Primatologists warn that extinction of the Great Apes – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans – threatens to become a reality within just a few human generations. The causes are numerous and complex. At current rates of deforestation in the tropics, the United Nations Environment Programme estimates that chimpanzee, gorilla, and bonobo habitat in Africa will have been reduced from its current levels by ninety per cent or more over the next twenty years. The estimate for the Asian Orangutan habitat is even worse; by 2030 their forest world will be essentially gone. Most of us, often far removed from the shrinking habitat of our Great Ape relatives, bear some responsibility.

Intrigued by a review article about the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project (MGVP) (www.gorilladoctors.org) which was unearthed during a long overdue desk tidying effort, I resolved to contact the author. The result of that conversation was a gorilla tracking expedition, an African odyssey that included teaching veterinary students in Uganda, honing the ophthalmic skills of the Gorilla Doctors at their base in Musanze, Rwanda, and tracking chimpanzees along with Dr. David Ramsey of the Animal Ophthalmology Centre in Michigan. Dr. Ramsey and I returned home determined to inspire our colleagues to become passionate about improving the health of Great Ape populations, the communities that surround them, and the ecosystem that we share.

A series of ten Continuing Education meetings followed in 2012. Each of the ophthalmology seminars were attended by over 600 veterinarians and their staff and began with an overview of the plight of the 850 critically endangered Mountain Gorillas remaining in the wild. Dubbed the “Gorilla Talks”, interest in the primer on gorilla conservation eventually eclipsed the ophthalmology topic of the evening! Eager to channel that interest into tangible support, and determined to enlist our colleagues to help make a difference, we settled on the creation of Docs4GreatApes (www.Docs4GreatApes.org).

Docs4GreatApes’ inaugural event will be a benefit conference at Sunningdale Golf & Country Club in London, Ontario on October 26, 2013. The conference offers an inspiring CE lineup including: Dr. Joane Parent, a veterinary neurologist from Quebec, and veterinary ophthalmologists Drs. David Ramsey and (myself) Rick Quinn. In keeping with the “One Health Concept”, Dr. Mamta Gautam, an internationally recognized speaker and psychiatrist from Ottawa whose practice is entirely physicians, will provide psychiatric enlightenment to help you understand yourself. The conference will end with a keynote address (and is open to the public!) on great ape conservation by Dr. Mike Cranfield, the Director of the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project (MGVP) and the Chief Veterinarian at the Maryland Zoo. This lecture, the first of an annual series, will help increase awareness of the issues facing critically endangered species and their habitat. All proceeds will be used to support the work of the MGVP.

International organizations such as the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project and The Jane Goodall Institute have made remarkable progress with “made in Africa” community-centered initiatives. Central to their success has been the One Health concept, acknowledging the link between the health and survival of the endangered species to the health of the human population surrounding them, and to the habitat that they share. In order to connect people, ideas, and resources to deliver medical education to build veterinary and human healthcare capacity, Docs4GreatApes has established a working group with the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry...
at the University of Western Ontario. Canadian internal medicine, family medicine, and psychiatry residents, sponsored by Docs4GreatApes, may soon travel to small community hospitals in Rwanda as part of their training experience and share their medical education techniques with tomorrow’s educators.

The need is urgent and we all bear some responsibility. Educate yourself about what impacts Great Ape populations including coltan mining for cell phone batteries, the nearly 50 billion pairs of chopsticks produced annually in China, palm oil, the bushmeat trade, and ecotourism, as well as the effects of Ebola Virus, poverty, and political instability. Paraphrasing Jane Goodall from a recent lecture in Toronto: “Make the world a better place for people, other animals, and for the planet that we all share. Within young people, the resilience of Nature, and the indomitable human spirit I find reason for hope. It is the little things that we do each day that matter as we move towards a better world”. One person can make a difference. If you would like to learn more, Docs4GreatApes offers you the chance to participate in inspiring change.

Dr. Quinn practices veterinary ophthalmology full time just outside of London, Ontario. He has taught ophthalmology on a volunteer basis in several countries, including three trips to Africa. While he and Dr. Ramsey continue to consult on eye cases for their colleagues in Africa, “Docs4GreatApes” has submitted an application to the Canada Revenue Agency for status as a charitable organization and for federal not-for-profit incorporation.

If you would like to learn more about Docs4GreatApes, Dr. Quinn can be reached at info@docs4greatapes.org

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