



Recommended Phased Plan for Repatriation and Rehabilitation of Three Orphaned Western Lowland Gorillas

November 2025

We, representatives of organizations dedicated to great ape conservation, animal welfare, and international environmental law, respectfully propose the following unified pathway regarding the future of three young, confiscated, orphaned Western Lowland Gorillas currently held in similar circumstances in Türkiye, in Nigeria and in the Republic of Congo, for their long-term well-being, for the conservation of western lowland gorillas, and for discouraging illegal and irregular trade in endangered species, in respect of CITES and other international agreements:

Phase 1 – Social Reintegration:

Transfer the male Zeytin (currently in Türkiye) and the female Bili (currently in Nigeria), to the PASA-accredited Tchimpounga Sanctuary in the Republic of Congo, to create a group with the young female named Mozambique (nicknamed “ZZ”), of similar age and who is already under the care of JGI-Congo in Tchimpounga. This step will give all three gorillas the opportunity to form a social bond with other Western Lowland Gorillas, an essential element of their psychological well-being and species-typical development. The Republic of Congo is a Western Lowland Gorilla range state.

We note that the transfer of Zeytin and of Bili to Congo can be organized from Nigeria, should Zeytin be repatriated first to Nigeria as previously agreed in principle. The integration of Zeytin and Bili and their eventual transfer to a PASA-accredited sanctuary in a Western lowland gorilla range state has been the proposed plan since the beginning of discussions between Türkiye and Nigeria. Alternatively, each gorilla could be transferred directly from their current situations to Congo without Zeytin transferring first to Nigeria. There are risks and benefits to both scenarios, but both scenarios can work, so this detail can be decided through further discussions between the three governments. The most important consideration is that all three young gorillas be united as soon as possible.

In either case, care-givers responsible for the care of Zeytin and Bili will be encouraged to accompany them during this important phase of their journey. This will provide important support to the gorillas, and will provide opportunities for powerful media messaging to highlight the case and how the various partners are working together to tackle the international illegal wildlife trade.

Phase 2 – Consolidation and Care:

The formation of the group of three young orphaned gorillas, and their subsequent care and introduction to the natural habitat of the Congo basin forest, will be undertaken at Tchimpounga under the guidance of Dr. Rebeca Atencia and her experienced JGI Congo team. This phase will ensure optimal health oversight and a carefully managed social integration. However, this step must be taken soon, while the gorillas are still young enough to have the highest chance to re-adapt naturally to the wild.

Phase 3 – Rewilding and Return to Freedom:

After the formation of the cohesive group, and a lengthy phase of consolidation and adaptation to natural forest, the three young gorillas will be assessed for their suitability to transition to one of two long-established gorilla reintroduction sites in the Batéké Plateau region of the Republics of Congo and Gabon— where numerous rescued gorillas have already been successfully reintroduced into protected forests within the framework of ongoing partnerships between the governments of Congo and Gabon and The Aspinall Foundation. These forests are continuously monitored and patrolled by trained guards to ensure the safety of the gorillas and other wildlife living within them. This would allow each of these gorillas to live in a social structure, surrounded by their own kind, contributing to the re-establishment of a gorilla population previously lost, and playing their part in restoring a functioning ecosystem.

We believe this proposal aligns fully with:

- **CITES Article VIII** and its provisions for the return of illegally traded specimens to the country of origin or suitable habitat.
- **CITES Resolution 17.8 (Rev. CoP19)** and its statement of principle regarding maximising the conservation value of confiscated live animals, discouraging further illegal or irregular trade in the species, and providing humane solutions.
- **IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations (2013)**, emphasizing welfare, ecological integrity, and long-term sustainability.
- **UNEP-GRASP (Great Apes Survival Partnership)** principles for great ape welfare, rehabilitation, and transboundary cooperation.
- **The Gorilla Agreement of UNEP-CMS (Convention on Migratory Species)** to which Nigeria and the Republic of Congo are both parties, and its provisions for international cooperation and implementation of concerted actions.

We note that this recommendation provides the best possible outcomes from the current situation in terms of respecting the statement of principal of the CITES guidelines for the disposal of confiscated live animals, by maximising the conservation value of these three wild-born Critically Endangered Western Lowland Gorillas, providing each with a humane solution to live in a cohesive group of conspecifics in their natural habitat, and discouraging further illegal or irregular trade in the species. We hope this collaborative proposal can help create a pathway to realising these best possible outcomes.

This proposal has been validated by:

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