



digit news

saving the world's last gorillas

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the gorilla organization



Celebrating 20 years of community-led conservation

The Gorilla Organization is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2012, with staff and supporters in the UK joining their counterparts in Africa in looking back on the successes of the past two decades.

Encouragingly, though lowland gorilla numbers have been dropping, mountain gorilla numbers have been rising steadily over the past 20 years. In fact, according to the latest census data, there are around 800 mountain gorillas alive in the world today, compared to fewer than 650 back in 1992. Such an achievement is due in no small part to stricter law enforcement in and around the gorilla habitat, with the ranger patrols that Dr Dian Fossey fought so hard to establish paying dividends. But, according to those working on the frontline of conservation, the upturn in fortunes must also be attributed to the shift towards getting local communities more involved in conservation,

an approach that the Gorilla Organization led the way in adopting in the mid-1990s.

“Even just a few years ago, most of the people living around the Virunga National Park thought that conservation was something that only involved scientists working in laboratories, and maybe also rangers with guns,” explains Henry Cirhuza, long-serving programme manager in DR Congo.

“Now everyone has a stake in saving the gorillas; gorilla tourism generates a large amount of income, local residents can get jobs and communities are being transformed, meaning people are now able to earn a living outside of the forests.”

Notably, 2012 also marks 20 years since the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or the ‘Earth Summit’, was held in Rio. Here, by signing up to Article 21, world leaders pledged to make local communities key

stakeholders in conservation and development efforts and, according to executive director Jillian Miller, sticking closely to the spirit of this landmark agreement represents the Gorilla Organization’s “greatest achievement” to date.

“Conservation is easy for people like us, whose daily needs are readily met,” she says. “But if you don’t know where your next meal is coming from, if you still cook on an open fire, if you live in a wood or bamboo hut and have to walk miles each day to find clean water, how can people tell you to stay out of the forest, where resources are plentiful?”

“In some areas around the gorilla habitat people risk being arrested as trespassers time after time for trying to get water, medicinal plants and food from the forest to feed their families. Thankfully, the world has come a long way since the first Earth Summit and people are beginning to understand the link between poverty and conservation and are designing programmes that address it.”

Thanks to such an approach, the Gorilla Organization has helped change tens of thousands of lives for the better while simultaneously helping to ease the considerable pressure being placed on the lush forests that are home to the critically-endangered gorillas. Over the past 20 years, for example, more than two million trees have been planted, helping to create a natural buffer between humans and gorillas, while more than 15,000 farmers have been trained in sustainable agriculture, again reducing reliance on the resources found in the forests. At the same time, the Gorilla Organization has provided conservation education to more than 100,000 children, helping create a new generation of gorilla guardians.

“The gorilla is the flagship species of this part of Africa,” Henry notes. “By making sure they survive, other animals are also protected and the people living alongside them can enjoy a better future.”



Letter from the Virungas

Our 20th anniversary is certainly something to celebrate. Sadly, however, we cannot get carried away. After all, it was just a few years ago that poaching in the Virunga National Park got so bad that we genuinely feared that the survival of the mountain gorillas living here was highly unlikely.



But there is hope. Right now, a new sense of security is gradually returning to the Virunga Massif. What’s more, the region is also benefiting from the return of tourists, many of them visiting in order to see gorillas living in their natural habitat.

Nothing illustrates this new hope among those of us who have worked so hard to protect gorillas than the case of the orphans at the Senkwenkwe Rescue Centre. The four young mountain gorillas living here were all orphaned as a result of poaching. But, while in the past orphans would have had little or no hope of survival, these youngsters are going from strength to strength and they may soon be ready to return to the forests.

For me, this goes to show just how effective the renewed sense of collaboration among conservationists working in DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda can be. Not only do the four young gorillas have a bright future, but the Centre’s educational efforts are helping inspire the guardians needed to ensure there are still mountain gorillas living in this part of Africa in another 20 years time.

TUVER WUNDA

Goma, DR Congo

www.gorillas.org

Creating a buzz about conservation

Long-standing supporter Bill Wilson has always had a passion for wildlife and the great outdoors. As a national park ranger, he looked after some of the most beautiful parts of his native Scotland. Now, in retirement, he's putting his free time to good use by spreading the word of gorilla conservation.

In the autumn of 2011, Bill, along with his wife Catherine, was lucky enough to see mountain gorillas in the wild in both Rwanda and Uganda. He also paid a visit to some of the Gorilla Organization's award-winning conservation and development projects. Inspired by what they saw, and in particular, by the way gorilla-friendly beekeeping is providing farmers with a viable living outside of the protected forests, the Wilsons have committed themselves to raising awareness – and funds – right across Scotland.

“My interest in Africa in general and the great apes in particular goes back over 40 years, so this was an itch that needed scratching,” says Bill. “Moreover, my background as a Countryside Ranger, gave me a good understanding of the importance of conservation and community



Sharing tales from Scotland with the gorilla guardians of tomorrow

development and the two working together, and so I was tremendously impressed by the Gorilla Organization teams in both Uganda and Rwanda, and we really appreciated the warmth of



welcome we were given.”

Bill is happy to hear from groups in central Scotland keen to learn more about his life-changing encounters with wild gorillas. He can be contacted through the Gorilla Organization.

Amy Turns 18

The Gorilla Organization's adopted mountain gorilla, Amy Akago, turned 18 on March 15. The elusive female mountain gorilla is still enjoying an extended 'gap year', flitting across the border between Rwanda and DR Congo, and is showing no signs of settling down any time soon! Learn how you can adopt Amy at www.gorillas.org



A landmark birthday for Amy

Leave the legacy of a world with gorillas

After watching a film on the plight of the gorillas just a few years ago, Beryl Collier was determined to do what she could to make sure these remarkable creatures are still around for generations to come.

“She was of the view that gorillas closely resembled man but did not show any of the negative characteristics of man,” explained the executor of her Will, in which she left a legacy of £150,000 to the Gorilla Organization in order to achieve just this.

While legacies the size of Mrs Colliers are remarkable, many people do what they can to give their loved ones the gift of a world with gorillas in it, and every penny that is left in a Will is vital in the fight to save the great apes from extinction.

“Legacies are so very important for an organisation like ours,” says Fauzia Malik, Individual Giving Manager at the Gorilla Organization. “Without them we would find it hard



to fund our valuable conservation and poverty reduction work. We know that taking care of family and friends is the first priority for most people when they are making their Will, though many choose to do this

by finding a way of creating a lasting legacy that will benefit their loved ones and many more besides.”

Should you wish to learn more about legacies and how they can help gorillas, email fauzia@gorillas.org

Great Apes need Great Volunteers

Are you keen to do your bit for gorilla conservation? Can you spare one morning every couple of months? Do you look good in black fur (fake, of course)? Then why not join the dedicated team of collectors raising money for the Gorilla Organization's award-winning work at stations across London. Email info@gorillas.org for more information on volunteering opportunities.



Gorillas still falling victim to poachers

Despite the best efforts of rangers and conservationists, poaching remains one of the biggest threats to the survival of gorillas right across the Virunga Massif, as recent, tragic events testify.

In February, rangers patrolling the Rwandan area of the Virunga Volcanoes made a grim discovery: the body of a young mountain gorilla, caught in a poacher's snare. A post-mortem found that the male gorilla was only three years old when he died. Tragically, it also revealed that he was severely dehydrated and had an empty stomach, indicating that he struggled in the snare for several days before dying.

This came just a few weeks after a similar incident occurred across the border in DR Congo. Here, in the dense forest of the Virunga National Park, Dunia, a five-year-old female belonging to the Mapuwa mountain gorilla family, also got her arm caught in a snare left by poachers trying to catch antelope. Fortunately, vets managed to remove the rope snare from her wrist before any serious harm was done – snares can lead to circulation loss and infections, causing gorillas to lose limbs or even die – and Dunia was able to rejoin her family.

These two cases effectively illustrate the extent of the problem facing park rangers. Over the past few years, anti-poaching patrols have removed more than 1,500 snares from the forests of the Virunga Massif annually, while in recent months an unusually high number of snares have been found in the Visoke and Sabyinyo districts, situated in the shared area between the Virunga National Park in DR Congo and Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park.

Notably, such an upturn in poaching has once again brought into question the wisdom of keeping some of the Virunga's critically-endangered mountain gorillas free from human contact. After all, it could be argued, while the young gorilla that died after struggling undetected in a snare for several days belonged to one of the few unhabituated gorilla groups in this part of Africa, Dunia belongs to a habituated group, meaning not only is she used to tourists and trackers watching her, she and her family also benefit from close surveillance and veterinary care.

However, many front-line conservationists are wary of going too far in this direction, fearing that too much intervention could turn the Virungas into a 'wild zoo', with



A single snare can devastate entire mountain gorilla groups

potentially devastating consequences.

At present, around 75 per cent of gorillas are habituated, a level Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka believes is more than enough. "Habituated gorillas can lose their fear of poachers and are more likely to wander onto people's land or even into villages," she explains. "They're at greater risk of disease and poaching. Plus, it costs a lot of money to follow gorillas every day, and this puts wildlife authorities under pressure to bring in more tourists.

Rather than attempting to habituate all of the Virunga's mountain gorillas, she says, the emphasis should instead be placed on "basic conservation methods", such as ranger patrols and snare removal

initiatives. "Sadly, of course, this may mean some unhabituated gorillas may get caught in snares, but at the same time, the benefits of leaving them in peace outweigh the risks."

Along these lines, and on the back of a rise in elephant poaching as well as the young gorilla's death, the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration initiative (GVTC), made up of wildlife authorities of Rwanda, Uganda and DR Congo, has announced plans to step up joint patrols in the shared areas between national parks within the Virungas. "In the end," says the group's deputy secretary Teddy Musabe, "solutions to poaching need to be found, for the good of people as well as for the wildlife."

New land gives Batwa fresh hope

The Gorilla Organization, assisted by funding from the European Commission, has purchased 14 hectares of land, to be used as part

of the innovative Batwa Training Programme (BTP) in Rwanda. Since its launch back in 2007, the BTP has been providing indigenous

communities – many of them living right alongside the protected Volcanoes National Park – with training in sustainable agriculture, as well as with the tools they need to make a living outside of the gorilla habitat.

The newly-acquired land, therefore, will give farmers their own plots, on which they can put their skills to good use. And, while the Gorilla Organization still technically owns the land, as soon as the seven separate Batwa groups benefitting have been fully-registered as Community Based Organisations (CBOs), it will be handed over to them.

Legal technicalities aside, dozens of local farmers have already got to work on the land, with hundreds of people set to benefit from fresh crops and the extra income they provide. Furthermore, according to the Gorilla Organization's programmes manager in Rwanda,

Emmanuel Bugingo, giving the Batwa their own land will go a long way towards addressing the discrimination they suffer.

"First of all, this land is going to benefit people who have never had land of their own to work on, and the crops they grow will feed them and will also provide them with some extra income," he explains.

"Just as importantly, now that they have their own land, the Batwa can call themselves 'farmers'. So, not only will they be developing the same crops and selling their produce in the same markets, they'll also have the same social status as around 98 per cent of Rwandans. This is a massive step towards helping these historically-marginalised people integrate into wider society."

In all, it is hoped that this project will benefit 1,500 people, helping combat poverty in some of Africa's poorest communities while simultaneously easing local pressure on the Volcanoes National Park, home to some of the world's last-remaining mountain gorillas.



New land gives the Batwa farmers food and a stake in society

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New Solar Sisters jet off to India

On the back of the success of the Solar Sisters project in neighbouring DR Congo, the Gorilla Organization is expanding its inspiring renewable energy initiative into both Rwanda and Uganda.

In Rwanda, two ladies from the village of Hehu and a further two from the village of Nyarugina were chosen by their own communities to take part in the exciting project. Meanwhile, across the border in Uganda, Gorilla Organization staff worked with community leaders to select two women from the village of Kagandu, which borders the Mgahinga National Park, for the project.

Like the trailblazing Congolese Solar Sisters before them, the ladies will spend six months at the Barefoot College in Rajasthan, India, where



The villages voted and the new Solar Sisters were chosen

they will learn how to become solar power engineers. As Digit News goes to press, all of the ladies have arrived safely at the college and are looking forward to learning the skills needed to bring electricity to their home villages for the first time.

Speaking to the Rwandan media before departing to India, 45-year-old mother-of-five Mukamanzi Domitille said: "I am sure that what I will learn at the Barefoot College will help me to improve my own quality of life and that of my neighbours."

Upon their return to Africa, this second wave of Solar Sisters will be given the tools and support they need

to electrify their home communities. As a result, people will no longer have to study or work by candlelight or make use of potentially dangerous kerosene lights, allowing them to push ahead with their education or generate some much needed extra income outside of daylight hours.

Additionally, by bringing a reliable source of power to their communities, the Solar Sisters will help ease the pressure being placed on the habitat of the Volcanoes and the Mgahinga National Park, both home to relatively small but hugely significant populations of mountain gorillas.



Dr Gladys Joins UWA Board

Gorilla Organization trustee Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka has been appointed to the board of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). Dr Gladys

was chosen for the three-year post due to her long-standing commitment to community-led conservation, a passion which has seen her set up her own NGO, Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH) on the edge of the Mgahinga National Park.

Celebrating the news, Dr Gladys, who volunteered at the offices of the Gorilla Organization while studying veterinary science at the University of London said: "It was a bit of a surprise. I'm the first person from a conservation NGO to serve on the board. Up until now, it's always been either academics or people working in the tourism industry.

"I'm now in a position where I can help NGOs and the UWA work together more effectively and take the great work small NGOs such as the Gorilla Organization are doing to the next level!"



Dr Gladys in action



12 months, two wheels, 66,000 people: After just one year, the pedal-powered cinema project has brought gorilla conservation films to thousands of people living in some of Africa's poorest and most remote communities.

THANK YOU

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