



digit saving the world's last gorillas news

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the gorilla organization

Building a gorilla haven in Congo's lawless forests

The Walikale Community Gorilla Reserve is Africa at its wildest. Spread across an area of 70,000 hectares, this corner of Congo is still largely unmapped, and the dense forests are not only home to wildlife but also to gangs of militia intent on controlling the natural resources found here.

Step by step, however, the Gorilla Organization is transforming the reserve into a true haven for 700 eastern lowland gorillas. Under project leader Andre Byamungu Ngurube, a team is slowly mapping the reserve, including the ranges of dozens of gorilla families, while also making important inroads into winning community support for conservation.

Now, the race is on to establish a more permanent presence. At present, the rangers can only carry out daily dawn to dusk patrols. Aside from five primitive shelters, there are no outposts they can use



Walikale's gorillas rely on the forests (below) for food and shelter

as bases for the night, limiting the distance the rangers can cover and the time they spend on the frontline.

Permanent bases a priority

To address this, the team are building permanent shelters, but this is no easy task. There are no proper roads, or even tracks, meaning all materials and tools have to be carried in by hand. To make matters worse, not only do the enterprising rangers have to be on their guard against the militia, they are also battling nature as the outposts need to be completed before the rainy season.

Despite the difficulties and dangers, Andre and his team are determined to get the work done. "This is about so much more than having a roof over our heads – though, of course, that would be a nice change! Proper outposts will help us expand our patrols deeper into the forest, plus, as a biologist, I will be able to carry out more

research into the gorillas living here. Also, the outposts will offer us better protection from militia and poachers and let us reclaim the reserve from them."

With fewer than 5,000 left in the world, the eastern lowland gorilla is teetering on the edge of extinction. While these gorillas can retreat to higher ground for safety, they will always be vulnerable to poachers, fighting and even human diseases. This is why transforming Walikale from a lawless wilderness into a proper, functioning reserve is so important and why Andre and his team are risking everything to realise this.

"If the rainy season comes and our outposts aren't ready, we will just have to return when the rains stop," he says. "The government, the local communities and supporters around the world have put their trust in us, so we have to keep going, however difficult it gets."



Letter from the Virungas

For far too long, the people of the Virungas Massif have known little but violence. But, with the ceasefire that brought the M23 uprising to an end, many are starting to look to the future and dreaming of what may be possible should this peace last.

Increasingly, the people of the region recognise the important role nature can play in their collective futures. This is why the recent meeting of the Greater Virunga Transboundary Committee (GVTC) caused so much excitement here, and not just among conservationists such as myself.

More and better cooperation means that it will be easier for rangers to preserve the integrity of the National Park and fight wildlife crime, which can only be good news for the endangered gorillas and other species living here.

Safe gorillas and lasting peace will hopefully bring the tourists back, with the communities of all three countries bordering the Massif benefitting the most as they share the revenues equally between themselves.

There are, of course, many challenges to overcome if we are to realise our dreams of a brighter future here. But, for once, I am glad to be sending a message of hope and optimism to you all.

TUVER - WUNAI

Goma, DR Congo



www.gorillas.org

Welcoming supporters to the projects

In his years heading up the Gorilla Organization's projects in Rwanda, Emmanuel Busingo has seen hundreds of people come through the doors of the busy Ruhengeri Resource Centre.



Tomorrow's conservationists

From celebrities and politicians to army chiefs and NGO leaders, he and his team have always taken time out of their busy schedules to offer them all a warm welcome and show them the work being done to save a species on the brink of extinction.

But rather than the A-list stars or big-shot politicians, it's the everyday tourists and in particular Gorilla Organization supporters holidaying in Africa, who are given the warmest welcome.

"It's a great honour to have people who have made all our work possible come and say hello," Emmanuel explains.

"For many, it's their very first time in Africa, and almost always their first time seeing gorillas in the wild, and their enthusiasm is infectious!"

Mesmerised by Africa

Most visitors choose to drop into the Resource Centre after they have been on a gorilla trek, Emmanuel adds: "It's impossible not to be mesmerised by the gorillas, and naturally people are more determined than ever to find out what can be done to stop them from disappearing forever.

"The team here are happy to show them that there is hope, whether it's through ongoing ranger patrols or



Visitors receive a warm welcome from our field staff

through the community work we do to make sure local people no longer have to rely on the natural resources of the gorilla habitat."

As well as simply dropping by, some supporters bring practical items to support the work being done with local communities.

Everything from pens and exercise books to footballs have been donated by visitors, though, as Emmanuel says, "the greatest gift supporters can give us is to return home inspired and to tell all their friends about the dangers facing gorillas and the work we are doing to save them for everyone".



Gorillas get social

This spring, the inaugural Great Gorilla Afternoon Tea will be held at the Theatre Royal in London. The event will feature, of course, tea and cake, with Chairman Ian Redmond and President Emeritus Stanley Johnson on hand to talk to supporters about their lives on the frontline of conservation. Tickets and more info are available at events@gorillas.org

Student Ambassadors get busy in schools!

The Gorilla Organization's crack team of Student Ambassadors have been hitting the road to inspire the next generation of conservationists.

Primatology students Roisin McAuley and Sarah Crudgington signed up last year to spread the message of gorilla conservation and have already visited a number of primary and secondary schools.

To get students interested in gorillas and their plight, Roisin and Sarah make use of a variety of fun, education tools.

"We run different activities with different year groups," explains

Roisin. "With the infants, we make gorilla masks or get them to draw around their feet to compare them with those of gorillas.

"With the older children, we make posters advertising gorilla conservation and discuss the importance of helping local communities find ways of earning money without relying on the natural resources of the forests."

Generating funds and support

It's not just awareness that Roisin and Sarah are raising. Several of the schools they have visited have also

offered financial support. Lochinver House School in Potters Bar, for example, voted to make the Gorilla Organization their chosen charity for the current academic year, and the Ambassadors have been invited back to the school in July for a celebratory lunch and to be presented with a cheque.



Roisin and Sarah, the Student Ambassadors

Going the extra 26 miles



For some, the Great Gorilla Run is just a walk in the park. So, to push themselves further and really go the extra mile for gorillas, they don their black fur suits and run 23 miles in the London Marathon.

In 2015, the Gorilla Organization had two runners taking part in the name of great ape conservation. Richard

Brown, from London (pictured below left), was inspired to take part after learning about the recent death of Ranger Mbera Bagabo at the hands of rebels.

Similarly, Matthew Fishwick, recently went to Uganda to visit gorillas in the wild and saw for himself the work that the Gorilla Organization carries out there.

"The London Marathon is

a unique event which brings the people of London together for a good cause and I'm very proud to play my part helping save the gorillas," Matthew said.

Meanwhile, registration is now open for the 2015 Great Gorilla Run!

For more information about the event and to register, please visit www.greatgorillarun.org

2014: An encouraging year as gorilla numbers rise

At the height of the M23 rebellion that rocked Eastern DR Congo in 2013 and early 2014, the sanctuary of the Mikeno Sector of the Virunga National Park was breached.

Rebel militia repeatedly crossed the park boundaries and even set up camp in the protected forests. Since the Mikeno Sector is the home of the Congo's mountain gorillas, conservationists around the world were rightly worried that the fighting could, if not lead to gorillas being killed or injured in the cross-fire, then at least cause them heightened levels of stress, potentially disrupting their breeding patterns.

Encouragingly, the latest statistics from the Mikeno Sector suggest that the gorillas found in this part of the Virungas emerged unscathed from what was one of the worst bouts of fighting DR Congo has endured for many years. According to the figures collected by park staff, the total number of habituated mountain gorillas living in the sector (that is, gorillas who are used to humans and who are regularly observed by both tourists and conservationists) rose from 101 at the end of 2013 to 107 at the end of 2014, a healthy increase given

that there are still fewer than 900 individuals living in the whole world.

This rise in numbers is the result of a mini baby-boom among a few of the best-known habituated families. In particular, the Kabirizi and Bageni families have both welcomed new additions over the past 18 months. In fact, the Bageni family now includes eight infants, watched over by nine adult females, a pair of adolescent 'blackback' males and a solitary silverback. Meanwhile, the small Nyakamwe group also includes a young infant, giving conservationists renewed hope for the future. Fittingly, since it's the rangers putting their lives on the line each day who are most to thank for increasing gorilla numbers, all of the new infants have been named after local conservation heroes.

Peace brings prosperity

For primatologist and Gorilla Organization chairman Ian Redmond, these latest figures are testament to the enduring resilience of mountain gorillas.

"Whatever the challenges thrown at them (by man, it must be added), the mountain gorillas of the Virungas do their best to adapt,



Babies have been born to several mountain gorilla families since peace returned to the troubled Virungas at the beginning of 2014

survive and even thrive, as we can see here," he explains.

"It is immensely encouraging to hear this news. Above all, it shows that the courageous park guards are not risking their lives in vain, and that the development of tourism in Eastern DRC can resume as soon as the security situation improves."

The news is encouraging. However, large parts of Eastern DR Congo remain relatively unstable

and another rebellion or prolonged bout of fighting could reverse any progress that has been made over the past 12 months.

"The numbers may be up, but they remain perilously low, leaving mountain gorillas on the edge of extinction," notes Executive Director Jillian Miller. "Far from relaxing our efforts, we need to carry on working tirelessly to ensure that any recent improvements aren't for nothing."

Communities get on board ambitious tree planting drive

Tree by single tree, decades of deforestation in an isolated part of DR Congo is slowly being reversed as the Gorilla Organization's most ambitious project to date gets underway.

Just last summer, the team at the Goma Resource Centre signed a groundbreaking new partnership with the African Development Bank (ADB), under which they pledged to plant more than two million seedlings with the aim of reforesting around 1,000 hectares of land. But, before any work could get started, Henry Cirhuza, Programme Manager for DR Congo, needed to gain the support of the leaders of the villages dotted around the Kahuzi Biega National Park. To achieve this, he has been busy demonstrating the environmental and economic advantages of planting sustainable forest rather than continuing to rely on the precious resources found within the boundaries of the park.

So far, three villages have come on board, namely Mukwija, Kinyezrie and Kalehe, all of which



Young and old alike are joining forces to build a natural green buffer

are located within a day's walking distance of the gorilla habitat. Community members here have already been busy establishing nurseries where the saplings will be nurtured before being transferred to create a sustainable green barrier between the humans and their gorilla neighbours.

Celebrating the implementation of the first stage of the project,

Henry explains: "These trees will not be for the gorillas. Instead, they are for the people. They are fast-growing trees that are perfect for firewood and for construction, but not for sustaining wildlife. By giving people a ready source of timber, they will no longer have to go into the National Park, so the mountain gorillas living here should be left in peace."

However, though a step in the right direction, it will take more than three villages to reverse years of destruction. The unprotected region between the Kahuzi Biega National Park and the Walikale Community Gorilla Reserve in the east of DR Congo has experienced some of the worst deforestation in Central Africa. As internal migration pushes the number of people living here ever higher, demand for natural resources has increased, with poverty meaning many people feel they have little choice but to encroach on the protected forests for food, fuel and building materials.

"There's no denying that this is a huge challenge, but it's one we need to meet if we are to put a stop to the destruction of these forests," Henry adds. "Once the protected forest is gone, it will take years to grow back, leaving gorillas without the habitat they need to survive. By pushing ahead with this project, we can start to put this right and, little by little, give both humans and gorillas a better future."

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Gorilla conservation knows no boundaries

It's been six years in the making, but dreams of formalising cross-boundary cooperation in the Virunga Massif are about to be realised.

Founded in 2009, the Greater Virunga Transboundary Commission (GVTC) includes representatives from Rwanda, Uganda and DR Congo. Its aim is to introduce a formal system for the countries to work together to protect the precious forests and the wildlife living in them. As well as helping rangers team up to combat wildlife crime and habitat destruction, the GVTC has also been exploring how communities across the region can share the revenues generated from mass tourism.

At a recent meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, ministers came together to prepare the trilateral treaty that will finally put into action the work of the GVTC. The politicians were joined by representatives from various NGOs, including the Gorilla Organization's Tuver Wundi.



Tuver Wundi (far left) and his international colleagues came together recently to promote transboundary conservation efforts

Reporting from the meeting, Tuver explained "The Executive Secretary of the GVTC, Dr Muamba, is confident that we will succeed in establishing a legal framework that will benefit not

only the gorillas, but also numerous communities living around seven National Parks.

"This really is a great step forward for conservation efforts in this part of Africa!"

Meet Dr Samson Werikhe!

As CVs go, his is more than a little impressive: A PhD in mountain gorilla conservation, former Director of the Wildlife Clubs of Uganda, coordinator of research at the Uganda Wildlife Authority and several positions leading ambitious grassroots conservation projects in the United States.

Now Dr Samson Werikhe has taken on the title of Regional Programmes Manager at the Gorilla Organization's busy Kisoro Resource Centre.

In his new position, he will oversee a range of conservation and community development projects across both Uganda and

neighbouring Rwanda and, despite being just a few weeks into the job, he already has a clear vision of how he intends to proceed.

"The main priority for me, and for other conservationists, is to increase community engagement," Dr Werikhe explains. "We need to bring the message of conservation to people's homes, right to their doorsteps, which is what I intend to do. After all, humans and gorillas need to live side-by-side, hopefully forever."



Organization and compelled him to get involved.

He says: "These gentle and intelligent creatures are amongst our closest living relatives.



"If we, as the dominant primates, can't protect our fellow great apes, then I feel we have failed catastrophically in our responsibilities towards our planet and the extraordinary fauna and flora it supports."

Impenetrable Forest in Uganda, that his passion for gorillas and their plight was really ignited.

Steve said "I stood in awe and it was then that the horror that these magnificent animals are teetering on the brink of extinction really struck me as once they're gone, they are gone forever."

Richard Deverell, meanwhile, is the former controller of BBC Children's TV and is currently the Director of Kew Gardens in London. It is his experience as a conservationist that attracted him to the grassroots work of the Gorilla

New Trustees join TGO



The Gorilla Organization's Board of Trustees has once again been strengthened with a pair of new appointments bringing a wealth of valuable experience and skills to the table.

Steve Crossman is a chartered accountant and entrepreneur and has worked on educational projects in the developing world for 20 years. However, it was only in 2012, on a visit to the Bwindi



THANK YOU

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