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Among African Apes: Stories and Photos from the Field
Christophe Boesch, editor
Martha M. Robbins, editor
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This illuminating collection of essays by field biologists, written from the late ’90s through the mid-2000s, touches frequently on a disturbing albeit expected topic: the great apes’ declining numbers, due to disease transmitted by humans, poaching for the bushmeat trade, and habitat destruction. For example, it “is estimated that between 1998 and 2002, the number of gorillas and chimpanzees in Gabon was reduced by more than half as a result of the combined effects of Ebola and illegal hunting.” But what emerges most vividly is the startlingly violent and competitive nature of chimpanzee and gorilla communities, and in contrast, the gentleness of the matriarchal bonobo communities.

Perhaps most distressing is the ordinariness of infanticide. As dominance is passed from one leader to another in a group, the new dominant male will usually kill any members under a couple years of age so that the females will be able to conceive again, and more of the reigning males' genes will be passed on. In the essay "Keeping it in the Family," researcher Josephine Head describes partially witnessing a conflict among chimps, most of which is going on in the branches of the forest canopy and impossible to see. "The last chimpanzee to descend the tree is an adult female, and it appears as though she was the one under attack." Head is relieved that the female is "not badly injured… . But then the female chimp stops and picks something up, before immediately turning around and heading back …" After she is gone, Head finds beneath the tree "a very small and perfectly formed chimpanzee foot." The female had carried off most of the remains of her murdered infant. For the romantics among us, it is further disturbing to read that an event like this "can actually encourage a female to join and mate with the perpetrators." We learn that infanticide not only occurs within groups, but will be used by adult males in a neighboring community to bring females to their stronger group, where their infants will be safer from infanticide.

Among African Apes raises questions about primate research itself. It can take a few years for researchers to habituate apes to humans so that they can be observed with any regularity. And once habituated, they are more vulnerable to poachers and human diseases. The value of the research lies in deeper understanding of our fellow primates and for population estimates, both of which can be used to help ensure the apes' protection, and seems to clearly outweigh the pitfalls for most of the projects described here. But research undertaken "to develop tourism based on the tracking and viewing of western lowland gorillas" causes one to wonder. It seems far more responsible for tourists to stay home—to let the scientists go out and do the work that these essays make clear is no picnic—and read about the apes in books like this.

Justin Courter