Eastern gorilla on the critically endangered list, pandas vulnerable

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.12.16

HONOLULU, Hawaii — The world's largest living primate has been listed as critically endangered. Now, four of the six great ape species are only one step away from extinction, according to a report released Sunday at the World Conservation Congress in Hawaii.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, cited illegal hunting in downgrading the status, or condition, of the eastern gorilla on its Red List of Endangered Species. The list contains more than 80,000 species, and almost 24,000 of those are threatened with extinction.

"To see the eastern gorilla — one of our closest cousins — slide toward extinction is truly distressing," Inger Andersen, IUCN director general, said in a statement. "Conservation action does work and we have increasing evidence of it. It is our responsibility to enhance our efforts to turn the tide and protect the future of our planet."

The organization said an estimated 5,000 eastern gorillas remain in the wild. That's a decline of about 70 percent over the past 20 years.
The Great Ape Species

Of all the great ape species — the eastern gorilla, western gorilla, Bornean orangutan, Sumatran orangutan, chimpanzee and bonobo — only the chimpanzee and bonobo are not considered critically endangered. They are still listed as endangered.

For the gorillas of the Congo, where the majority of the population lives, conservation will be a struggle because of political instability, said primatologist Russell Mittermeier. He is the executive vice chairman of the Conservation International environmental group and chairman of IUCN’s primates specialist group.

"There are no simple solutions right now, other than a much greater investment in on-the-ground protection until the region stabilizes," Mittermeier said in an email to The Associated Press. He added that once the area becomes safer, "major ecotourism, as is happening in the neighboring countries of Uganda and Rwanda, can take place."

Catherine Novelli is the U.S. undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy and the environment. In an interview, she called the gorilla numbers a man-made tragedy.

Honolulu Conference Unveils New Research

The research by the Wildlife Conservation Society was accepted by the IUCN, which is made up of both private organizations and governments. This week, the IUCN is hosting the World Conservation Congress. More than 9,000 delegates from over 180 countries are attending the conference in Honolulu, including several heads of state.

"Critical endangered status will raise the profile of this gorilla subspecies and bring attention to its plight. It has tended to be the neglected ape in Africa, despite being the largest ape in the world," the study's lead scientist, Andrew Plumptre, said in an email.

The IUCN's Red List is the most comprehensive analysis of endangered species. It guides government policy around the world, said Cristian Samper, president and CEO of the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Other animals on the list fared better than the apes, including the giant panda, which was previously on the endangered list. It is now listed as "vulnerable," or at risk, after conservation efforts helped protect its natural home.

"For over 50 years, the giant panda has been the globe’s most beloved conservation icon," said Marco Lambertini, director general of the environmental group World Wildlife Fund. "Knowing that the panda is now a step farther from extinction is an exciting moment for everyone committed to conserving the world's wildlife."
Threats To Species

Hunting, and the destruction of animals' homes, is taking a toll on animals and plants in a variety of areas.

For example, in Hawaii, about 90 percent of native plants are threatened with extinction. This is due to invasive species like rats, pigs and non-native plants, the IUCN said.

In Africa, the plains zebra population has declined by a quarter since 2002, according to the group's statement.