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Case Study of an Unusual Human–Chimpanzee Conflict at Bulindi, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION
Across equatorial Africa expanding human populations and forest clearance for agriculture has meant that increasingly humans and great apes occupy the same habitat. Interactions between apes and people in shared environments are often characterized by competition and conflict\(^\text{1-6}\). In this report I describe an unusual human–ape conflict involving a newly-studied community of \(\geq 25\) chimpanzees (\textit{Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii}) in heavily disturbed forest–farm habitat at...
Study Site

Bulindi is situated between 1°27'-1°30'N and 31°26'-31°30'E, 25 km south of Budongo Forest. The chimpanzees' territory comprises a network of small (≤ 50 ha) riverine forests within the vicinity of 11 permanent villages. These unprotected forests are being logged for timber and cleared for cultivation. The chimpanzees regularly consume agricultural foods. They are not hunted but experience high levels of harassment from villagers. Although familiar with people, the apes are unhabituated.

CONFLICT CASE STUDY

Background

Of five main riverine forests at Bulindi, Kaawango forest in the northeast was least utilized by chimpanzees during this study (Oct 2006-Jan 2008). No evidence...
indicated chimpanzees visited Kaawango between October 2006 and April 2007. However, on 15th May, chimpanzees raided mangos at a home bordering the forest (Fig. 1). They returned to this homestead for mangos ≥ 5 times in May–June, after which the fruits were gone. On each occasion they travelled to Kaawango from Kiseeta or Kyamalera forests, in the core of their range (Fig. 1), apparently specifically for these mangos, which had fruited earlier than other mango trees in their territory. They spent little time within Kaawango forest.

Unlike most village homes, this house had concrete walls and glass windows. Ornamental shrubs and trees were planted around a grass lawn. The owner, a senior government official, resided in the capital Kampala but occasionally visited Bulindi. Metal doors on one side of the house had glass window panes in which chimpanzees could see their reflections, and this ‘mirror’ provoked considerable interest and excitement in the apes. Two side of the house, which open to a small courtyard, and immediately in front of the glass. He opened gates at the front of the door. They had again broken branches from trees behind the house. The owner was also highly agitated and could not be approached. It was a prolonged confrontation; shots were still being fired approximately 30 minutes later. According to FAs, chimpanzees remained at the site calling and drumming until late afternoon (i.e. several hours). The following morning, FAs searched the forest but found no dead apes and no blood.

On 22nd August M.M. visited the owner who gave the following account of the incident: at around 1300 or earlier, he was inside his house and heard loud banging against the door. Two chimpanzees were outside, immediately in front of the glass. He opened gates at the side of the house, which open to a small courtyard, and went to chase them away. The animals charged towards him, vocalizing loudly; one was carrying a branch. Shocked, he ran back into the courtyard, shutting the gates. He was convinced the apes wanted to physically attack him and began shooting with his rifle in the air to frighten them away. The chimpanzees ran 50m to Eucalyptus trees and, still vocalizing, broke branches to threaten him. (According to the FA, other apes were in dense undergrowth nearby, vocalizing and drumming). The owner continued firing in the air. After the initial confrontation, chimpanzees twice returned to the
homestead; each time, the owner fired shots to repel them. He said he did not shoot them because he knew chimpanzees are legally protected. The six identified adult males at Bulindi were all subsequently seen by the research team in good health.

On the afternoon of this meeting, a mixed party of ≥ 9 chimpanzees travelled to Kaawango. FAs found five adult males on the lawn by the glass door. At their approach, one male displayed towards them dragging a branch. However, after several minutes, the owner arrived, having heard chimpanzees were at his house, and drove his car at the apes causing them to flee. He subsequently agreed to cover the lower glass panes of the door with cloth as a temporary solution. During the remaining five months of research, chimpanzees travelled to Kaawango ≥ 8 times and raided papaya, sugarcane, cocoa and oranges in villages surrounding the forest. They visited the homestead ≥ 5 times. On three occasions, adult males were discovered seated calmly by the door, now covered with cloth; each time, they returned to the forest at our approach. In October, chimpanzees were twice chased away by the owner, apparently without incident.

DISCUSSION
Captive chimpanzees are famously capable of self-recognition in mirrors7. However, the capacity for self-recognition is most pronounced in subadult animals (8–15 yrs), and the proportion of subjects showing self-recognition declines sharply among adults8. In this anecdotal report, wild adult male chimpanzees at Bulindi were evidently fascinated by their reflections in the glass door of a house, returning to the home once mangos – the initial attractant – had finished fruiting. The chimpanzees’ range includes many streams as well as papyrus swamps, and after heavy rains stretches of riverine forest become flooded. Consequently, the apes have ample opportunity to see their reflections in water. Young chimpanzees at Mahale were observed examining their reflections in pools and streams9, but it is not yet known if similar behavior occurs at Bulindi. Although the males at times intently examined the door, their high state of arousal implies that they most likely saw ‘other’ chimpanzees behind the glass. The house is situated outside of their core area in the northeast corner of the chimpanzees’ known range. Visiting parties usually comprised adult males only. This raises the possibility that the males had identified the homestead as a location for territorial encounters with extra-group strangers. A motivation to engage in territorial confrontation at the homestead is perhaps reflected in their willingness to remain at the conflict scene to monitor and threaten the owner, despite the noisy gunshots. After the windows were covered, chimpanzees made occasional visits to the house, but their behavior was no longer excitable and aggressive.

With increasing human penetration into great ape habitats and growing interest in the conservation implications of human–great ape interactions in human-dominated landscapes4–6, further reports of novel human–ape conflicts are anticipated.

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