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Assessing the prevalence and characteristics of hair-plucking behaviour in captive western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*)

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Abstract

Non-human primates occasionally exhibit behaviours thought to occur only in captivity that are considered abnormal. In particular, hair-plucking behaviour occurs across many species of mammals and birds. This study was the first to assess the phenomenology, demography and aetiology of this behaviour in captive gorillas across the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) population. A survey was sent to 52 AZA institutions housing western lowland gorillas. Hair-plucking behaviour occurred in 15% of the surveyed population with 62% of institutions housing a hair plucker. Individuals were most likely to self-pluck using their fingers. Individuals that were exposed as youngsters to a hair-plucking group member were significantly more likely to develop the behaviour themselves. There was also a trend toward solitary individuals being more likely to perform this behaviour. Future research needs include identifying hormonal correlates to this behaviour, understanding its relationship to acute or chronic stressors, and examining what causes this behaviour to fluctuate in frequency once it has developed.

Keywords: *abnormal behaviour, animal welfare, self-directed behaviour, survey, trichotillomania, western lowland gorilla*