

**STATUS AND CONSERVATION OF WESTERN CHIMPANZEE IN BIA
CONSERVATION AREA, SOUTHWESTERN GHANA.**

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The global western chimpanzee population has dramatically declined by more than 80% over the past 24 years and it is currently classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Besides this alarming information, the population status of the species is poorly known across its range, especially in Ghana. In 2015, a preliminary survey we conducted in Southwestern Ghana showed that Bia Conservation Area could plausibly hold the most significant population of western chimpanzee in Ghana. To preserve this believed significant population of western chimpanzee in Ghana, this project was initiated in July 2017 to investigate the conservation

status of the species in Bia Conservation Area and foster community conservation support for the species. Specific objectives of the project were to determine population size and distribution of chimpanzees; identify and document threats to the continued survival of the species; carry out stakeholder dialogues and community conservation awareness campaigns and build capacity of students and local conservation personnel in primate survey and conservation techniques.

The project activities ran from July 2017 to February 2018. Field surveys were conducted using a combination of line transect and recce walks. A total of 80 line transects, each 1 km long, were systematically laid in the study area and surveyed using the Standing Crop Nest Count (SCNC) survey method. Additionally, a total of 90 km of recce transects were walked. On each transect, signs of chimpanzee activities (sleeping nests, feeding signs, vocalizations) and illegal human activities (wire snares, empty cartridges, illegal chainsaws, etc.) were recorded. In total, we recorded 37 chimpanzee nests along both the recce walk and the line transects, providing a nest encounter rate of 0.22/km walked. Encounter rates of nests along line transect only and recce transects only were 0.3/km and 0.14/km respectively. Additionally, 16 feeding signs were also recorded, giving an overall encounter rate of chimpanzee activities of 0.31/km walked. No direct sightings of chimpanzees were made but calls were heard on two different occasions at different locations in the reserve. Due to the low total number of nests recorded we could not estimate chimpanzee population size in the conservation area using Distance software. A total of 234 signs of illegal human activities comprising wire snares, empty cartridges, burnt trees (a sign of hunting by fire), poachers' camps and gunshots were identified and recorded in the reserve. This provides an encounter rate of illegal human activities at 1.4/km walk. The distribution of the chimpanzee activities shows that the species is concentrated in the southern part of the reserve.

In addition to field surveys, we carried out a conservation awareness campaign on the conservation importance of primates and a capacity building programme in primate survey techniques. Over 650 people were reached out to with our awareness campaign and six volunteers (two university students and four locals) were provided with training in primate survey and conservation techniques. The four trained local conservation personnel are currently volunteering to continue with conservation education programmes among community members, and monitor and address basic conservation challenges in and around the conservation area. Also, the two trained university students have developed a keen interest in primate research and I

am currently providing them with technical support to design their own research work on chimpanzee at different sites in Ghana. Furthermore, we organized a stakeholder workshop among key stakeholders (Staff of the Bia Conservation Area, Community leaders, farmers, chain saw operators, etc.) to share the research findings and highlight the importance of chimpanzee conservation and forest protection as well as having dialogues on pragmatic conservation actions needed for long-term persistence of the species. These have stimulated local community conservation efforts for primates and, more specifically, chimpanzees, and made some locals voluntarily join the field team during one of our field surveys.

Hunting activities were identified as the biggest threat to chimpanzee populations in the Bia Conservation Area. The results showed low density of chimpanzee in the BCA, which puts the long-term survival of the species in question if detailed ecological surveys to ascertain the fate of the species and continuous conservation efforts are not dedicated towards this Critically Endangered species.