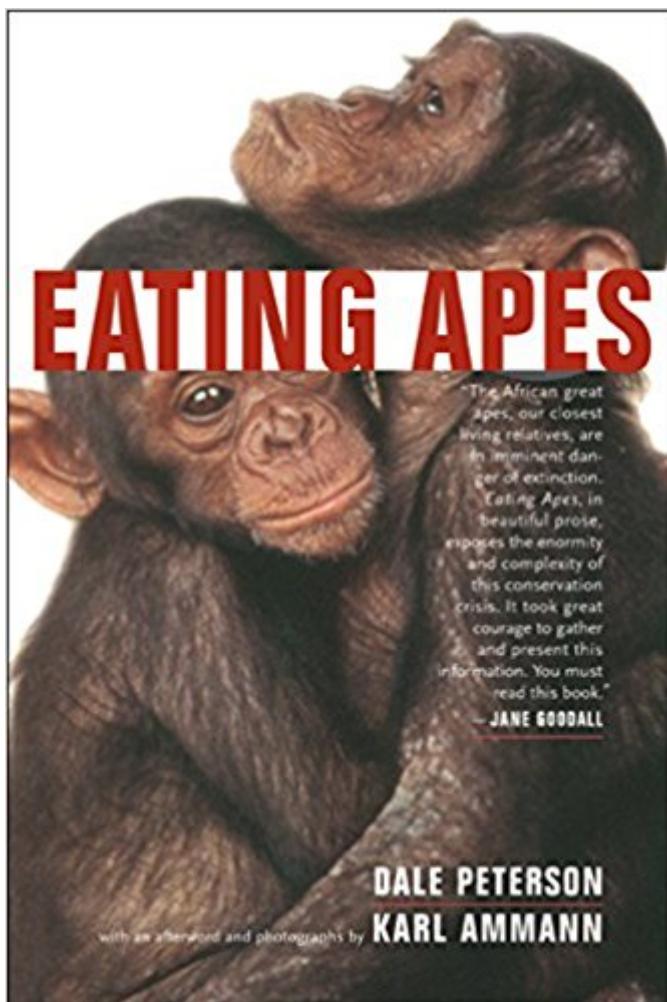


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Eating Apes (California Studies In Food And Culture)



Synopsis

Eating Apes is an eloquent book about a disturbing secret: the looming extinction of humanity's closest relatives, the African great apes—chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas. Dale Peterson's impassioned exposé details how, with the unprecedented opening of African forests by European and Asian logging companies, the traditional consumption of wild animal meat in Central Africa has suddenly exploded in scope and impact, moving from what was recently a subsistence activity to an enormous and completely unsustainable commercial enterprise. Although the three African great apes account for only about one percent of the commercial bush meat trade, today's rate of slaughter could bring about their extinction in the next few decades. Supported by compelling color photographs by award-winning photographer Karl Ammann, Eating Apes documents the when, where, how, and why of this rapidly accelerating disaster. Eating Apes persuasively argues that the American conservation media have failed to report the ongoing collapse of the ape population. In bringing the facts of this crisis and these impending extinctions into a single, accessible book, Peterson takes us one step closer to averting one of the most disturbing threats to our closest relatives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This articulate study maintains that the increasing human consumption of apes and other primates in Central and Western Africa poses a serious threat to biodiversity, public health and sustainable

development, as well as raising a considerable moral question: is it right to eat animals who share between 96% and 99% of our DNA? It's worth noting that Peterson, who has written extensively on primates, is neither a simple conservationist nor an animal rights advocate. "People hunt and eat wild animals for protein all over the globe," he acknowledges. "So there is nothing special about the fact that people living in and near forests of West and Central Africa happen to eat wild animal meat." Peterson (Storyville, USA) is sincerely curious about all aspects of "ape-eating," interviewing hunters, butchers and consumers to learn about hunting, transporting and slaughtering techniques, as well as preparation and taste. Readers learn, for example, how to make a good gorilla plantain and that "[g]orilla meat is sweet, very sweet." This information is presented with compelling evidence indicating that some human blood viruses, including HIV-1, were likely caused by ape blood coming into human contact; that the tropical logging industry, feeding Asian and European demand, is directly responsible for the tremendous increase in demand for bushmeat and the destruction of primates' natural habitat; and that apes are drawing closer to extinction. Peterson is never shrill, and rarely does his tone become emotional; he does not overwhelm readers with evidence, yet his evidence is extensive. Ammann's chilling photographs (e.g., "Gorilla head in a kitchen") contribute vastly to this equally distressing and thought-provoking survey. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Riveting . . . Eating Apes addresses compelling material, and deserves a wide public." -- Washington Post "The author argues persuasively that conservationists have failed to report the demise of Africa's great apes, humanity's closest relatives." -- Atlanta Journal Constitution "The honesty of the text, which points the finger of culpability directly at some of the world's largest conservation organizations and logging consortiums, is both gutsy and, given the extremely detailed notes at the end of the book, accurate. And the photographs. . . snuff out any possibility of denial and leave nothing but the honest, brutal, truth on the page." --Hope Walker, Primates On-line -- Review

I have been seeing references to the African trade in wild meat, including primates, for a couple of years now--Jane Goodall mentions it in her talks--but searched unsuccessfully for an intelligent guide to the issue. Now it's here, and it's clear that this subject is urgent, appalling, and very very complex. Dale Peterson's gift is to explain the crisis in accessible terms, dispassionately (though the problem arouses passions across the political spectrum), with a wealth of information, and in a lucid, utterly compelling manner. With Karl Ammann, who took the riveting photgraphs, Peterson has

visited the meat markets where ape meat is sold as exotic--not subsistence--food, tracked the loggers whose commercial enterprises have opened up the forests to hunters on a scale heretofore unimagined and completely unsustainable, and walked into hunting camps and interviewed the hunters themselves. The story of one of these men, Joseph Melloh, gives the book a human face and a narrative frame; one of the most powerful effects of this study of cultural and political conflict is that it reads like a novel, with this man at its heart, and we see the issues through African eyes--no First World condescension to Third World problems. The book also shows the full range of the catastrophe--environmental, economic, political, social, and ethical--while at the same time showing how readers can make a difference through a few simple steps, by working to change public opinion and shift economic goals. The great apes are humans' closest relatives, and we are destroying them. This book faces a crisis that most people are hardly aware of, and explains it in a way that makes change thinkable and possible. ...

What animals we eat are selected by what culture we grow up in. Distant societies think nothing of eating dogs. Some closer ones think eating horse is completely acceptable. Then there are frogs, snakes, and insect larvae. It is all a matter of getting enough protein. One man's protein is another man's atrocity. Americans are used to eating meat they find in Styrofoam trays wrapped in plastic, but the indigenous peoples of central Africa have always eaten the animals living around them: elephants, antelopes, porcupines, rodents, and so on. They don't mind a stew of gorilla or a chimp's sirloin, and what of it? It's the way they have always done things. Tribal languages, in fact, often use the same word for wild animal as they do for meat. The world, however, is not the way it always was, and a shocking book, *Eating Apes* (University of California Press) by Dale Peterson, shows that apes on the menu is not something the world ought to continue to accept. We ourselves are members of the tribe of great apes; chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans are on the branch with us. But if African tribes don't share our scientific view or our squeamishness, traditional hunters, in predation balance over the centuries, surely are not going to do lasting harm. Traditional hunting, however, is no longer traditional. There has been an invasion from outside the continent by logging companies, making huge profits from our demand for hardwoods. The companies have lots of workers, many of them from the region, and all the workers have to be fed. Hunters, many of whom are also from the region, are hired to bring in the protein. Bows, arrows, and nets have given way to the far more efficient and deadly wire snares and automatic rifles and shotguns. Perhaps if greater firepower were the only threat to our primate cousins, they could still make it. But we are destroying their habitat (again, mostly by logging), and primates will suffer before other species

because of their slow rate of reproduction. There are plenty of species headed toward extinction, but few because we are eating them, and none so close to us evolutionarily. In addition, butchering the apes may be the way humans got HIV and Ebola viruses. It may well be that you haven't heard of the problem of eating apes into extinction because the conservation organizations are keeping quiet about such a downer of a message, and because they are, believe it or not, in partnership with the loggers. What will be needed is the courage to challenge cultural convictions. It is possible for the West to value (or at least claim to value) sensitivity to other cultures, but in the case of eating apes, it will have to impose scientific knowledge of close kinship, risk of disease, and impending loss of primates to get the native cultures to change. It may even be possible within the corporate culture, which mines habitats to get at profits, to insist not just on sustainable development (a nebulous idea the logging companies pay lip service to) but to take on a wider view of environmental improvement. You can figure up the odds of occurrence of these cultural changes, and especially if you look at our past record, you will not be optimistic. Peterson includes an appendix of what you, and what conservation organizations, can do; he obviously is not giving up hope. Perhaps it is a sign of hope that his reasonable and dispassionate account of this disaster will start many people thinking about the previously covert problem of the loss of the apes. Nevertheless, this is a profoundly disturbing and sad book, and will not be forgotten by those who can get through it.

As a primatology student, I am often asked by friends, with a hopeful look in their eyes, if I believe in the existence of Bigfoot, a giant ape dwelling in the forests of the American Northwest. I hate to do it, but I always have to rain on the parade and say there is no compelling evidence for such a creature. I then explain to them that there actually is a Bigfoot, and a Littlefoot as well, living today, but they do not live in America. My friends get excited and ask me where...but their interest rapidly diminishes when I tell them they are the great apes of Africa and Southeast Asia: the gorilla (Bigfoot) and the chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans (Littlefeet). These are beings with self awareness and complex social lives who use tools, eat medicinal plants and pass their traditions down from generation to generation. I feel that we are dulled by familiarity into not realizing how very lucky we are that these amazing, sentient cousins of ours still share the world with us in their tropical strongholds...and hence are not doing what we ought to to prevent their ongoing slaughter. If the current administration proposed clear-cutting the forest in which the (mythical) Sasquatch lived, I have no doubt that thousands of people would rush to that forest and chain themselves to trees, do whatever it took, to save them. And yet the great apes are being eliminated with nary a hand raised in protest. "Eating Apes" describes with shocking clarity the astonishing failure of the

conservation community to mobilize the world to save our closest cousins. The message of the impassioned text, backed up by Karl Ammann's brutally riveting photographs, is: enough of the feel-good "win some small battles while losing the war (but publicize the hell out of the small wins)" mentality. Action is called for, and now. Anyone who has ever been enchanted by the grandeur of African wild places and the Bigfoots and Littlefoots who live in them should read this book now. Time is running out.

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