

2 Mountain gorillas

COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION

Mountain gorilla populations are increasing, and the people who live alongside them are benefiting



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Augustin Akantambira of Kabaga village near Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda shows his gorilla carvings for sale to tourists

“Before there was no connection between the park and communities. Now it is totally different. They understand that the park is important for them because they are benefitting directly from the money we are getting from tourism. They respect the gorillas.”

Patience Dusabimana, community leader and guide, Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda

With fewer than a thousand mountain gorillas left in the wild, the odds appear stacked against them. Just two populations remain in small islands of forest, surrounded by a rising tide of humanity. Some of the darkest episodes in recent history took place in this region – the Rwandan genocide and the wars that have devastated the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The consequences can still be felt, as tens of thousands of people attempt to rebuild their livelihoods, based largely on the natural resources around them.

Yet mountain gorilla numbers have increased by almost 30 per cent in recent years (IGCP, 2012) – the only species of great ape whose numbers are rising. A spiral toward extinction has been transformed into a virtuous circle as people and gorillas thrive together.

Mountain gorillas survive in two isolated populations, among the Virunga volcanoes on the borders of DRC, Rwanda and Uganda; and the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. Since 1991, mountain gorilla conservation has been led by the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) – a coalition involving WWF and Fauna and Flora International.

The IGCP works with local people and government agencies to manage a cross-border network of protected areas, and to develop responsible mountain gorilla tourism. This creates jobs as tour guides, porters or park rangers. Tourists come from all over the world to see gorillas in their natural habitat, and the revenues help fund gorilla conservation and community projects. Ultimately, local people gain more from preserving their natural resources than from exploiting them in the short term.

Gorilla tourism has transformed communities in the region – like Nkuringo, an isolated mountain town in Uganda. The town is home to the Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, a community-owned boutique hotel that welcomes 1,200 guests a year. It directly employs more than 40 people, but the benefits extend to more than 30,000 others living in nearby villages.

Restaurants, bars and other accommodation are opening up, while craft shops sell carved wooden gorillas, t-shirts and baskets made by local artisans, many of whom are women. Income from the hotel and gorilla-tracking permits goes into a community foundation, which has funded a range of enterprises, including vegetable growing and tea plantations. The foundation funds a sponsorship scheme that pays for the poorest children to go to school. It’s also meeting the costs of training nurses and building a health centre.

In Rwanda, gorilla tourism is the engine powering a tourist industry worth US\$200 million a year in foreign exchange earnings (Nielsen and Spenceley, 2010) – although tourist numbers are limited to avoid negative impacts on the gorillas, local people and the local environment. Communities around the national parks share 5 per

cent of the money generated by park permits – which has helped to build schools and hospitals, set up sustainable businesses, and fund environmental projects such as tree planting and erosion control.

Furthermore, the IGCP’s “gorilla water” initiative has brought improved water and sanitation to many communities and households, by helping construct rainwater storage facilities. With most villages in the area lacking a safe water supply, women and children used to collect water from streams within the national parks. Not only was this an arduous and potentially dangerous chore, but the presence of large numbers of people posed a threat to the gorillas and other wildlife. Now, many women and children have more time to spend on education and improving their livelihoods, and fewer people need to enter the gorillas’ habitat. The communal effort of building water tanks, and their shared ownership, has helped to strengthen the sense of community – a particularly important outcome in an area with large numbers of displaced people, where the scars of conflict are still raw – and establish a positive connection with the parks and the gorillas.

As Anna Behm Masozera, head of the IGCP, puts it: “When done mindfully and respectfully, conservation has the power and potential to bring people together for a common cause, both across park boundaries where park and people intersect, and across international borders as well.”

Preserve natural capital: The value of Uganda’s gorillas as a tourist attraction has been estimated at between US\$7.8 million and US\$34.3 million (IGCP, 2014).



Redirect financial flows: A proportion of park revenues (which varies by country) is distributed to neighbouring communities, supporting community-led health, education, infrastructure and livelihood projects.



Equitable resource governance: As people benefit directly from the gorillas and understand their value, they have an added incentive to look after the forest.



Consume more wisely: Tourists are directly benefiting communities and conservation through their spending.



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With mountain gorillas as the star attraction, ecotourism in DRC’s Virunga National Park – following the successful models demonstrated in Rwanda and Uganda – could create thousands of jobs and bring in an estimated US\$235 million per year.