Title

Chimpanzee population response to commercial hunting in south-east Cameroon

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Abstract

Wildlife monitoring data provide an objective basis for evaluating conservation efforts and refining conservation strategies. Central chimpanzee nest censuses were conducted in *La Belgique* Research Site, south-east Cameroon, in 2001 (reference year) and 2014 using the Standing Crop Nest Count methodology. In both study years, 10 6-km transects traversing all habitat types were opened at a constant bearing of 45° to collect nest data. Analyses were performed in Distance 6.2. Chimpanzee nest density values (nests/km^2) were 112 and 69 in 2001 and 2014, respectively. These results suggest that chimpanzee numbers in the research site have dropped by 38.4% in 13 years. This is probably due to a strong commercial hunting pressure, especially since 2009, whereby gun hunting has become the *de facto* method for harvesting wildlife in the region. From the reference year till 2014, the study site had not been subject to devastating disease epidemics or major habitat disturbance from logging and agricultural activities. In the study site−where the presence of conservation scientists and the constant sensitization within the rural communities raise awareness of the need for ape protection−chimpanzees are not particularly targeted by hunters, and it is quite plausible that a number of individuals fled to adjacent forest patches where disturbance shooting is minimal. However, despite observed range shifts, chimpanzees persist in the region. In contexts where laws are not enforced rigorously enough, conservation research presence or other activities aiming at reinforcing the value of living great apes are crucial for the survival of these critically-endangered species.