

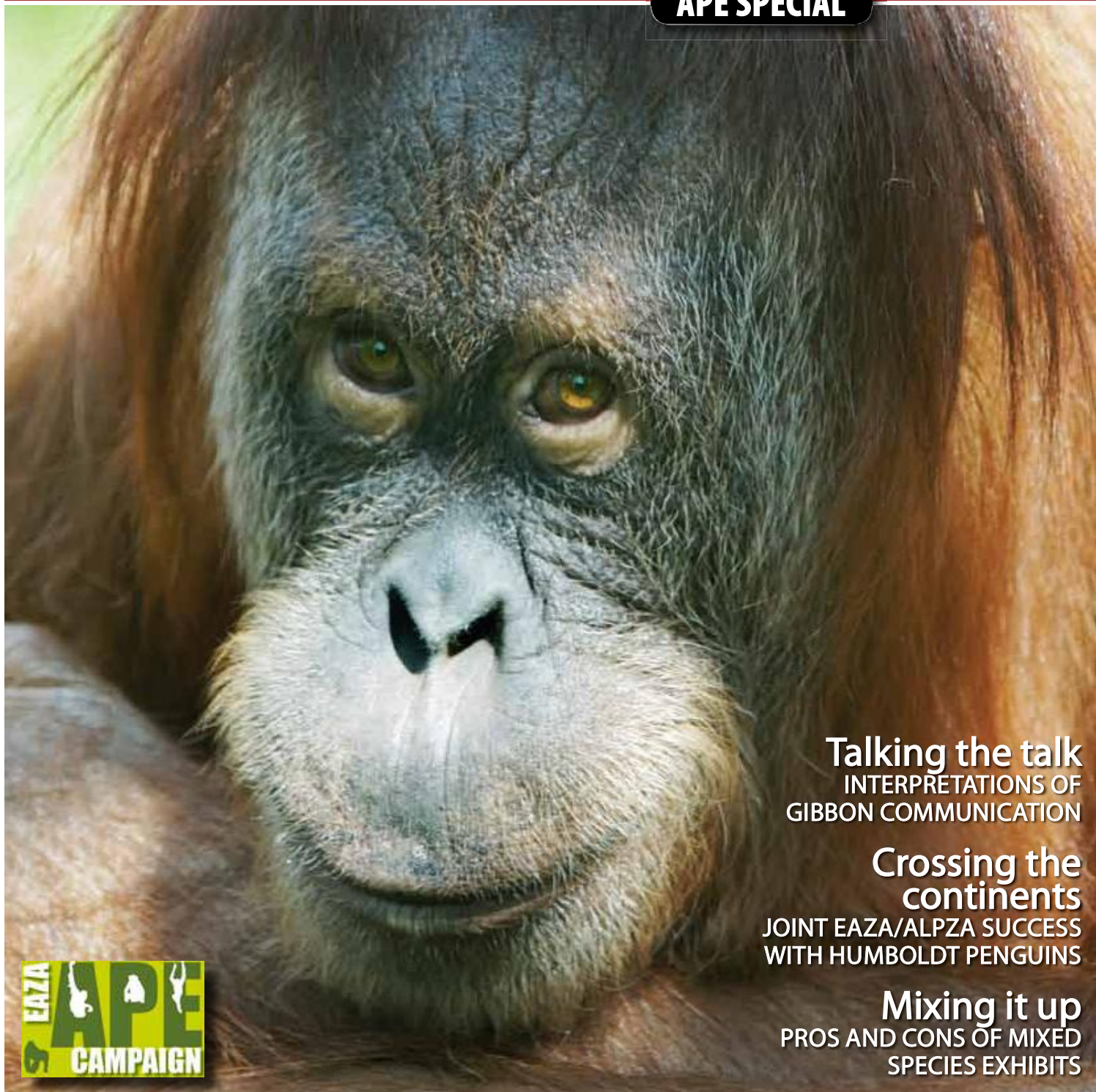
# ZOOQUARIA

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**APE SPECIAL**



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## Face to face

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GORILLAS AND HUMANS

# The human factor

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF GORILLAS HAS REVEALED THAT THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR KEEPERS AND EVEN ZOO VISITORS CAN HAVE AN EFFECT ON THEIR OWN FAMILY DYNAMICS

Professor Andreas Spengler, Wunstorf and Dr Heiner Engel, Hannover Zoo

New discoveries about the mental and social capabilities of the great apes are on the increase. Nonetheless, the individual interactions between the great apes and their keepers, and the effects these have on social behaviour, have not been systematically investigated. This is rather astonishing in light of the knowledge gathered from experience by zoo staff, not to mention common knowledge from pets and circus animals. Consequently, in response to an emergency situation in a gorilla family at Hannover Zoo in 2003, we began external psychological counselling and supervision to change the individual interactions between the apes and the zoo staff.

We originally had a functioning gorilla family including Artis the alpha male, three females and their offspring. They lived in an extensive outdoor enclosure, and in an indoor area at the tropical house. Disaster struck in 2000 when Artis drowned in the moat, an event that destabilised the family dynamic and caused severe tension. We brought in a 10-year-old named Batouri from Melbourne Zoo in September 2001, but he was still learning the basics of social behaviour, and needed to be hand-reared by a keeper for the next two years. During this time, the tension rose. He broke the arm of one of the

youngster, Mambele, and even threw her into the moat from which she was rescued by her mother, Zazie. He also bit another child, Awembe, who then had to be removed. Batouri was incapable of assuming his role as alpha male.

Medical interventions with neuroleptics or benzodiazepines were tried, but failed entirely, and it was up to the keepers to control and separate him when he became aggressive. Breeding was clearly out of the question, and zoo management was under increasing pressure from visitors and the media.

At the request of the zoo, the first author began an external consultation by assuming the role of psychological supervisor, as established in human therapeutic processes. The theoretical framework was one of family therapy. This approach seemed useful because it did not focus on individuals but on interactions and personal relationships.

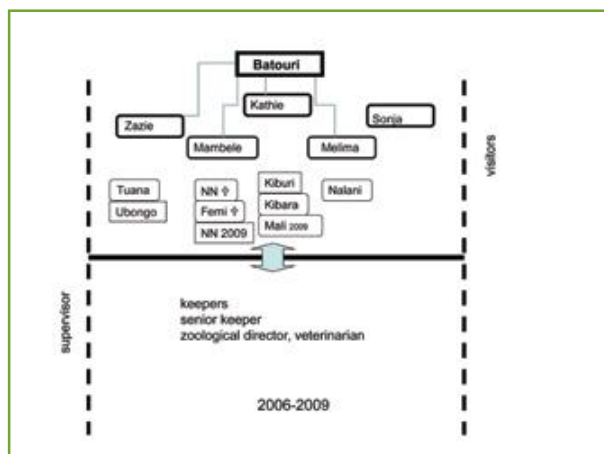
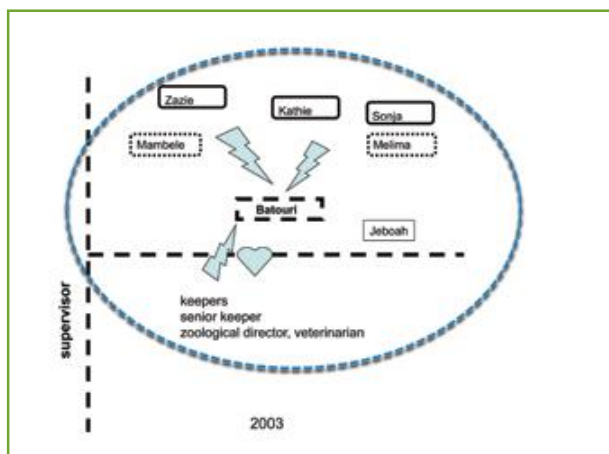
The keepers felt the burden caused by risks and responsibilities. They showed inconsistent attitudes and behaviour towards the apes, and from an outsider's perspective, the key factors seemed to be the gorillas' attachment to keeper team members, and awareness of the human hierarchy, and specific differentiation and attraction between males and females of both humans and gorillas.

From this we developed the idea

of a shared social system, within which personalities from different species experience complex personal relationships: to some extent, a life with 'two cultures' in one social space. Our expectation was that change in the behaviour of the humans would also have an effect on the animals. We tested a sociogram including animals and team-members, and were able to better understand the individual relationships with the apes.

## ALPHA ROLE

The first step was to deliberately assign the role of the alpha male to Batouri, to pay him more attention and to approach him in an explicitly respectful manner. This meant indirectly paying the female gorillas less attention and treating them in a more distant manner. This turned out to be a decisive factor. Within three or four weeks Batouri was showing a clear change in his behaviour. He was a group member now, observing and controlling the family. He modulated his dominance behaviour, and the family responded by becoming markedly more relaxed. The females Kathie and Zazie presented themselves to Batouri in 2004 and 2005, and two young were born. Between 2006 and 2008 another four children were born to Zazie and Kathie, and then to their daughters







Mambele and Melima as well, one of which was stillborn. These were all natural births in the family, as Batouri steadily matured into a handsome and imposing silverback. In 2009, two more children were born, and today the group has seven healthy youngsters.

#### HURDLES

There were relapses on route to this successful outcome, however. Once or twice a year we observed outbursts of rage from Batouri, who would seize his own young and throw them aside, where they would be rescued by the females. In 2008, Mambele's youngest baby was often left lying around and ignored by her, but carried by her elder siblings. In October, Batouri suddenly hurled the baby against a rock wall. It was injured, fell ill and succumbed to subsequent infection some days later.

Other aspects came to light during this period, one of which was particularly interesting. Interaction with visitors who spend long periods at

the gorilla enclosure was found to be a relevant source of stress and disturbed behaviour for Batouri, who could recognise visitors individually. In 2005 one female visitor regularly provoked Batouri to aggression. When we spoke to her she confirmed her personal antipathy to Batouri: out of sympathy for the female gorillas, she greeted only them and paid him no attention. We convinced her to greet Batouri first whenever she came, and the tension caused by her appearance evaporated.

Ultimately, we could not offer an explanation for Batouri's aggressive acts against babies. Normally infanticide is directed against the children of rivals. It seems possible that an unspecific effect came from the surroundings, from overstimulation and limited territory. Actually, he reacted aggressively to the appearance of a new, blonde trainee. His human nurse had been blond, so we speculate that his problematic early development could play a specific role.

We conclude with the proposition that psychological counselling and external systemic supervision are appropriate in this field and should continue to be tested in practice. In our project, the unexpectedly strong influence of human beings became clear. Our hypothesis of 'a system in two cultures' was confirmed. In this, the knowledge and experience of the keepers is the essential resource. Our 'hands-off' philosophy of keeping the apes was confirmed effective, but it was extended by adopting a mental attitude of greater emotional distance by the keepers. Today, we see a functioning gorilla family life.

There are new tasks for visitor management, and in public relations. Breeding success and undisturbed animal behaviour must be considered in more than only terms of technical and veterinary husbandry regimes. Sustained success will not be possible in a socially incompetent or dysfunctional animal family.