

PRESS RELEASE - 1 June 2010

CONTACT: Bala Amarasekaran

PHONE: +232 33 611211 / +232 76 611211

EMAIL: info@tacugama.com

Wild Chimpanzee Population in Sierra Leone Found to be Double Previous Estimates

Sierra Leone National Chimpanzee Census offers new hope for the survival of the endangered Western Chimpanzee

Freetown 1 June 2010: Twice as many wild chimpanzees exist in Sierra Leone as previously thought, according to preliminary findings of the first comprehensive national chimpanzee survey conducted by Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary.

Survey results released today reveal that the wild chimpanzee population stands at approximately 4,000 individuals, whereas previous estimates suggested only half this figure. The survey has also determined that almost half of these chimpanzees are surviving in highly threatened and marginal habitats outside of the country's protected forest reserves. These results confirm that Sierra Leone still hosts a significant population of the endangered Western Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes verus*).



Chair of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group, Dr Russ Mittermeier commented: "It is extremely valuable to have such sound, scientific data. These results provide some very encouraging news about the chimpanzee population in Sierra Leone in contrast to many other parts of West Africa. It's imperative that protection should be established for those significant populations that have been found outside existing reserves"

These results offer hope for the long-term survival of the Western Chimpanzee, but also highlight the significant threats that this flagship species faces in Sierra Leone. With the country's push to develop and eliminate poverty, habitat is being rapidly lost to logging, mining and farming, pushing

chimpanzees into direct conflict with communities as they strive for survival. While the higher than expected numbers are good news, these results do not mean that chimpanzee numbers are increasing in Sierra Leone. More than 70% of people interviewed during the survey declared that they see fewer chimpanzees now than several years ago.

Bala Amarasakaren, director of Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary, said that the work of the sanctuary and the Government arms embargo have ensured that chimpanzees have not vanished altogether:

“For fifteen years we have been working hard to eradicate the pet trade, promote law enforcement and educate citizens that it is illegal to hunt and kill chimpanzees and our findings confirm that we are making progress,” Amarasakaran said. “With increasing economic and development pressures we now need to ensure that the survey results contribute to urgent and sustainable conservation action that recognises the needs of both people and wildlife.”



Fieldwork began in January 2009 and the survey has been the first systematic, nationwide survey ever undertaken in Sierra Leone to establish the status of the one of the most endangered of Africa's four chimpanzee subspecies. The previous estimate from 1980 considered populations in protected areas only.

The National Chimpanzee Census project was conceived and co-ordinated by Tacugama, with support from the Pan Africa Sanctuary Alliance (PASA) and endorsed by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). The field research team, led by Dr. Terry Brncic, worked intensively across Sierra Leone and interviewed almost 800 communities and surveyed around 670km of transects on foot. As well as collecting details on chimpanzees, habitat quality and human impact have been documented. Significant data have been captured for other large mammal species that include evidence of forest elephants in the centre of Sierra Leone.

The Head of the Conservation and Wildlife Management Unit, Forestry Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, Kate M. B. Garnett, welcomed the results, saying, “We can build on this robust research to strengthen the Government's ability to drive conservation management”.

PASA has been impressed with the determination and commitment of the Tacugama team in delivering this critical project. “From start to finish, this project was conceived, prepared, funded and executed in an amazingly short period of time – roughly two years,” said Doug Cress, executive director of PASA. “Tacugama and its staff have overcome many challenges to ensure that wild chimpanzees in Sierra Leone can now benefit from real, scientific evidence that can lead to effective, long-term protection.”

Implementing the survey has been a key priority for Tacugama, which marks 15 years of operations this year. The results allow the sanctuary to move forward and address the root cause issues that result in the arrival of chimpanzee orphans at its gates.

Bala Amarasekaran will be in London to take part in a 15th Anniversary fundraising evening at the Royal Over-Seas League on 11 June.

For more information on the survey please visit www.tacugama.com/census_2010.html

Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary enforces the laws protecting chimpanzees in Sierra Leone and cares for 100 confiscated and abandoned chimpanzees at the sanctuary close to Freetown. Founded in 1995, Tacugama operates education, community development, field research, conservation and ecotourism projects to address the root cause issues that threaten the survival of chimpanzees and their habitat in Sierra Leone. Web www.tacugama.com / email info@tacugama.com

PASA – the Pan Africa Sanctuary Alliance - was founded in 2000 to coordinate activities between primate rescue and rehabilitation centers across Africa. PASA member sanctuaries currently care for over 850 chimpanzees, in addition to almost 3,000 other endangered primates, at 18 facilities in 12 countries. For more information, please visit the PASA website www.pasaprimates.org or contact info@pasaprimates.org.