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## Great Ape Trust plays key role in writing first-ever ape reintroduction guidelines

*Best practices are assembled in a single document to help ease growing populations in sanctuaries and return great apes to their natural habitat*

Des Moines, Iowa – November 20, 2007 – For the first time, conservation groups reintroducing endangered great apes in the wild have a concise set of best practices to guide the repatriation of mankind’s closest living relatives.

Great Ape Trust Director of Conservation [Dr. Benjamin Beck](#) and two graduate students with ties to The Trust – Kristina Walkup, a part-time employee working on a post-graduate degree in anthropology at Iowa State University and Michelle Rodrigues, a former Great Ape Trust associate pursuing her post-graduate anthropology studies at Ohio State University – had lead roles in developing the guidelines for the Primate Specialist Group of the [IUCN](#) (World Conservation Union) Species Survival Commission.

Though not binding, the 50-page document, *Best Practice Guidelines for the Re-introduction of Great Apes*, offers practical advice on how to repatriate some of the approximately 2,200 great apes living in sanctuaries in range countries where they occur naturally in the wild. Best practices guide the reintroduction of all endangered species, but because great apes are most closely related genetically to humans and

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have similar cognitive abilities and behavioral characteristics, more specific guidelines were needed. The guidelines also provide for post-release monitoring, an aspect missing in some previous efforts to repatriate great apes, and provides for documentation of outcomes that is important to funders and other stakeholders.

Development of the guidelines reflects a growing sense of urgency among those involved in the field of ape welfare, as populations in sanctuaries are increasing by about 10 percent a year. In the 13 sanctuaries maintained by the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA), populations had grown by March of this year to 729 chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), 84 gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla* and *G. beringei*) and 56 bonobos (*Pan paniscus*). And that doesn't account for the 1,200 or so orangutans (*Pongo spp.*) in sanctuaries in Indonesia and Malaysia, where new orangutans arrive daily.

Chronic overcrowding leaves sanctuary sponsors with a host of unattractive options on how to best manage those populations and only a couple of palatable choices – greatly expand the capacity of sanctuaries or reintroduce captured apes into the wild.

“It's important to humanely and responsibly deal with these orphaned apes,” Beck said. “There's nobody that I know who seriously supports euthanasia of healthy apes, and very few would support selling them to biomedical research. Most range-country governments are opposed to exporting them to foreign countries and, for the most part, zoos in range countries are not capable of managing those populations either.”

Development of the guidelines generated strong interest among scientists grappling with the enormity of issues surrounding the conservation of great apes. It took Beck and his team two months to write the initial draft, which then went through a peer review process that lasted more than a year – greater scrutiny than any publication in his more than 30-year career in the conservation of the world's primates. Nearly 40 scientists added input in more than 140 pages of single-spaced comments.

“It was enormously helpful,” Beck said. “The interest was keen, and everybody wanted to make sure it was right and appropriate.”

Successful repatriation could make a significant contribution to the conservation of apes in the wild, but Beck said it's important not to regard reintroduction as a silver

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bullet that alone will reverse the trend of toward extinction. “The real problem,” Beck said, “is there is no vacant forest.

“But if a place were to become available,” he added, “we know how to reintroduce great apes responsibly and humanely and make life better for them.”

The best candidates for reintroduction are young apes who have lived with their mothers for at least a year and have learned from them some of the behavior and survival skills needed to move about the forest, forage for food and protect themselves from predators. Many times these infants have been rescued from the illegal pet trade after their mothers were killed by hunters, and in those cases, survival-critical behaviors must be addressed in the reintroduction process.

Ape reintroduction isn't a new concept, and populations have successfully been re-established over the past 40 years. One of the first reintroductions on record occurred on the island of Sumatra in the mid-1960s to enhance the survival of free-ranging orangutans in Indonesia “There's little question that it has been successful,” Beck said.

Other successful programs involve the repatriation of western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), found throughout the African nations of Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Gabon, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea, and chimpanzees, which are found throughout equatorial Africa. One of the most successful reintroductions was with Project HELP (Habitat Ecologique et Liberté des Primates), in which 37 chimpanzees were reintroduced in the Conkouati-Douli National Park in Republic of Congo.

The only type of great ape that hasn't been reintroduced is the bonobo, found only in Democratic Republic of Congo, but Lola ya Bonobo sanctuary, a Great Ape Trust partner, plans to begin ape reintroductions in 2010.

Beck volunteered to oversee the arduous process of writing the guidelines two years ago when the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Great Ape Section met in Chicago. While working for the Smithsonian National Zoological Park as its associate director prior to coming to Great Ape Trust, Beck established strong credentials when he led one of the most successful primate reintroduction projects in the world. In that project, he coordinated the preparation, reintroduction and post-release monitoring of

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160 golden lion tamarins (*Leontopithecus rosalia*) in Brazil. Thirty years ago, only 200 of the small orange-yellow monkeys with lion-like manes existed in the wild. Now, with about 1,500 individuals, their status has been upgraded to endangered from critically endangered on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species, an accomplishment reached with only a few species.

Beck said it became apparent early in the process that drafting the guidelines was not a one-person job. He was teaching a class at Drake University in Des Moines and enlisted the aid of two students, Walkup and Rodrigues.

Few graduate students are offered such opportunities to do work so important to great ape welfare, said Walkup, who assists with orangutan research as part of her responsibilities at Great Ape Trust. The process put her in direct contact with some of the world's leading experts on great apes and it was a bit overwhelming, she said.

"From the perspective of a graduate student, the process of assisting in writing the guidelines was an opportunity to engage in intellectual discussions with Dr. Beck and other scientists from across the world via e-mail," Walkup said. "Working with Dr. Beck was a very valuable experience and I really appreciated his support and guidance. One of the most important aspects of this work for me was the privilege in participating in and producing a set of guidelines that may have a substantial impact on studying the welfare of great apes and advancing their conservation."

Part of Great Ape Trust's mission is to provide unique educational opportunities, and writing the ape reintroduction guidelines went a long way toward helping the scientific research facility fulfill that. "We have to be a learning organization, we have to be multi-generational and we have to recognize our responsibility to the future," Beck said. "The problems and the conservation of biodiversity are not going to go away in my generation, and part of our responsibility at The Trust is to prepare the next generation of scientists to address them."

## **GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND**

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in

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North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to [www.GreatApeTrust.org](http://www.GreatApeTrust.org).

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**Insights Through Collaborations with Apes**