NEWS RELEASE

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Rwanda conservation effort to link isolated chimpanzees to distant forest

Historic project will create forest corridors to connect small group of chimps in Gishwati Forest Reserve to Nyungwe National Park 30 miles (50 km) away

Des Moines, Iowa, USA – March 19, 2008 – A group of some 15 chimpanzees facing extinction in an isolated pocket of Rwandan rain forest will have a greater range – and, thus, greater chances for survival – thanks to one of Africa's most ambitious forest restoration and ecological research efforts ever. Organizers of the project, named the Rwandan National Conservation Park, said today that a 30-mile (50km) tree corridor will be planted to connect the Gishwati Forest Reserve, the chimpanzees' home range, to Nyungwe National Park.

The Rwandan National Conservation Park is a collaborative effort of the Rwandan government; Great Ape Trust of Iowa, a scientific research facility in Des Moines, Iowa; and Earthpark, a national environmental education center proposed for Pella, Iowa. The project in Gishwati was unveiled at the Clinton Global Initiative last fall by Rwanda President H.E. Paul Kagame and Ted Townsend, founder of Great Ape Trust and Earthpark.

"This is an ambitious plan, but the Gishwati chimpanzees are on the brink of extinction. Every newly planted tree increases their chance of survival by providing additional food, shelter and security from people," said Dr. Benjamin Beck, director of

conservation at Great Ape Trust. “If we direct the reforestation southward, there is the additional advantage of bringing them closer to a larger, more secure population in the Nyungwe National Park in Rwanda and the Kibira National Park in Rwanda, with a combined total of about 800 chimpanzees. Once they make contact, the Gishwati chimpanzees will enjoy a wider pool of prospective mates, and thus can avoid inbreeding.”

The Gishwati Forest, in Rwanda’s Western Province, was deforested in the 1980s by agricultural development and in the 1990s during the resettlement of people following the civil war and genocide. Human encroachment, deforestation, grazing and the introduction of small-scale farming resulted in extensive soil erosion, flooding, landslides and reduced water quality – as well as the isolation of a small population of chimpanzees.

A team from Great Ape Trust and Earthpark toured the Gishwati region in late 2007, hosted by representatives from the Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) and Rwanda National Forestry Authority (NAFA). Meetings with MINITERE, REMA, NAFA, the Rwandan Office for Tourism and National Parks (ORTPN), the National University of Rwanda, the Wildlife Conservation Society and Great Ape Trust, resulted in four goals for the Gishwati project:

- Create Rwanda National Conservation Park, defined as conservation of biodiversity in an extensively degraded landscape, populated with low-income, small-scale agriculturalists.
- Restore ecosystem services in the form of improved water quality, reduced soil erosion and flooding, fewer landslides and increased sequestration of carbon.
- Restore natural biodiversity with special emphasis on chimpanzees as a keystone and flagship species.
- Generate income through ecotourism, investment opportunity and local employment.

“We must of course find ways to adequately and sustainably compensate people whose agricultural productivity is decreased by reforestation,” Beck added. “One answer

will be a new ecotourism destination resulting in employment opportunities as trackers and forest managers."

The next step for the Rwandan National Conservation Park project is to hire a program coordinator. Candidates for the position will be interviewed in Kigali this month by Dr. Beck. Subsequent steps proposed for 2008 include:

- Begin a study of the behavioral ecology of the Gishwati chimpanzee population to determine population size, resource and space use, patterns of social and reproductive behavior, degree of genetic relatedness, patterns of tool use and communication, health and nutritional status and degree of human conflict.
- Expand the existing Gishwati core forest by at least 200 hectares (500 acres)
- Through National University of Rwanda, acquire satellite images and ground mapping information to plan a Gishwati to Nyungwe forest corridor to incorporate Gishwati as a functional component of Nyungwe National Park.
- Create a 'corridor laboratory' in Nyungwe National Park. This pilot forest corridor of 10km (6 miles) would connect the main block of Nyungwe NP to Cyamudongo, an isolated section of forest roughly the same size as Gishwati with a comparable population of chimpanzees. The test corridor will serve as a laboratory in which to study the use of the corridors by chimpanzees.
- Provide community education and economic development programs for those living around the Gishwati Forest Reserve. This would include employment opportunities for trackers for the chimpanzee study, planting and monitoring forest trees and technical support for the development of agricultural cooperatives.
- Restrict deforestation of the existing 10^2km core forest and riverbanks in the Gishwati Forest Reserve.
- Develop socioeconomic study of the human population living in and around Gishwati. Begin negotiations to establish sustainable livelihoods for occupants of land within area of core forest expansion.

Once the second-largest indigenous forest in Rwanda, Gishwati extended 1,000^2 km (100,000 hectares or 250,000 acres) in the early 1900s. By the late 1980s, Gishwati was about one-fourth its original size. Resettlement by refugees following the 1994 genocide reduced the forest to about 6^2 km (600 hectares or 1,500 acres). Reforestation efforts during the past several years have increased Gishwati's forest to approximately 10^2 km (1,000 hectares or 2,500 acres).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, it will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities. Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing a unique educational experience about great apes.

Earthpark will be an icon of ecological literacy and learning to improve the lives of people, species and the environment around the world. This unique learning campus will demonstrate sustainable and restorative solutions to the myriad ecological threats facing humanity, using state-of-the-art educational tools and online communication with schools, communities and government worldwide. Earthpark will include four acres of tropical rainforest, a 600,000-gallon aquarium and more than 1,000 species of plants and small animals in a re-created ecosystem.

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