

People and chimpanzees of Sierra Leone: conservation and sanctuary activities and people's perceptions

Year: 2008

Place of fieldwork: Sierra Leone

Name: Asami Kabasawa

Key Words: Chimpanzee, Sierra Leone, Sanctuary, Conservation

● Research background

Chimpanzees are an endangered species and their conservation in Africa has been initiated and carried out by experts from developed countries. In order for such conservation activities to be a success the involvement and understanding of local people has been recognized as being of great importance. However, how people perceive chimpanzees and their conservation in habitat countries has not been fully studied. Thus it is important to conduct sociological and anthropological studies to fill the gap between the ideals presented by international conservationists and the realities derived from the culture and tradition of local people in order to make conservation efforts effective.

● Research purpose and aim

This research aims to understand how people perceive chimpanzees and their conservation activities in habitat countries. Since the 1980s, chimpanzee sanctuaries have been established to care for confiscated pet chimpanzees, in response to an increase in the chimpanzee pet trade across Africa. Sierra Leone used to be a major exporter of live chimpanzees to the US, Japan and European countries. By using the sanctuary in Sierra Leone as a focal point, I studied relationships between chimpanzees and people and functions and problems of sanctuaries in general.

● Results and achievements of fieldwork

The study on chimpanzees received at the sanctuary and a literature review revealed how the historical international chimpanzee trade left an influence on people's perceptions of chimpanzees in Sierra Leone even after the international trade was brought under control. Although some conservationists consider sanctuaries as animal welfare facilities, not contributing to conservation efforts, the examination of sanctuaries' functions showed that sanctuaries could play many roles in conservation, especially in the controlling of the illegal pet trade and in terms of education. The interviews with local people showed that their perceptions on chimpanzees are diverse, influenced by religions, traditions and personal experiences.

● Implications and impacts on future research

Because of the lack of information on chimpanzee distribution in Sierra Leone, this study was conducted only in limited areas. Since a chimpanzee population census will be carried out in 2009, this information on distribution will enable more extensive studies in habitat areas in the future. It is important to continue with the study on chimpanzees received at the sanctuary for the purpose of understanding trends in the long-term. Furthermore, it will be interesting to conduct a comparative study with sanctuaries in other countries in order to appreciate

differences in pet trade problems.



A mural informing about the law concerning chimpanzees. Part of the sensitization activities initiated by the sanctuary.



A pet chimpanzee awaiting sale