Male – male social interactions in breeder and bachelor groups of gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla*):

An indication of behavioural flexibility

Submitted by Penelope Kirsten Pullen, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology, July 2009.

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Abstract

The establishment of bachelor gorilla groups in captivity, along with the continued success of the captive breeding programme provides an opportunity for research on social interactions in two differing circumstances. This thesis focuses on male–male social interactions. Emphasis is placed on dominance and affiliative behaviours and gives indications of the level of behavioural flexibility within both breeder and bachelor gorilla groups.

Evaluation of behavioural diversity, to validate the use of multi-institutional research, confirms that behavioural phenomena, such as the effect of age class, are not masked by the potential confound of differing husbandry practices and enclosure design between institutions.

It was found that males in bachelor groups express significantly lower frequencies of both dominance and aggressive behaviours than males in breeder groups. A Relationship Quality Index (RQI, based on the ration of dominance to affiliative behaviours) was developed and again bachelor males exhibited a significantly lower RQI, indicating that bachelor males express a greater frequency of dominance behaviours than affiliative behaviours. This may have a direct impact on the social development of young males, and potentially their social competence in later life, a significant finding for the management of gorillas in captivity. In addition, it can be suggested that affiliative behaviours, which may work to repair damage to social bonds, may not be performed to the same extent in bachelor groups, suggesting that the ‘value’ of social bonds within a bachelor group may be reduced.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to start by acknowledging the support and advice of my supervisors Dr. Lisa Leaver and Prof Stephen Lea (Exeter University) and, in particular, Dr. Amy Plowman (Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust) for guiding me through this research.

I must also acknowledge the support and encouragement of the Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust; without the Trust’s backing this research could not have been carried out. In addition my colleagues within the Trust’s Field Conservation and Research Department have always been prepared to provide encouragement and a cup of tea.

This research was greatly facilitated by the helpfulness of the managers and the staff of each of the zoos that I visited: Calgary Zoo, Columbus Zoo, Apenheul Primate Park, Belfast Zoological Gardens, Disney Animal Kingdom, Boissiere du Doré, Loro Parque, Paignton Zoo Environmental Park and Port Lympne Wild Animal Park. In each of these institutions I received support and encouragement but there are a couple of people who really looked after me: Rose Fodor (Calgary Zoo), Rebecca Phillips and Debbie Machamer (Disney Animal Kingdom), Sam Bremner-Harrison (Belfast), Frank Rietkerk (Apenheul Primate Park).

There are many other people in the zoo community and the university who have always been there with support when necessary. I’d like to thank Andrea Fidgett and Holly Farmer for always listening, Nicole Dorey for keeping me going, Tracey Moore for always answering and Mike Woolham for telling me fairy stories and keeping me laughing.