**Assessing the status of Cross River Gorillas in the Olum Hills, Nigeria**

**Inaoyom Imong (**[**iimong@wcs.org**](mailto:iimong@wcs.org)**) and Emmanuel Bassey**

**Wildlife Conservation Society, Nigeria Programme**

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The Cross River gorilla *Gorilla gorilla diehli*, categorised as critically endangered by IUCN, is the most threatened ape taxon in Africa. Fewer than 300 individuals remain, their survival threatened by hunting and habitat destruction. The Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary is home to a subpopulation of these gorillas, numbering 25-30 individuals, and other endangered primates including the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes ellioti* and drill *Mandrillus leucophaeus*. While the sanctuary covers the core range of the Afi gorillas, the gorillas occasionally range outside it in two areas of unprotected community forest – the Olum Hills and the Kakwagom-Bitiah forest. When ranging in such areas with no legal protection, the Afi gorillas face an increased risk of hunting, in addition to rapid loss of their habitat from farming, logging and seasonal bush fires. With about one-third of the Cross River gorilla population living outside protected areas, improved management of habitat in community land is needed, in addition to increased law enforcement within protected areas, to protect these gorillas effectively. This project assessed the current habitat status and investigated the continued presence of gorillas and chimpanzees in the Olum Hills and Kakwagom-Bitiah Forest and options for improved conservation management of the areas.

Two surveys were conducted by staff of the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Cross River State Forestry Commission in November 2014 and May 2015 to collect data on ape presence and levels of human activity. Because of the rugged terrain of the areas, the surveys employed the reconnaissance walk method and covered a total distance of 143 km. Community meetings were held before and after the surveys to discuss options for improved conservation management of the areas.

The presence of gorillas and chimpanzees was confirmed only in the Olum Hills during both surveys, confirming that the area was habitually used by gorillas and chimpanzees. Three nest sites and other signs of gorilla, including dung and trails, were recorded. Six chimpanzee nest sites and one unidentified great ape nest site were also recorded in the Olum Hills. Other primate species recorded in the Olum Hills were mona *Cercopithecus mona* and putty-nosed *C. nictitans* monkeys, which were sighted on several occasions. The presence of gorilla or chimpanzee in the Kakwagom-Bitiah forest could not be confirmed during these surveys, though gorilla signs had been recorded there in an earlier survey by WCS in 2006. Though the importance of the Olum Hills and Kakwagom-Bitiah forest for gorillas has long been noted, these areas have received little conservation attention. As in the earlier survey, levels of human activity, including hunting, farming and logging, were especially high in the Kakwagom-Bitiah forest. In 1997, the Olum Hills suffered substantial fire damage which forced the gorillas to abandon the area for about a decade, returning there only in 2005 when the vegetation started to recover.

During discussions the local communities identified community-based conservation as the preferred management option. Extension of the current boundary of the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary to include the two areas was not supported by the communities as a management option. The Cross River State Forestry Commission which manages all forest in Cross River State should consider co-management of these forests with the local communities to protect Cross River gorillas at Afi.