

Over one thousand chimpanzees to die from Koukoutamba dam in Guinea



Western chimpanzee, filmed in Bossou, Guinea. These chimpanzees are the most endangered of all subspecies of chimpanzees. They are listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List. The Koukoutamba dam could kill over one thousand individuals.

Koukoutamba village. Cattle and goats rest in the shade of hand-woven thatch rooves covering traditional African earth-walled round houses. This village has no running water or electricity, and the people here live pretty much a subsistence life. There is no school. No toilet for that matter.



Rebecca Kormos

Koukoutamba village in the Republic of Guinea, West Africa.



Koukoutamba village

I am hanging out with the kids of Koukoutamba who have taken me to the Bafing River that winds along the edge of the village. It is May 2018 - the end of the dry season and it is hot and dry, but the river is still wide and deep. On one side of me there is a cow drinking from the river, and upstream, a woman soaping up clothing and pounding them on a rock before rinsing them in the water. The older kids plunge into the river, while the younger kids play at the river's edge with an empty plastic water bottle I gave them when I had finished drinking from it. The plastic bottle is a desirable item in this part of the world where most necessities come from the earth. Bottled water is not needed here though. This Bafing River is their water source.



Rebecca Kormos

Moyen Bafing River and the children of Koukoutamba village



Moyen Bafing River

The kids push the fishing pirogue out into the slow-moving water and jump aboard. A fishing eagle soars overhead. The scene is peaceful – but it’s the calm before the storm. The government of Guinea is finalizing plans to build a new 294 MW dam just upstream from here. It will take the name of this village – the Koukoutamba dam.

The people of Koukoutamba know the dam is coming. What they don’t know yet, is whether they will be among the 8,700 people who will be displaced by this project. Neither have they been told that the flow of the river will change from the current 10m³/s to around 117 m³/s, or how the dam will create a reservoir upstream by flooding an area double the size of the city of San Francisco.



The height and speed of the Bafing River will change drastically as a result of the dam, tremendously impacting the lives of those living downstream of the dam who depend on this river for their drinking water, and water for irrigation and livestock.

In the flood path are many mosques, as well as sacred sites and forests. There is the "Maadja" historical site where war drums and other sacred musical instruments are buried from the minority Dialonke tribes also living in this region. And the impacts from this dam will not only weigh on the people. Living in the flood zone are also chimpanzees, and scientists have predicted the dam could result in the death of up to 1,500 individuals¹.

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https://www.wildchimps.org/fileadmin/content_files/pdfs/reports/2017_WCF_Rapport_inventaire_de_faune_2014_2016_Moyen_Bafing_sma11.pdf



Moyen Bafing River and the children of Koukoutamba village.

We follow a farmer, his wife and his two sons to his banana plantation near the river's edge. He shows us how he uses the water from this Bafing River to irrigate his crops. Beyond his plantations are trees such as *Parkia biglobosa*, *Ficus* and *Dialium* whose fruits are eaten by both people and chimpanzees. Because chimpanzees are so morphologically similar to humans, most of the food that chimpanzees eat, humans can eat as well. Chimpanzees are after all human's closest living relatives on earth, sharing about 98.5% of our DNA. Chimpanzees are in fact more closely related to humans than they are to gorillas. And like humans, they demonstrate similar emotions, they are extremely intelligent, they express empathy, they reason, and they mourn their dead. People in this region of Guinea have long recognized these similarities and chimpanzees and humans have lived side-by-side here for centuries. While in other areas of Africa, chimpanzees are often hunted and eaten, here in this region of Guinea called the Fouta Djallon

highlands, chimpanzees are protected due to religious and cultural taboos of the Foulani people.

Behind the farmer's banana plantation and past the lowland forests, in the distance we can see forest-covered mountains. The landscape is dramatic and vast. In a stunning move, just this year, the President of Guinea declared this area as part of a new 6,426 km² Moyen Bafing National Park (MBNP). That's bigger than the State of Delaware. The work to create this park was spearheaded by the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and it was created specifically to protect the estimated 4,000^{2,3} chimpanzees living in the park. It is now the largest protected area for chimpanzees in West Africa.



The new 6,426 km² Moyen Bafing National Park in the Fouta Djallon, Guinea.

This protected area is of vital importance to the survival of chimpanzees in region. Largely due to the protection that the Foulani people have provided, the Fouta Djallon has become the stronghold for this chimpanzee's survival. Overall, the number of this subspecies has declined by a drastic 80% in the last 24 years⁴. In 2017, the IUCN Red List

² https://www.wildchimps.org/fileadmin/content_files/pdfs/reports/2017_WCF_Annual_Report_EN_final_14-02-2017_2.pdf

³ <https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/achievements/8470/guinea-4000-chimps-safe-in-new-national-park>

⁴ <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/15935/0>

reclassified western chimpanzees as *Critically Endangered* – the highest threat category for any living species⁵. Whereas chimpanzees have either gone extinct or are on the verge of disappearing in most areas of West Africa, here in the Fouta Djallon, chimpanzees are still living in large numbers of about 17,000. This is a rare place on earth where humans and our closest living relative on earth coexist.

But despite this coexistence that has existed for decades, and regardless of the creation of the new national park, plans for the dam are proceeding at an alarming rate. “The President wants his park, but he wants his dam too,” is what people in Conakry will tell you if you mention chimpanzees and the dam in the same breath. That, and they will also tell you that the President does not want to prioritize chimpanzees over people.

While it is the President of Guinea who is ultimately responsible for proceeding with the dam, it is the World Bank who is responsible for siting the dam here. In 2013, the World Bank funded a feasibility study to research options for the dam’s location. The study was not well done. Just a glance reveals how bad it really was - listing species like the reticulated giraffe, that don’t even exist in Guinea⁶. Nevertheless, the study was accepted, and based on its recommendations, the Guinean government put out a tender in 2016⁷ to secure a partner to build the site.

The Koukoutamba dam is just one of a series of dams that are being built as part of the Senegal River Basin Development Organization (OMVS) - a partnership between Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, created to cooperatively manage the 1,800 kilometers Senegal River. The mandate of OMVS is to “secure countries’ economies and reduce the vulnerability of peoples’ livelihoods through coordinated water resources and energy development.”⁸

But will this dam reduce the vulnerability of the people of Guinea? Guinea has the 6th lowest Human Development Index in the world. Only 18% of the population of Guinea have access to electricity, and this drops to only 3% in rural areas.⁹ This is far lower than the average for Sub-Saharan Africa. Increasing access to electricity, especially for those outside of cities is obviously badly needed. However, a closer look at this project reveals that this power is not in fact slated to support the rural poor of Guinea. *Three quarters* of the electricity generated by the Koukoutamba dam is to sell to other countries¹⁰. The

⁵ November 2013. Etude d’Impact Environnemental et Social (EIES) des Investissements du PGIRE II (PGIRE, FEM, PDS, PDRI)

⁶ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/714611468009330144/pdf/ICR26530ICR0Se00PUBLIC00Box379845B0.pdf>

⁷ <https://archive.crossborderinformation.com/Article/Guinea+Koukoutamba+dam+tender.aspx?date=20160324#>

⁸ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/714611468009330144/pdf/ICR26530ICR0Se00PUBLIC00Box379845B0.pdf>

⁹ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/515871527263469191/pdf/Project-Information-Documents-Integrated-Safeguards-Data-Sheet-Guinea-Mali-Interconnection-Project-P166042.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/172941521424821535/pdf/GUINEA-POWER-SECTOR1-PAD-02272018.pdf>

money goes to the Guinean government. Whether this money will filter down to the people of Guinea is not clear, but in a country that ranks 148 out of 180 countries on the corruption perception index¹¹, this is not a given.

Not only is three quarters being sold, but another large proportion of the electricity will be diverted to support the mining of bauxite in Guinea. Sadly, not only is Guinea's Fouta Djallon region home to the largest population of chimpanzees in West Africa, but Guinea has the largest bauxite reserve in the world. A map of mining in Guinea reveals back to back mining concessions like a patchwork quilt across the Fouta Djallon region where the chimpanzees live, even stretching into the new Moyon Bafing National Park. Countries from all over the world are here to mine Guinea's riches, including Russia, China, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, among others. But as with the dam, the money from the mining goes primarily to the government.

In the mining towns such as Boke, for years now people have been watching their earth being transported on trucks and trains out of their country, yet they have seen very little benefits from these billion-dollar sales of their land. The lack of jobs, absence of electricity and running water, increased pollution and loss of livelihoods, has caused the people of Guinea to start to rise up against both the mining companies and their own government. In the last few months, demonstrators have burned buildings, and smashed windows of government buildings. In recent months, these riots have turned deadly.

¹¹ <https://www.transparency.org/country/GIN>



Rebecca Kormos

Raw bauxite being hauled by train to the port in Kamsar, where it is put on boats and transported to smelters in places like Iceland, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi and made into Bauxite.



Rebecca Kormos

Government electricity building in Boke attacked in September 2017 by protesters angry against the lack of electricity and water in the village and the pollution from the mining.

While many of these mining projects are supported by loans from the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Koukoutamba dam is a project of the World Bank. When World Bank recommended this site for the dam to the Guinean government however, they were not aware that this new Moyen Bafing National Park was being created in the same area. Nor did they know that the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – the private lending branch of the World Bank – was using the creation of this park as a “chimpanzee offset” for two of their clients – the Global Alumina Corporation (GAC) and the Compagnie de Bauxite de Guinée (CBG). These companies had calculated how many chimpanzees would be killed due to the mining, and then how many chimpanzees they would therefore have to protect elsewhere to balance things out. The IFC is guided by Performance Standards (PS) and PS 6¹² permits them to loan to clients even if they destroy habitat of even Critically Endangered subspecies such as these chimpanzees, provided there is “no net loss regionally or globally.” Thus, companies can legally “offset” chimpanzees. This may sound harsh, but these two companies have gone above and beyond all other companies in Guinea in terms of avoiding chimpanzee habitat, mitigating their impact, and in compensating for what they do destroy. The IFC worked closely with conservationists of the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation and the Guinean government to ensure that a new National Park was created in the area with the one of the highest densities of chimpanzees in all of Africa. No other company in Guinea has compensated for their impacts on the environment in such a way.

When the World Bank learned that the dam they had been supporting was in the middle of this new national park, as well as in an “offsetting” location for the IFC, and when it learned of how many chimpanzees would die as a result of the dam, they asked the government of Guinea to put a pause on their plans for the dam. But by now, the Government of Guinea had already put out a tender for construction of the dam. It was too late. The World Bank decided that to finance the Social and Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) of the dam, but after that, they would cut the project loose. This strategy of funding projects early on, but not maintaining responsibility and accountability later, is becoming increasingly common at the World Bank that reduces their risk, but not those of the project.

The SEIA, not surprisingly, gave a lower estimate for the number of chimpanzees that will be affected by the dam. The study estimates that the habitat of 200-300 chimpanzees will be flooded, although it remarks that in addition, there will be ‘very substantial losses

¹² https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/policies-standards/performance-standards/ps6

of chimpanzees¹³ as a result of the construction of new roads and infrastructure that will increase accessibility to previously remote areas.¹⁴

What the recent SEIA for the Koukoutamba dam does not mention, is the loss of chimpanzees that will result from the warfare that occurs between chimpanzees when they are pushed into each other's habitat. Even when chimpanzees move away from the noise of people and construction, when they enter the territory of another group, deadly fighting will likely occur. An additional critical point is that the recent SEIA does not use methods for counting chimpanzees that are recommended by the IUCN Best Practice Guidelines,¹⁵ and IUCN scientists have confirmed the SEIA estimates are therefore not accurate. Finally, this SEIA covers only the construction of the dam. Associated with the dam will be the additional construction of an extensive network of roads and powerlines. A total of 1,600 km of 225 kV of power-lines will be built across the region as part of the World Bank funded Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du fleuve Gambie (the Gambia River Basin Development Organization - OMVG). That is more than the distance from San Francisco to Denver, Colorado. The goal is to assist electricity trade between the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal. That project will require a separate SEIA and so the death toll of chimpanzees will rise.

On the edge of Koukoutamba village, as we take shade under the trees next to the banana plantation, the farmer speaks of his dreams and aspirations for the future. He points to an area next to the river where he has been digging. His dream is to create a fish farm here, he tells us. He lists the species he hopes to farm here, and how much he thinks he can sell them for in the market. As he talks, his eldest son supervises his little toddler and I can't help wondering what the future will hold for this man and his family?

There is a plethora of evidence that hydroelectric dams are not the solution to poverty, but rather destroy the very resources upon which the rural poor depend. Just over the border in Mali, the Mantali dam is a prime example. Why do we keep making the same mistake, and why are tax payers' money being used to fund these mistakes?

So, for now, the project is continuing unabated. On July 10-11 the OMVS held a meeting to approve the SEIA despite its weaknesses. It was determined that the ESIA was not

¹³ Tractebel, April 2018. Aménagement hydroélectrique de Koukoutamba: Etude d'impact environnemental et social de l'aménagement hydroélectrique de Koukoutamba. Rapport provisoire

¹⁴ [https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Environmental-and-Social-Assessments/Guinea - Boke Mine Rail and Port Project -ESIA Summary.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Environmental-and-Social-Assessments/Guinea_-_Boke_Mine_Rail_and_Port_Project_-_ESIA_Summary.pdf)

¹⁵ <https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/documents/ssc-op-036.pdf>

adequate however, to validate, and they have requested more information. This has provided a brief window of opportunity to reconsider the impacts of this dam.

Just last month,¹⁶ the Guinean government gave the contract for building the dam to Sinohydro – a Chinese owned company that was ineligible for World Bank-financed funding for a period because they had been sanctioned under the Bank's fraud and corruption policy¹⁷. Sinohydro is also the same company that is building a hydroelectric dam in northern Sumatra that scientists believe may wipe out a newly discovered species of Orangutan¹⁸. This company was previously criticized by the United Nations when authorities at the Merowe Dam Sinohydro constructing in Sudan “unexpectedly closed the dam’s gates and began filling its reservoir” without prior warning to the people. More than 100 families were forced to flee their homes.¹⁹

After four days in Koukoutamba, it is a poignant good-bye to the people of this village who we have already grown so fond of, who generously shared their food, home and dreams with us. There is no doubt that there is need for jobs, electricity, schools and healthcare here, but as I think about how their lives are about to change as a result of this dam, I am not convinced they will see any of these benefits.

¹⁶ https://www.seneneews.com/actualites/grosse-nebuleuse-a-omvs-larmp-bloque-un-marche-de-739-millions-de-dollars_236774.html

¹⁷ http://web.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64148989&piPK=64148984&theSitePK=84266&theSitePK=84266&contentMDK=64069844&querycontentMDK=64069700&sup_name=SYNODYDRO&supp_country=

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2018/apr/23/worlds-newest-great-ape-threatened-by-chinese-dam>

¹⁹ <https://www.internationalrivers.org/resources/hundreds-forced-to-flee-homes-as-merowe-dam-reservoir-waters-rise-without-warning-3905>



The future of the children of the Koukoutamba village is uncertain.

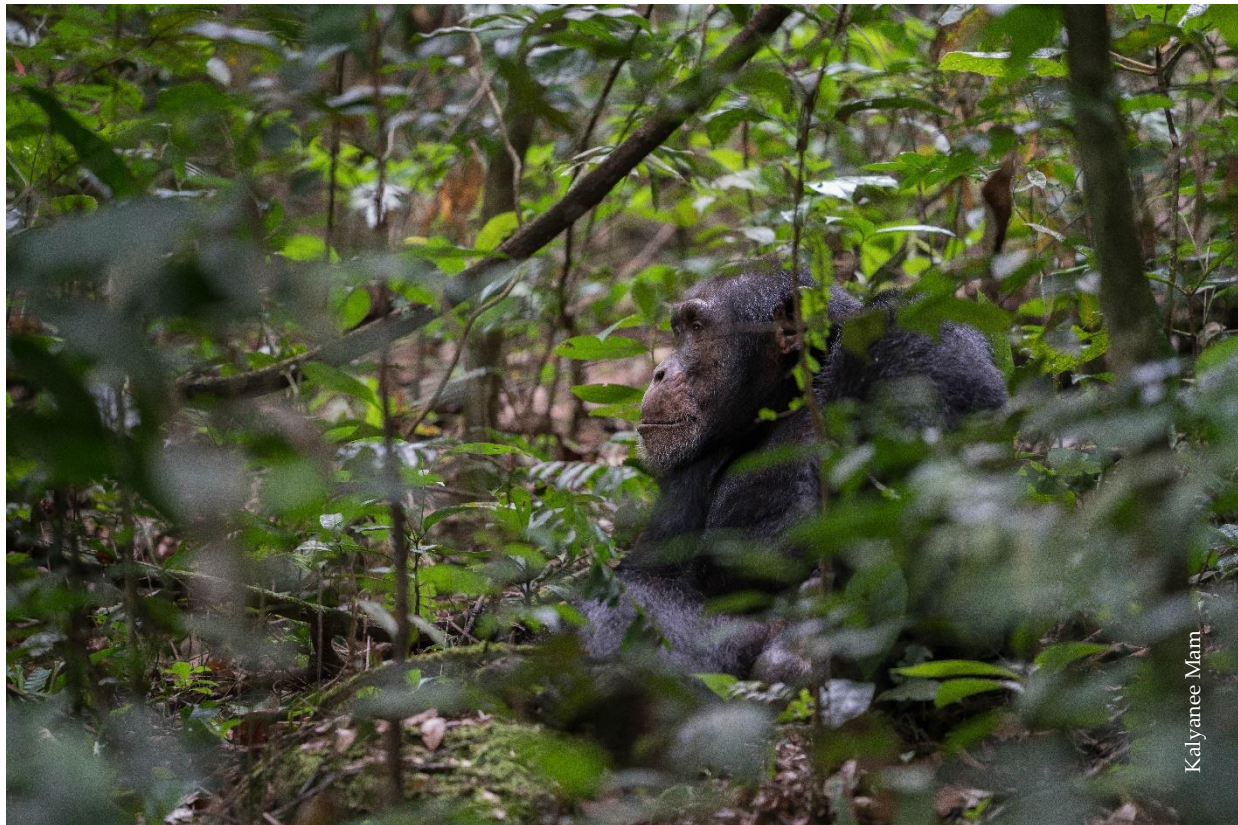
As we continue our journey across Guinea, I can't help but notice that where there are powerlines in the country, they run between pilons, high up over the top of villages, leaving the houses below them in the dark.



Hydroelectric power lines in Guinea run above houses, providing electricity for only 3% of Guinea's rural population.

What can you do?

The Koukoutamba dam has not yet been built. Please visit www.guineachimpanzees.com for information and add your signatures to letters to the Guinean government, the World Bank, and to the OMVS, asking them to consider alternatives to the Koukoutamba dam. Ask them to find a solution to bring electricity to rural communities and not just generating more money for the government from the sale of their natural resources, including hydroelectric power.





Bafing River, Guinea

Rebecca Kormos and Kalyanee Mam recently spent one month in Guinea with local NGO Guinée Écolgie, filming for the National Geographic funded documentary about the chimpanzees of Guinea, the special relationship between the chimpanzees and the people of the Fouta Djallon, as well as the looming threats that risk pushing them to extinction. The views expressed in this article are my own, and do not reflect those of Guinée Écolgie.