

An interview with Rowena Facee Schaeffer: Supporting a holistic approach to chimpanzee protection

Written by Catherine Farren

Catherine is a PhD Candidate at the University of Winchester (UK). Her research explores the sociocultural dynamics of animal protection interventions with a specific focus on international NGO strategies. Catherine's case study research focuses on great ape protection in Cameroon, which is particularly interesting owing to the sociocultural factors at play, such as beliefs, norms, education, and corruption. Catherine interviewed Rowena to gain insight into her perspective and expertise, and attain a deeper understanding of the strategic approach of Go-Ape Foundation. Excerpts of this interview shape the article, revealing Rowena's passion for protecting chimpanzees through a holistic approach.



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As the world's great ape populations continue to decline their protection is becoming increasingly vital. Rowena Facee Schaeffer, Founder of Go-Ape Foundation, champions international and local efforts to protect Africa's critically endangered chimpanzees.

Rowena's mission to help generate sustainable change for chimpanzees was sparked over a decade ago when volunteering as a chimpanzee caretaker in the Netherlands, before travelling to Limbe Wildlife Centre in Cameroon to learn about the plight of great apes, specifically chimpanzees.

Threats to chimpanzees

The principal threats to chimpanzees are caused by human activities, such as habitat loss, bushmeat hunting, illegal trade, and climate change. These threats have a devastating impact on chimpanzee populations, and tackling them is a complex task.

The illegal trade of great apes and their parts threatens chimpanzee populations on local and international scales. Chimpanzee meat is traded locally in rural villages and bushmeat markets, some believe that eating their meat "empowers them". Rowena pointed out that many people living in rural communities are not aware that this trade is illegal. Globalisation is exacerbating the issue as "it's now becoming more and more often that parts of wildlife are being sold to Europe". Rowena states that the demand for trade in chimpanzees or their parts is "so hard to control because it's all online and you have no idea what's going on there". International efforts to monitor the illicit online trade are growing but the trade continues.

Human-ape conflict also poses a threat to chimpanzees that often harm agricultural livelihoods by crop raiding. This causes some farmers to perceive chimpanzees as a pest and feel "they just need to be shot". Rowena shared that many infant chimpanzees in sanctuaries are there because the mothers have been killed during human-ape conflict.

"Most of the babies that get rescued are living in a local community" where they are being kept as pets, usually on a leash until they become adults "because they cannot keep an adult chimpanzee."

Go-Ape Foundation

“I think the most important thing is to have a holistic approach”.

To successfully protect chimpanzees "I think the most important thing is to have a holistic approach". For Rowena, this means not just rescuing chimpanzees, but also considering "what's going on economically and what's going on with the communities, and then try with rangers, work with education, work with the communities, to give them another way of life, an alternative." Go-Ape Foundation works with partners to help communities establish these alternatives. Rowena adds "of course you need law as well, but you can only solve it when you see it as a whole and not just one isolated problem."

“We’re running out of time because there’s almost no chimpanzees left.”



Go-Ape Foundation was established to raise funds for local projects across West Africa, to raise awareness and to support volunteers and interns travelling abroad to work with great apes. The Foundation supports local organisations and “works with the local communities to make their country a better place”.

Go-Ape Foundation supports projects that engage local communities “because I’ve seen too many times that big organisations with a lot of money, they come with their big SUVs, they live in a compound and they spend money and well, basically nothing changes because they don’t listen to what the community needs”.

Go-Ape Foundation provides funding for a range of activities that protect chimpanzee populations, such as tree planting initiatives, alternative livelihoods, and environmental education, engaging both adults and children. Rowena highlights that protecting great apes is not simply “saying ‘you can’t do that’ ... you also have to give them other means or alternatives to provide themselves with food, with money”.

When Go-Ape Foundation select which projects to support “it’s very important that it’s not just a rescue centre, because you can keep on saving them, but if you don’t do anything to prevent it then there’s no end.” Delivering education and improving awareness about the plight of great apes is “one of the most important things”. “It’s not just about chimpanzees or gorillas, it’s all wildlife and all forests”.

The Foundation supports projects that educate communities about the importance of the forest, and the entwined of their own health and the environment.

Challenges

Despite the efforts of local and international organizations to protect great apes, the demand on sanctuaries continues to grow. Rowena explained that positive impacts of education and awareness projects cannot compete with deforestation. “**The deforestation is such a huge, huge problem and it’s going so fast that it’s really hard to keep up with it**”. Despite the fantastic efforts of many local and internationally led organizations striving to protect great apes, there are limitations to what can be achieved when faced with continued mass deforestation.

Corruption is “a really, really tough one to handle”. Rowena described a scenario in Sierra Leone where a chimpanzee rescue recently failed because the local police officer was involved in corruption. Great ape sanctuaries avoid paying bribes that fuel corruption, and so in this case, the bribe was not paid and sadly the chimpanzee was not rescued.

Rowena described how volunteering with chimpanzees in Cameroon can present challenging experiences: “It can be scary because when I went to Cameroon the first time, I went to Limbe Wildlife Centre, we had to cross the border from the French part to the English part and that was really rough because my suitcases were taken out of the cab ... they were screaming and there were guns at us, in the end, they didn’t do anything, so it was just a lot of talk, but it was kind of scary”. Rowena’s experience led her to help prepare others travelling to Cameroon; “since my experience in 2018 the situation is calmer, although the crisis continues”.

Rowena recently visited an education project in Cameroon that Go-Ape Foundation

sponsored and she describes feeling very safe, “so don’t let my stories stop you from going, just always be careful and/or contact me for advice up front”.

Highlights

Whilst working in great ape protection can be hugely challenging, it can also be spectacularly rewarding. Rowena described two of her biggest highlights from working in great ape protection. The first was releasing, not chimpanzees as one may expect, but orangutans back into the wild in Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of Borneo); “that was amazing”. However, great ape protection is a complex field and even highlights can be conflicted. Rowena expressed “it was also a difficult time because next to the fragmented parts of rainforest, you had the palm oil plantations and that really broke my heart. Especially for the animals, but also for the local people”. Rowena described this as a “heart-breaking” experience.

Rowena’s second highlight forms an inspiring story: “I am an ambassador in The Netherlands of the Sunday Foundation and that foundation builds schools for the most unfortunate children in Sierra Leone. They already built over 40 schools there together with the local communities. Because I also work with Tacugama, through combined forces, they have built the first school in Loma Mountains National Park where the highest concentration of wild chimpanzees in West Africa are living, 1500 chimpanzees. Now at the school, they’re teaching them about the importance of wildlife and their environment, so I’m really proud of that. Tacugama and the Sunday Foundation are currently building 3 new schools in areas with wild chimpanzee populations. Education is key to wildlife conservation!”