

## Technology Boom, Gorilla Bust

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The technology in our world is ever changing. Every day, with each new scientific advancement, the world becomes a smaller place, and a single phone call can connect us with the other side of the planet. But with what effects does the cost of our technology become too high? The current technology boom puts the lives of one of our closest relatives at risk. Each new computer, cellphone, or similar gadget being created threatens the lives of gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo. George Schaller, a naturalist, conservationist, and author, puts the relationship between humans and gorillas in perfect words: “No one who looks into a gorilla's eyes - intelligent, gentle, vulnerable - can remain unchanged, for the gap between ape and human vanishes; we know that the gorilla still lives within us” (“Gorilla” np). Unless we as humans change, our technological advancements will soon destroy an entire species.

Gorillas, who share ninety-eight percent of their genetics with humans, have been on the endangered species list since 1970. All three subspecies of gorilla – western lowland, eastern lowland, and mountain gorilla – are found in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Gorillas have no natural enemies or predators, and therefore are only endangered because of human actions (“Gorilla” np).

Human actions like coltan mining pose as one of the greatest threats to the already endangered gorilla populations. Coltan, one of the world's most sought after minerals, is found in the midst of gorilla populations in the Democratic Republic of Congo. When refined, coltan becomes a heat resistant powder called metallic tantalum, which can store electrical charge and is used to make parts for cellphones, computers, hand-held games, and pagers (“Digging” np)

Because of an increase in worldwide demands for electronics, the overall demand for coltan has also increased. In 2000, coltan values spiked from \$65 to \$600 a kilo because of the cellphone boom (Alden np). In the United States, there are an estimated 140 million cellphone users. The average cell

phone user changes their phone model every fourteen months due to the rapidly changing technology, and in 2007, more than one-hundred million cellphones were discarded, but less than ten percent of those cellphones were recycled (“Cellphone Recycling” np).

In order to mine coltan, miners cut down trees and dig into the forest floor. Destroying the forest floor reduces food for the gorillas (“Coltan” np). Marc Languy, World Wildlife Fund coordinator, has said that “Loss of habitat is the worst threat to this species.”

Approximately eighty percent of the world's known coltan supply is in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and illegal coltan mining has affected ninety-seven percent of gorilla habitat (Pickrell np). The once thriving population of 17,000 gorillas in the whole eastern Congo in 1991 has been reduced to no more than 1,000 (“Digging” np). The number of eastern lowland gorillas in eight Democratic Republic of Congo National Parks has also declined by ninety percent in the past five years, and now only 3,000 gorillas remain (“Coltan” np).

Much of the coltan is mined illegally in Kahuzi Biega National Park (“Coltan” np). In the last decade, there have been more than ten thousand illegal miners in the protected parks due to the cellphone boom (Lovgreen np). Not only do the miners destroy gorilla habitats and their food supply, but gorillas are also killed and sold as bush meat (“Coltan” np). Because of the poaching and clearance of habitat, a population of 258 eastern lowland gorillas in Kahuzi Biega National Park five years ago has now been decimated to a population of a mere 110 gorillas.

Another national park, Maiko National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been protected by law since 1970, but like other national parks in Africa, Maiko is unable to stop illegal coltan mining alone. Conservation International's senior director for central Africa Juan Carlos Bonilla has said that Maiko is in reality a “paper park,” meaning that although Maiko exists by law, little is

done to protect the park and the park's inhabitants (Pickrell np). Without our help, gorillas will become a victim of human progress.

Through educating the public, using legitimate sources of coltan, and recycling cellphones, we may be able to stop the threat against gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These three ideas are key to protecting the remaining gorillas before it is too late.

In order to more effectively stop coltan mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the first step is educating the public on the connection between coltan and the danger to gorillas and their habitat. Much of the public has no idea that the creation of technology we use everyday – cellphones, computers, et cetera – is deadly to the wildlife in Africa. In a survey I conducted, ninety-seven percent of the people surveyed were unaware that our use of cellphones threatens gorilla species in Africa because coltan is mined in their habitat. If we become more knowledgeable about this connection, we can help pressure companies to use legitimate sources for mining coltan. We can also support organizations that fight illegal coltan mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Another crucial solution for protecting the gorillas is to use coltan sources outside the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are other coltan mining operations in Australia, Brazil, and Canada that are less harmful to the environment (Essick np). Recent research by Dr. Adrian Finch, a geologist from the University of Saint Andrews, has also found coltan in extinct volcanoes in the North Muizfeldt region of Greenland (Woods np). If companies that use coltan, most critically the cellphone companies, change their source of coltan, it would help erase the threat coltan mining poses to gorillas. In an e-mail interview with Motorola cellphone company, I found that they are one step ahead of other cellphone companies. Motorola not only monitors where their suppliers mine coltan, but Motorola also requires that their suppliers verify in writing that their coltan does not come from the

Democratic Republic of Congo (“Motorola”). If all cellphone companies monitor where their coltan comes from, and if cellphone companies do not accept coltan mined from Africa, we would be taking a large step in helping save the Democratic Republic of Congo's gorilla populations.

Along with educating the public and using alternative sources of coltan, a cellphone recycling program must be implemented on a world-wide scale. Cellphone technology changes almost daily, causing cellphones to be widely discarded (“Cellphone Recycling” np). That is why it is imperative that we reuse and recycle cellphone technology to reduce the need for the creation of new cellphones. Currently, there are recycling programs for cellphones, but because so few cellphones are recycled, more must be done to encourage people to recycle.

Eco-Cell, a cellphone recycling company, has already brought attention to the connection between gorillas, coltan mining, and cellphones. People can donate their old cellphones, and Eco-Cell reuses approximately eighty percent of the cellphones they receive, and the rest are properly recycled under Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. Eco-Cell has recycled 200,000 cellphones total, and in 2008, Eco-Cell recycled 66,151 cellphones. They are also partnered with over one-hundred zoos in the United States and use their program to educate zoo visitors and raise money for the wildlife affected by the coltan trade (Ronay np). Eco-Cell is not the only group that recycles cellphones; there are also programs like Cell Phones for Soldiers, which recycles cellphones to pay for calling cards for soldiers in need. It does not matter whether people recycle their old cellphones to environmentally conscious groups like Eco-Cell or other organizations that reuse and recycle cellphones, what matters is that people act now and recycle their cellphones to curb the need for destructive coltan mining in Africa.

Environmentalist Jane Goodall once said “Only if we understand can we care. Only if we care will we help. Only if we help shall they be saved.” Although Jane Goodall's quote refers to chimpanzees, it also applies to the gorillas in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We must educate others so that they understand the consequences of our technological advancements. We must make others aware that the actions we take can either help or destroy an entire species. Only when we understand the consequences of our use of cellphones can we take the steps necessary to prevent the harm we are causing to gorillas. Fortunately, there are solutions allowing us to benefit from the responsible use of our technology without harming other species. Now we must take responsibility to educate others and act on what we have learned.

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