



RACHEL'S PROMISE

One woman's mission to create a primate sanctuary in the wilds of Cameroon. TEXT: JO-ANNE MCARTHUR

Rachel Hogan had anticipated a long adventure in Africa when she packed her bags and left her home in Bromsgrove, England, in 2001 at the age of 26. But she probably wouldn't have believed that, eight years later, she would call a small patch of jungle in Cameroon her home or 250-plus primates and 30 staff members her family.

Soon after Hogan began a three-month volunteership at the primate sanctuary Ape Action Africa (AAA), a week-old gorilla, orphaned by the bush-meat trade, was placed in her care. She named him Nkan Daniel. (In the local language, *nkan* means "gorilla.") Three months became a year, and many more apes—also cast-offs from the pet trade and bush-meat industry—were surrendered to, or confiscated by, AAA. A larger, better-organized sanctuary was urgently needed for these animals. Until issues of poverty and hunger are dealt with in West Africa and stricter anti-poaching regulations are put in place, releasing these already-endangered animals into the wild can be a death sentence.

It was then that Hogan made Nkan Daniel a promise: She wouldn't rest until he was returned to a proper forest

sanctuary with a gorilla family. She returned to the U.K. for two weeks, settled her affairs and made a permanent move to the Cameroonian sanctuary that she would be instrumental in building over the next eight years.

My visit to AAA coincided with the fulfillment of Hogan's promise to Nkan Daniel and the other gorillas. Under her tireless efforts (she is now project manager for AAA, working with directors Avi and Talila Sivan and Cameroonian staff and volunteers), AAA has grown into a 1,050-hectare sanctuary that cares for more than 250 primates. Every week, new animals are rescued, confiscated or surrendered, creating an ever-growing need for new enclosures, food and money to pay the staff.

February 21—the big moving day—has finally arrived. With the help of gorilla keepers and veterinarians, the gorillas are sedated, given a health checkup and moved to their new enclosure: four hectares of dense jungle, packed with towering trees and opportunities for exploration and foraging. Hogan is quiet and thoughtful—she's in command of the day, but her heart is bursting as her dream becomes a reality. No one knows how the gorillas will react to their new surroundings—will it be with fear, ▷

curiosity or joy? But all goes as Hogan dreamed. They run into the forest with excitement and begin exploring. Smiling, she follows them along the side of the enclosure and, throwing her arms into the air, says: “Now the Big Man can take me. I’ll go with a smile on my face!” □

To learn more about Ape Action Africa and how to support its work, visit apeactionafrica.org. Hogan’s story forms part of a larger body of work entitled *We Animals* by Toronto photographer Jo-Anne McArthur (weanimals.org).



Clockwise, from right: Bruno the chimp strikes a pose; Tacugama’s vaccination clinic; chimps playing in their sanctuary



CHIMP CHANGE!

The Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary. TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND

The market stalls and motorcycles that choke the streets of Freetown, Sierra Leone, thin as the *poda-poda*, or minibus, makes its way south of the city. Small farms line the potholed road. Not long after we pass the sprawling complex of the International Military Army Training Team (IMATT)—a global mission of military experts who are retraining the Sierra Leonean army—a thick tropical rainforest unfolds.

Even before the *poda-poda* reaches the entrance to the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary in the thick of the palm and mango trees, the squealing conversations of the primates can be heard. “You must read the signs before you go in,” the driver admonishes in broken English. One sign warns “Watch out for rocks and other objects thrown by chimps.”

“Two years ago, 100 chimpanzees escaped and brutally killed a man,” continues the driver. “One big fella named Bruno

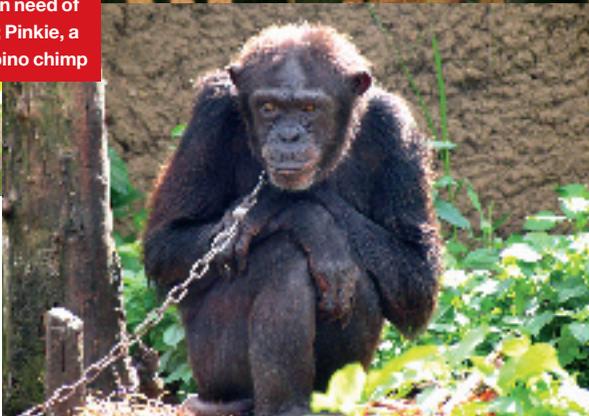
is still loose. When people see him, bad things happen. They get sick, like with malaria. Not a good place to be,” he says, clicking his tongue. “Best to turn around and go home.”

That’s a bit of an exaggeration. The truth is, 31 chimps escaped in April 2006 by breaking open the lock on their cage door. They mauled a taxi driver to death when he got caught in the middle of the pack. Almost all of the chimpanzees found their way back to the sanctuary—a few are still at large, though, including Bruno. But sanctuary staff aren’t that worried—at least for humans. Ideally, they prefer that the chimpanzees live in the wild. “As long as the chimps aren’t provoked, they’re harmless,” says founder Bala Amarasekaran. “It’s people who pose a bigger threat to them.”

Indeed. Until recently, chimps have been much sought after as pets—both in Sierra Leone and in the international exotic-animal trade. They are also a common food source >



Clockwise, from right: Feeding time at the sanctuary; a chimp in need of rescue; Pinkie, a rare albino chimp



in West Africa. As well, a large amount of their natural rainforest habitat has been destroyed by village farming and global warming, which has seen the rainy season decrease and become less predictable. About 40 years ago, it was estimated that 20,000 chimpanzees lived in the wild in Sierra Leone; today, that number is less than 3,000.

In 1995, in an attempt to stop the decline, Amarasekaran and his wife, Sharmila, founded Tacugama, the only sanctuary of its kind in Sierra Leone. Today, more than 90 chimpanzees call Tacugama home, and the sanctuary, which boasts three guest lodges, has become one of the country's most popular tourist attractions—the others being beaches, mountains and birdwatching.

Tacugama has been instrumental in raising awareness about the plight of chimpanzees in Sierra Leone. School programs educate young people on the close genetic association of members of the great ape family, which includes humans, chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas. And Tacugama has hooked up with international groups, such as the Jane Goodall Institute and the World Society for the Protection of Animals, to better protect the chimps. In 2007, Tacugama managed to get the government of Sierra Leone to beef up its 1972 Wildlife Act, enforcing stronger penalties on those who break the law. Now, anyone caught with a chimpanzee can face a jail term of two years and a fine of \$1,000—an astronomical fee in a country where the average wage is less than \$1 a day.

But these efforts are piecemeal at best because Sierra Leone—which has been ravaged by an 11-year civil war that ended in 2002—is one of the poorest countries in the world. It costs about \$320 a day to keep the Tacugama sanctuary in operation—that figure could buy food for a small village for an entire month. As a result, most Sierra Leoneans care little about the sanctuary, forcing Tacugama to rely almost entirely on outside donations.

Tacugama is famous throughout the country, though. During the conflict, all of the warring factions invaded the sanctuary at one time or another, taking its medical supplies and food but not harming the staff or primates. “Many of the rebels and soldiers were kids who knew about us from their school programs,” says Amarasekaran. “We were able to

convince them—and they convinced their commandos—not to shoot.”

Originally from Sri Lanka, Bala and Sharmila moved to Sierra Leone with their parents when they were school-aged themselves. Amarasekaran is an accountant like his father, but in 1989, during a drive in the countryside, he and Sharmila stumbled on Bruno, chained up, dehydrated and on the brink of death. The couple purchased him from some villagers and brought him to their home on the very same day that Mike Tyson was fighting British boxing heavyweight Frank Bruno—that’s how Bruno got his name. Bruno was nursed back to health and soon became a member of the Amarasekaran family. “It was like he was my own son,” says Amarasekaran. “I was shocked to discover how human he was, curling up in my lap and wanting to be hugged.” Amarasekaran started the sanctuary for Bruno, knowing there were many others like him out there.

Since its official opening, Tacugama has housed an extraordinary bunch of characters. In 1999, Pinkie—a few-weeks-old chimp taken from soldiers near the Liberian border during the civil war—arrived. With white hair and one blue eye and one brown eye, Pinkie was thought to be the world’s only albino chimp—and the object of many of the male chimps’ affections. Sadly, Pinkie died after falling from a tree. Jido showed up in the early 2000s in the back seat of then president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah’s sedan—he had been a gift to the president’s son. “More than any other chimp, Jido has helped us get the message out that having chimps as pets is wrong,” says Amarasekaran. “If the president handed over his own son’s chimp, then surely everyone else can too. And, boy, that chimp thinks he’s special—he acts like royalty.” □

For more information on the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, visit tacugama.com.