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26 March 2001 : Open Letter to the Information Technology and Mining Industries

I write to draw your attention to an unfolding environmental crisis, which is being intensified by the growth in the market for computers and mobile phones. The demand for tiny tantalum capacitors, which withstand the heat of ever-faster computers and ever-smaller mobile phones, is accelerating the extinction of the eastern lowland gorilla.

Tantalum is made from columbite/tantalite ore, or coltan, which is found only in a handful of places in the world. Kahuzi Biega National Park in eastern Congo, a World Heritage Site and the only remaining eastern lowland gorilla habitat, holds some of the world's most valuable coltan and as much as 15% of the world's total deposits. The worldwide market for tantalum has been increasing rapidly. In 1988 5 billion units were mined. In 1998 15 billion units were mined. In 2000 25 billion units were mined.

Last year increased global demand for mobile phones and rumours of a tantalum shortage sent the price rocketing from \$10 per pound to \$80 per pound. As a result, peasant miners and mining companies have now taken over Kahuzi Biega and their presence threatens to finally exterminate the few remaining gorillas and elephant that have managed to survive years of war and an escalating bushmeat trade.

Guy Debonnet, who manages a German-sponsored project at Kahuzi Biega, reported last week that foreign concerns are planning the systematic exploitation of coltan "bang in the middle of the park" and have earmarked a quarry soon to be sited in Kakamba. He explained that as many as 10,000 people are in the park mining for coltan and they are feeding on meat from gorillas, elephants and chimpanzees. The local authorities levy taxes on coltan and are encouraging people to go into the park. "It is all too clear that the mining of coltan is leading to the extermination of the gorillas," he said.

This is as serious a situation as gorillas have ever faced. There were 8000 eastern lowland gorillas in Kahuzi Biega National Park - half a million hectares of forest on the western banks of Lake Kivu - until war engulfed the region. Last year we reported on the bushmeat crises in Kahuzi Biega as one of the worst wildlife disasters on record. Although rangers have regained control of only 10% of the park they estimate the gorilla population, now being hunted by the multitude of coltan miners in the park, has dropped to under 1000.

The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund is calling on the IT and mining industries to act. Tantalum from eastern Congo can be identified. It is low in radioactive isotopes and as a result more valuable. With a little research it should be possible to tag coltan from eastern Congo and influence those buying ore in central Africa to consider the environmental issues and what can be done. It is our belief that, once aware of the facts, the IT and mining industries will not stand for the plunder of a World Heritage Site and find a solution.

The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund continues to examine the facts and consult all those along the tantalum route from the peasant miners right back to the computer and mobile phone manufacturers, to ensure everyone is aware of the impact the export of coltan from Kahuzi Biega is having on this habitat of outstanding universal value. We are asking the participants to examine the issue and take action.

Thank you for your interest and concern. Please make others in your industry aware.

Yours faithfully,

Greg Cummings
Director, DFGF Europe