (LWC Vice Conservator MINFOF) has been added to the LWC teaching staff.

Saturday Nature Club

Every Saturday the LWC Nature Club meets in the Education Centre. The members of Nature Club are extremely motivated and it is therefore a joy to work with these children. The current program is sponsored by Busch Garden Zoo, Florida. The teaching syllabus follows the same program as the outreach program for secondary schools; however with Nature Club a lot of extra activities are organized. In the last few months two internet chat sessions have been held between students in the Nature Club and students in Busch Gardens, Florida.

These sessions, which are very popular with all involved, give the students the chance not only to discuss issues concerning conservation, but also the chance to chat about their own lives and cultural differences. Both sessions were very successful, with students who had not touched a keyboard before getting really involved, asking questions and explaining about the situation in Cameroon. This exchange of information gives the Nature Club students a much broader outlook on conservation and the world in general.



Staff Training

In October 2006 the LWC's Veterinary Surgeon, Dr. John Kiyang, traveled to Chester Zoo in the UK to participate in the exchange program that has been running for several years between the LWC and Chester Zoo. During his stay he worked with his English veterinary colleagues on many different species, learning new procedures and developing new working methods that he brought back with him to Limbe. This exchange program is fully sponsored by Chester Zoo, and we would like to take this opportunity to thank them again for continuing to support the LWC through this exciting program. We look forward to April 2007 when Mr. Andreas Mbong, Head Keeper of Chimpanzees, and Mr. Alfred Bama, Head Keeper of Gorillas, both travel to Chester to benefit from this much loved and very valuable annual exchange.

New developments

The Born Free Chimpanzee Enclosure project, the biggest construction project in the LWC's history, is moving forward steadily. The six chamber night house has now been erected, and currently the zinc roof is being built. All that remains is for the tunnel linking the new and the old enclosure to be made, the electric fence line to be cut, fence poles to be placed and the many kilometers of electric fencing wire to be threaded through the thousands of insulators. We are pressing forward and hope to have the new enclosure ready in a few months time.



Conclusion

With all these activities and developments, my first four months at the Limbe Wildlife Centre have been very busy, working long days and having short weekends, while enjoying every minute. The work we do is important and I believe the work is done well. That makes it very rewarding to be part of the Limbe Wildlife Centre.

As most people know the Limbe Wildlife Centre is dependent on the help of its loyal sponsors, supporters and friends and we, the staff of the LWC, would like to take this opportunity to thank you all very much for supporting the LWC's conservation work. We hope that your continued support will make it possible to develop our activities even further in the future.

Simone de Vries