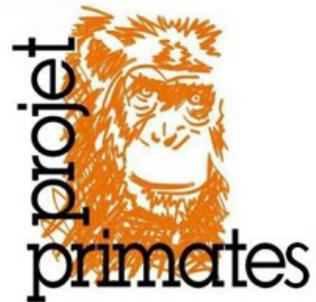

REBECCA'S REPORT

Travel Grant to Guinea, West Africa with the Jim Cronin Memorial Fund

Jim Cronin
Memorial Fund



Charity No 1126989



The Chimpanzee Conservation Centre is a sanctuary and rehabilitation centre in Guinea, West Africa. Located in Somaria, in the Haut-Niger National Park, it was founded in 1997 by Janis Carter to help orphaned chimpanzees that have been victims of the illegal pet trade. The sanctuary has three main goals – to rescue orphaned chimpanzees with the help of the Guinean Government and provide them with the most natural captive environment as possible. To rehabilitate and release chimpanzees where possible and to educate the local communities about the threats that wild populations are facing due to the bush meat and pet trade.

The decision to apply for a travel grant through the Jim Cronin Memorial Fund was an opportunity that I could not pass up. I had known for a long time that I wanted to travel to Africa to help an organisation that were rescuing chimpanzees closer to their natural habitat, however deciding which sanctuary to go to was not easy.

The Chimpanzee Conservation Centre (CCC) stood out to me as they are one of the few sanctuaries that have successfully released rescued chimpanzees back into the wild. At the release site, located in Bakaria, they have a small community of chimpanzees living almost completely natural lives. They have had females successfully integrate into other wild communities, and have had 5 births, which is a huge success for conservation of this endangered species.

After a telephone conversation with the director, it was agreed that I would have my own projects to focus on and would be tasked with creating new and interesting enrichment ideas for the chimpanzees at the centre as well as teaching some new techniques to the volunteers who were less experienced in primate care.

Upon arrival to Guinea, I found that the centre was extremely organised. I was put into quarantine for the first 2 days and could not have any contact with the chimpanzees, but I was kept very busy with enrichment-based tasks. I assessed the materials and tools that they had available, it was limited due to their location and lack of funding and consisted of a small metal container with scrap paper, 1 Kong and novelty items such as sun glasses and a tube and a garage containing scrap pieces of metal, wood, plastic, tyres and piping. I discussed options and possibilities with the other volunteers, they asked me a lot of questions about enrichment and I was able to teach them some simple but effective techniques that could help keep the chimpanzees occupied.

After the quarantine period I was introduced to the chimpanzees I would work with the most. There were 10 chimps that were kept alone, one of them, a young female named Labe, was in a special vet cage. She had been attacked by females during an introduction, so was being kept alone while she healed, after which future introductions would be reassessed and tried again. I'm pleased to report that a month later this introduction was completed successfully. Another was a large adult male, named Coco, He had been shot in the leg when captured and was unable to live with other chimpanzees due to his injury but there were plans to introduce him to suitable chimpanzees in the future.

Most of the others were chimpanzees that had previously been successfully introduced to groups but kept escaping and had to be moved into cages at the centre for safety. Whilst the enclosures that CCC provided for their groups of chimpanzees were very impressive, large and filled with trees, natural leaves and berries they could forage on. The barriers only consisted of electric wires and some of the chimpanzees had learnt to use branches to move the wires and escape. The centre had no choice but to keep the repeat offenders in metal cages for the safety of the staff and volunteers. The Sanctuary is hoping to raise enough funds to change the style of their enclosures to put a stop to the escapes, if they are successful, most of their isolated animals would be able to be integrated back into their more natural groups and out of the metal cages.

Coming up with new daily enrichment ideas for these lone chimpanzees was one of my main roles, but the chimpanzee manager, was also very keen to provide more structural enrichment in the nursery group's indoor enclosure too. Whilst the young chimpanzees attend Bush School twice every day, they sleep inside in their indoor enclosure on hard, metal platforms and the Manager asked me to create new ways to encourage them to sleep up high like they would in the trees. Creating hammocks was the obvious solution to this, but there was only a small amount of hosing available, so I had to get creative and after a few attempts I managed to successfully fill their nursery room with hammocks that the infants now use every time they sleep.

The daily enrichment was especially important for the isolated chimpanzees. Despite the lack of resources, it was still possible to make up enrichment that could entertain these chimpanzees for a good amount of time. Items such as bottles and plastic pipes are very simple forms of enrichment, and whilst they would not prove hard work for the chimpanzees at monkey world, at CCC they were very popular as they don't generally get things like this. As part of my grant application I requested funding for additional enrichment items that I could take to the centre with me, simple things such as a garden hose pipe and plastic ball-pit balls made a big difference as they could be

easily filled with their food and even though none of these items would be found in the wild, they do encourage natural behaviours by stimulating their minds to think about how to get the food out, similar to breaking open nuts or fruit.

The centre was keen for me to see every aspect of what they did on a daily basis and I was asked to go on the daily bush walks with the infants and the keepers, they call it "Bush School" It was an amazing experience to watch the two groups of young chimpanzees learn to run, play, interact with each other and swing through the trees. One or two of them even tried nesting down in the leaves. My time with the youngsters reminded me how strong and destructive they are. Although sometimes appeared calm when out in the bush, the reality was quite the opposite, they had a great time pulling my clothes and hair, trying to pull my glasses off and swinging from the roof so that they could kick me in the chest, playfully, yes but with a huge amount of force. This experience not only made me realise that I needed to make my structural enrichment so much stronger than I had previously planned for, but also gave me first-hand experience at how utterly unsuitable these primates are as pets even at a very young age.

I left with a very high opinion of The Chimpanzee Conservation Centre, whilst not everything was perfect as a result of a lack of funding, I believe they are doing an amazing job. I wish I had been able to stay for longer, but I am happy with all I achieved and genuinely believe I made a difference to the daily lives of the primates at the centre. Overall my experience can only be described as incredible. Thank you to the Jim Cronin Memorial Fund for funding my travel grant. I hope that I made a difference to the lives of the primates, staff and volunteers at the centre.