

*Catalyst Profile*  
**David Morgan**

On the southern end of the Nouabale-Ndoki National Park in Central Africa, there is a 100-square-mile stretch of lowland forest. This is the Goualougo Triangle: a preserved habitat harboring endangered species of elephants, gorillas, and chimpanzees. It is also the office of David Morgan, the WCU alumnus of 1992, who became a turned-wildlife biologist.

Though the woodland is home to rare floras indigenous to the Congo Basin, for Morgan it has always been about the apes. Back in the late 1980s, when he first arrived in Cullowhee, he knew that he wanted to conduct research on the species.

“This was a rather narrow objective, particularly considering I was only an undergraduate,” said Morgan, now a world-renowned conservationist.

Despite the loftiness of his goals, the freshman dove headfirst into biology courses. He was first exposed to research projects focusing on invertebrates such as coral reefs and trap door spiders. During his junior year, Morgan then began collaborating with Hal Herzog, a professor of psychology with a particular interest in animal ethics.

The duo, a chimpanzee man and a serpent guy, spent summers analyzing the anti-predator behavior in snakes. In pursuit of research, they spoke with the foremost experts in snake behavior and graduate students across the country.

For his senior thesis, Morgan observed the interaction between garters and rattlesnakes at a small, roadside zoo in Maggie Valley. While the “abysmal study design” caused for “unpublishable” results, it allowed the former Catamount to develop an appreciation for other fields of scientific inquiry. Plus, Morgan was hooked on behavioral research from that point on.

“The firsthand experience gained at that time has been invaluable to me and my career as a researcher and field primatologist,” said Morgan.

Soon after bidding farewell to mentors Herzog and Fred Coyle, a retired professor of biology with an interest in all-things arachnid, Morgan found work at numerous zoological institutions including the Smithsonian Institute’s National Zoo and Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida.

Still, there was his pipedream, and in 1997, with hopes of getting closer to great apes in the field, he took a research assistantship with the Mbeli Bai Gorilla Project.

Three years later, while attending Cambridge University, Morgan began a study of chimpanzees in the old growth forests of the Goualougo Triangle. His investigation of the “social structure, spatial distribution and feeding ecology” of the ecosystem would soon evolve into the Goualougo Triangle Ape Project. The conversation program, founded in

1999, aims at measuring the effects of human activity on the western lowland gorilla and the central subspecies of chimpanzee.

“This remains one of the most remote and pristine forests in all Central Africa,” said Morgan of the triangle, which is often referred to as the “Last Eden.” “It continues to be a site where new discoveries in ape ecology and behavior are uncovered.”

Morgan’s latest research focuses on the impacts of both mechanized logging and the repeated outbreaks of Ebola hemorrhagic fever. Accompanied by his wife, Crickette Sanz, the project also successfully lobbied the Congolese government, turning the unexploited “enclave of forest” into a World Heritage Site. Now protected from hunters and timber barons, the move was a “landmark decision for conservation and great ape research.”

“I would never have imagined I would continue on a trajectory that would have me presenting research or lecturing on a weekly basis or annually submitting roughly 15 proposals to various funding agencies,” said Morgan, reflecting on his career. “I will always be grateful to those at WCU who encouraged me to pursue my interest and not to be afraid to take risks in doing so.”