

BUTCHERED IN AFRICA.....ON SALE IN BRITAIN

The 'bushmeat' trade is sickening – and now experts fear it is spreading a new Aids-like killer virus

Special Report by Sue Reid

The chimpanzee stretches out a hand as though begging for life, as the hunters corner her in the remote Cameroon rainforest. One blast from the powerful shotgun and it's all over. The animal is butchered where she falls and bungled unceremoniously into a canvas bag.

Within days, her bloodied, dismembered body will be smuggled across the world to be sold illegally from the back of a white van parked in a London back street. The foetus she carried will be smoked before appearing on the menu of a West African restaurant in Brussels. The price of feasting on the unborn chimp? At least £150.

Monkeys, gorillas and chimpanzees are now considered such a delicacy that a single ape steak sells for more than £20 on the thriving and secretive bushmeat black markets of Hackney, Brixton, Newcastle and Nottingham.

Recently, I heard of bushmeat being sold outside a church used by African expatriates in one Midlands town. The trade set up a stall to catch the worshippers as they left the early evening service. In the course of half an hour, hundreds of £10 notes were handed over in exchange for six-inch by six-inch packages of meat wrapped in clingfilm and said to contain the body parts of Ghanaian monkeys and an African rat called the grasscutter. The queue of eager shoppers wound down the road and round the corner.

Thousands of pounds worth of bushmeat is secretly coming into this country every year. Clive Lawrence, a 49 year old food logistics expert and former consultant at Heathrow Airport, told the Mail. 'I have watched the couriers come off the planes from Africa, walk into Terminal Three and pick up their suitcases full of raw or smoked animals from the bush. Sometimes there is blood leaking from their cases on to the carousels. This is organised crime. It is no different to the drugs trade. The monkey, the gorilla, the chimp, or the baboon will end up on the dinner table of someone with money. Yet the consequences to human health are enormous'.

The horrific dangers of the bushmeat trade have been placed in sharp focus by the discovery that a virus similar to HIV, the cause of Aids, has already jumped species from apes to humans.

Dr Glyn Davies, director of conservation at the London Zoological Society, has confirmed the new virus has been found in the pygmy hunters of Cameroon, who kill, butcher and eat wild apes. The hunters, who have been isolated in the jungle, for thousands of years, are now integrating into the towns of 21st-century Africa with all the modern temptations that brings – including promiscuity and prostitution. As a result, many experts believe it will only be a matter of time before the new virus infects the urban population of Africa and then the rest of

the world – just as HIV did. No one knows what lies ahead, but the consequences are potentially catastrophic.

Dr Nathan Wolfe, professor of public health at America's prestigious Johns Hopkins University, who led the team of scientists that made the discovery, explained: 'We have found a retro-virus which is the same family as HIV in a number of the hunters. This is an area of the world that HIV came from and bushmeat is the most likely source of HIV in the human population'. The Cameroon discovery does indeed have chilling echoes of the past. It is believed that HIV emerged in this part of the world in the early part of the last century and crossed from ape to pygmy hunter as he butchered or ate chimpanzee meat. Over time, HIV adapted to its human host and then spread through sexual contact – slowly at first and then faster as Africa opened up and transport improved, triggering the global pandemic of today.

This apocalyptic message must be taken seriously

'We know that retro-viruses have the potential to spread globally because that is what happened to the HIV virus', says Wolfe. What we don't know is whether the new virus can do that. But we fail to examine this issue at our peril'. Dr Wolfe's message is apocalyptic. And it must be taken seriously, for it comes after years of extensive research. The scientists examined the blood of more than 1,000 pygmy hunters to find that most are infected by the Simian Foamy Virus (SFV).

Humans are believed to contract the virus by exposure to the blood and body fluids of wild apes while killing and butchering them – or by eating them.

So it follows that the virus is almost certainly present in the illegal bushmeat being sold in Britain. No one knows what the long term effect of the virus is on human health, but the potential danger is here. Now.

To put this finding in perspective, we must go back and examine what is fuelling the booming bushmeat trade in Africa and the cities of Europe. In the last century the world population of primates, the closest biological relatives of man, has been reduced by 90 per cent from two-and-a-half million to just 250,000, because of hunting by humans. Gorillas and chimpanzees, a favourite for the bushmeat cooking pot, face extinction within a decade. Conservationists say that 10 per cent of the planet's 608 primate species are now in danger of being wiped out completely.

'If the levels of hunting are allowed to continue, man will literally eat the Great Apes of Africa to extinction' says Jonathan Owen, of the London based World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA)

Only a year ago the disappearance of a species of primate during the past 100 years was reported when the last Miss Waldron's red colobus monkey – traditionally hunted for its distinctively-flavoured meat – died in West Africa. Nowhere does the scale of baboon, gorilla and chimpanzee meat take place more openly than on the dusty, dirty streets of impoverished Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon.

Every day a train from the forests arrives at the city's main terminal and the trader's jump out with their bags containing ape, monkey, porcupine and elephant meat, and even the odd panther. There is no shortage of takers. Four smoked monkeys sell for £2.50. A couple of

baby gorillas will fetch £100; their severed hands are on offer for £1 each – the weekly wage of many in Cameroon – and are considered a particular culinary delight.

One conservationist told the Mail that he recently saw the body of a freshly slaughtered baboon being traded in the Yaounde backstreets. It was sold for little more than £40. In most African countries, the killing and selling of chimpanzees or gorillas for food is illegal. But many public health and wildlife officials turn a blind eye to a trade that is reaping poverty-stricken citizens a fortune. Gorilla is the most popular meat because of its sweetness. It is often turned in pepe soup, a hot chilli concoction that is believed by many Africans to make the drinker more agile and cunning. Chimpanzee has a distinctively strong smell, but still sells well. The apes that are not bartered here and in other towns in Cameroon are sold by the hunters to shadowy middlemen who send them overseas to Britain and the rest of Europe.

In recent years the trade in bushmeat has grown exponentially as the great wild forests of Africa have become more accessible to humans – largely due to the logging industry, which is opening up large tracts with dirt roadways. The pygmy hunters, once isolated from the outside world, are now a common sight on the outskirts of towns. So are the trucks carrying the bushmeat from the pigmies' hunting grounds to the busy market places.

'Not only is the logging destroying the forests where the Great Apes lived, but it is also creating a huge market for bushmeat', explains Mr Owen of WSPA. 'Once a pygmy hunter would return with just enough food for his family. Now he is killing to sell and make a living, helped by the loggers' new roads linking the densest part of the jungle and local towns'. His views are endorsed by Will Travers of the Born Free Foundation, an international wildlife charity. He insists that the commercial bushmeat industry, once confined to Central and Western Africa, is becoming commonplace, even in East African countries such as Kenya.

Wild animal flesh can be bought all over London

'The widespread consumption of bushmeat is having dire consequences for wildlife in Kenya', he said. 'But there are health issues too. The transmission of diseases such as the deadly ebola virus is closely linked to the butchering and eating of the continent's apes'.

Only last year the House of Commons environment, health and foreign affairs select committees were warned by one zoologist that ebola could reach Britain from Africa because of the sale of bushmeat here. The virus, which kills up to 80 per cent of humans it infects, can survive even in an animal corpse. The disease has reached epidemic proportions among chimpanzee and gorilla populations in Gabon and the Republic of Congo. Within a year it is expected to reach the apes of Cameroon. Like SFV, ebola is transmitted to humans who eat poorly cooked bushmeat, via their stomach membranes. It can also be contracted by hunters from the blood or bodily fluids during the slaughter and butchering of wild animals.

Urbanised Africans buy ape meat as a reminder of their cultural identity and because they like the taste better than the cheaper chicken, beef or lamb on offer. The same reasons prompt the ethnic communities of London, Paris and Brussels, to seek out bushmeat for their tables.

No one knows this better than Richard Robinson, head of environmental health in Hackney, London, where illicitly imported bushmeat has been discovered on sale in the shops and stalls

of the borough's Ridley Road street market. He says the flesh of the wild animals can also be bought all over London.

'When we started investigating, we found bushmeat for sale at almost every West African shop in Hackney. Now the trade has disappeared underground. We know it's still going on, but it has been pushed behind the counter', he explained recently.

The Mail sent an undercover reporter from West Africa onto the streets of North and South London to find bushmeat. He went from shop to shop for a day, but was told there was none officially on sale. 'We used to sell it, but now the inspectors come calling', said an African shopowner in Haringay, North London. 'It doesn't sell this way any more..although you can get it if you know how,' she confided.

Earlier this year a London woman was jailed for three months for a series of offences arising from the illegal sale of bushmeat in Tottenham, North London. A spot check by customs officers on a flight from Nigeria recently uncovered six dried monkey carcasses. At Felixstowe, the biggest container port in Britain, one illegal consignment of bushmeat is discovered every week. One container said to contain crisps was found by a sharp eyed customs officer to be full of wild animal carcasses.

The Mail has also been told that bushmeat is carried in passengers' suitcases on every single flight coming into Heathrow from the capitals of Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya. In addition, professional couriers have been seen walking through customs to pick up their bags full of meat in the arrival's hall, before gathering at a meeting point in the terminal car park. 'They quickly throw their bags of bushmeat into a van waiting there,' one airport works told me. 'It is taken away to be sold in the markets of London and other British cities. Then the couriers simply disappear into the crowds.'

Howard Jonas is general manager of Vetspeed, an animal waste management company hired by environmental health departments to get rid of illegal bushmeat seized in this country. In that past year he has been working in Exeter, Northampton, Bradford and Luton. On average, he gets two calls for help every month. So what are the consequences for Britain of this vile trade? Could a human epidemic similar to Aids be provoked by the SFC so prevalent in apes and now passed to their pygmy hunters?

Elliot Morely, the Government's environment minister, has insisted that, as yet, there is no evidence of viruses coming into Britain through bushmeat. 'But we do realise there is a potential risk to humans,' he has said. 'We must be on our guard.' But will being on guard really be enough to stop what could develop into an epidemic? Clive Lawrence, with years of experience at Heathrow Airport, thinks not. He believes that political correctness, and the fear of offending our black communities is stopping action against the imports of wild ape meat secretly destined for the dinner tables of our ethnic minority areas.

Only last week, the government's Health Protection Agency warned that last year's 7,000 new cases of HIV in Britain were largely among immigrants, including those from sub-Saharan Africa. The number of people globally infected with HIV or suffering from Aids is put at 40 million. Could the SFV virus cause such a catastrophic plague in the future?

No one knows, but we would do well to remember that the apes are our closest relatives in the animal world and our genetic make-up is very similar. It is this fact that makes the transmission of viruses from them to us more likely.

These animals will laugh if you tickle them

A chimpanzee, which shares 98.6 per cent of our genes, will display the same maternal instincts as a human mother. These animals laugh if you tickle them. They will cry if they are unhappy. 'When hunters drag the babies off their dead mothers, you can see the obvious grief in those babies' faces. The agony they endure is no different to what a human would suffer,' one zoologist, who has worked in Cameroon told the Mail.

Even more heartbreaking is how a chimpanzee acts when faced with the barrel of a gun. Hunters report that the ape often adopts a pleading expression and holds out its paw to the killers.

Tragically for the animal – and perhaps for all mankind – the bushmeat hunters of Africa take no notice at all.