

UP vets assist chimp sanctuary in the DRC

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University of Pretoria (UP) veterinary ophthalmologist, Dr Izak Venter, accompanied by Dr Keri-Lee Dobbie, a veterinary surgeon and resident in ophthalmology, recently travelled to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to examine a chimpanzee at the JACK Sanctuary for chimpanzees.



Dr Keri-Lee Dobbie (veterinary ophthalmology resident), Dr Rebecca (medical ophthalmologist), Dr Izak Venter (specialist veterinary ophthalmologist)

Dr Venter, a senior lecturer in the Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies at UP's Faculty of Veterinary Science (and co-owner of the Johannesburg and Cape Animal Eye hospitals), and Dr Dobbie, an MMedVet postgraduate student in the same department, travelled to the DRC, after being invited by the Jeunes Animaux Confisques Au Katanga (JACK) Sanctuary in Lubumbashi to evaluate Doguy, a 13-year-old male chimpanzee.



Dr Dobbie said: “JACK is home to confiscated chimpanzees that have been orphaned owing to, among others, habitat destruction, disease and poaching for bush meat, as well as for the illegal pet trade.” It was founded and is run by primate lovers, Franck and Roxane Chanterreau, and it’s a member of the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance.

According to Dr Venter: “JACK reached out to us in 2018 as Doguy had only one remaining eye, which appeared to be uncomfortable and there was concern about vision loss and possible cataract formation.” Doguy’s right eye was removed a number of years ago, owing to severe end-stage lens-induced uveitis, secondary to a hypermature cataract, with retinal detachment and secondary glaucoma, resulting in a painful, blind eye.

There are only four registered specialist veterinary ophthalmologists in Africa, all UP-trained, while Dr Venter has the most experience with primate ophthalmic surgery.

Armed with specialist ophthalmic equipment, Dr Venter and Dr Dobbie arrived in the DRC to examine Doguy. “He had good visual acuity, as he could reach out for individual peanuts with great accuracy despite not having stereopsis (depth perception), because he had only one eye,” according to Dr Venter. The next day, Doguy was immobilised and placed under general anaesthetic to facilitate a complete ophthalmic examination at the Lubumbashi Zoo Veterinary Clinic. The two UP vets were joined by Congolese veterinary colleagues and the medical ophthalmologist who had previously examined and treated Doguy.

“Upon examination, Doguy was diagnosed with mild, likely non-progressive, post-traumatic corneal degeneration in the left eye. There were no signs of cataract formation or ocular inflammation,” said Dr Venter, while no treatment was required.

Furthermore, Doguy’s retinal function was also tested and found to be normal. “This was wonderful news and very comforting for Roxane and Franck to finally have a definitive diagnosis and good prognosis for vision and ocular comfort for Doguy. We feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to help such a marvellous, endangered animal, and we are humbled by the incredible commitment, dedication and hard work that Franck and Roxane put into keeping the sanctuary running each and every day,” said Dr Dobbie.

Dr Venter is credited with performing the world's first ever cataract surgery on an orang-utan in 2007 in Borneo, while Dr Dobbie is doing her Master's of Veterinary Medicine with her research dissertation focusing on ophthalmic findings in chimpanzees.



JACK was founded 13 years ago, and not only does it provide a home to 35 orphaned chimpanzees, but it has also managed to stop all illegal trade of apes through Lubumbashi, the second biggest city in the DRC. It is an independent, self-funded NGO in Lubumbashi, DRC that is in need of your support. For more information click on <http://www.jacksanctuary.org/>

This is not the first time UP vets have been called on to help animals in distress overseas. In October last year, Prof Gerhard Steenkamp and Dr Adrian Tordiffe drew international attention when they performed intricate surgery to remove an infected tusk from Grand the elephant, in the former Soviet republic of Georgia.