



Gorilla rangers killed as fresh crisis grips Congo

The Virunga National Park in eastern DR Congo is a natural paradise. Tragically, for those who dedicate their lives to keeping its wildlife, including its famous mountain gorillas, safe, it has now become a living hell. Large parts of the reserve are controlled by armed militia and the 'thin green line' of rangers standing between them and the critically-endangered gorillas is getting more fragile by the day.

Between April and May, seven staff working for the Virunga National Park died in three separate incidents which made news headlines around the world. Firstly, a single ranger was killed amid demonstrations against a new hydro-electric plant. While this project has been hailed as a way of providing local communities with clean energy, critics argue that only richer households will benefit. Given that most people living within a day's walk of the National Park have little fuel for their own personal use, tensions have been high ever since work on the plant; ultimately this cost the life of a gorilla guardian.

Ranger deaths rising

In the second incident, five rangers and their driver were killed after being ambushed by rebels in the park's northern sector. As with nearly all the 175 rangers killed in the line of duty since the Virunga National Park was established in 1925, all those who died on the bloodiest day the reserve has known were young men, most with wives and children. But, in the most recent attack, a 25-year-old female ranger was killed as she tried to protect two British tourists visiting the park to see its famous gorillas. Together these events have led to tourism being suspended indefinitely.

"These latest attacks are



Fighting has spread into the forest home of mountain gorillas

deeply shocking and a huge blow for conservation efforts," says Jillian Miller, Director of the Gorilla Organization. "Henry, our programme manager in the country, sends regular reports that highlight just how lawless the area around Goma – where we have our Resource Centre – and the section of the National Park closest to Lake Edward have become. I fear we will see more rangers lose their lives as they risk everything to keep the gorillas safe from harm."

A big step backwards

When the Virunga National Park opened to visitors in 2014, hopes were high that tourism could drive sustainable development in the region. As well as providing jobs, a proportion of the money generated through 'gorilla tourist visas' would go to local communities, providing them with a source of income and reducing their reliance on the natural resources found in the gorilla habitat.

"This feels like a big step backwards," Henry explains from

Goma. "The rate at which rangers are being attacked has risen dramatically over the past few months. I often see rioting in the streets of Goma and the unrest is spreading out of the city to the National Park, including in the zones where the gorillas live."

The Gorilla Organization's projects in DR Congo are ongoing despite the challenging times. Flights between Walikale and Goma are now regularly cancelled due to the insecurity. This makes it harder – and more dangerous – for staff to travel to the field projects or to check up on the gorillas. But as Henry notes: "We've never backed down before and we won't now. This is when the gorillas need our help the most and cannot let them down!"

How you can help?

See how you can make a difference in the fight to save DR Congo's mountain gorillas at <http://www.gorillas.org/congo-crisis/>

Mountain gorilla population hits 1,004!

Mountain gorillas are shy, reclusive and move large distances every day. But, thanks to the skills of experienced rangers and the latest technology, it's possible to count them down to the very last lone silverback. And the latest census brought some very good news: there are now 1,004 mountain gorillas in the world. Given the world population dropped to below 250 in the 1980s, when Dian Fossey was working in the field, this is a true conservation success story and proof that a joined-up approach to conservation produces results.

"Just four years ago, we released our 'Gorilla Charter', pledging to do everything we could to get mountain gorilla numbers up to the 1,000 mark," says Jillian Miller, Director of the Gorilla Organization. "I'm delighted to say that this goal has now been realised. We now know there are at least 1,004 mountain gorillas living in the wild today, and they are slowly but surely moving back from the brink of extinction."



Mr Gorilla rides again

How do you top knuckle-crawling the entire 26-mile route of the London Marathon (and becoming a media superstar and raising £40,000 in the process)? Well, if you're Mr Gorilla, you just get on your bike!

The indomitable Tom Harrison, the man behind the black fur mask, hand-cycled the 660 miles from John O'Groats in the very north of Scotland down to Land's End, the southern-most tip of England. Along the way, the London policeman gave interviews to press, radio and TV crews, raising awareness of the ongoing plight of the gorillas. For his incredible effort, Mr Gorilla raised a further £3,000 to support conservation work in Africa.

Mr Gorilla has still to decide on his next fundraising adventure.



Police officer Tom Harrison has been clocking up the miles for gorillas

Until then, he wants other wildlife-lovers to follow his lead: "I would urge supporters to take on any challenge, whether that is having a

Gorilla themed tea party, arranging a cake sale at work or running a marathon. After all, nothing comes from doing nothing!"

Thank you!
In February, we asked you how much you would be willing to give to help gorillas in the wild. And the response was simply overwhelming. The month's appeal was purposefully hard-hitting, showing gorillas in distress and stressing that every minute a snare is left undiscovered on the forest floor a gorilla is at risk of serious injury or even death. "The appeal raised an incredible £35,386," says Anna Somerset. "Once again, we are delighted to see how much our supporters care about gorillas, and how generous they are ready to be to fund the fight to keep them from extinction. Thank you!"

Marathon gorillas

Team Gorilla with their London Marathon medals

Team Gorilla endured record-breaking heat to make it across the finish line of the 2018 London Marathon. Three runners flew the flag for gorillas over the course of 26.2 miles, helping bring the message of gorilla conservation to a global audience of millions. They also raised over £4,500 for the Gorilla Organization's conservation and development projects in Africa.

Though an experienced distance runner, Robert Cummings said the April event was "one of the toughest marathons I have done."



He adds: "I was, however, spurred on by the fantastic donations I had received, and in the knowledge that it was helping continue the great work that the Gorilla Organization does."

Also going the distance was Fiona Mills. She recalls: "The fact that I'd received such amazing support from all my donors is what kept me going, as was knowing that this would make a difference. I simply had to cross that line for those amazing gorillas."



Great Gorilla Run 2018



After a decade in the City, the Great Gorilla Run is moving to London's West End, and you can be a part of it! Registration is now open for the iconic event, which will take place on Sunday 23 September. It will be held in partnership with Kings College London, with hundreds of students to be joined by "silverbacks" in full gorilla suits as they run through the heart of the British capital.

"This gives us a great chance to inspire a new generation of gorilla guardians, while holding on to what's always made the Great Gorilla Run so popular," says Events Manager Chris Perrin. "Registration is open to both teams and individual runners and there will be trophies awarded on the day, including for Best Dressed Gorilla ...so sign up and get creative!"

▶▶ www.greatgorillarun.org

Amazon Smile

Want to help make a gorilla smile? Then sign into smile.amazon.co.uk and nominate the Gorilla Organization as your chosen charity! A small proportion of anything you buy will go to support gorilla conservation projects. It's super easy to use and can be done through your existing Amazon account.

A year in Walikale

The Walikale Community Forest lies deep in the Albertine Rift in eastern DR Congo. It's not only incredibly remote, in many places it's largely lawless. The forests are dense and often unmapped and the terrain tough to navigate. Nevertheless, the Gorilla Organization's Walikale Gorilla and Forest Conservation Project has been making significant progress over the past 12 months, testament to the hard work of the team working under Project Manager André Byamungu.

The project is an ongoing operation, funded by trusts and the generosity of individual donors, with the aim of counting and then protecting a previously-undocumented population of eastern lowland gorillas. The first part of the mission is almost complete. The 39-strong team at Walikale, including 33 rangers, have been tirelessly patrolling the park to search for evidence of gorillas. They count day and night nests, using GPS to ensure they don't count the same site twice. On the back of hundreds of patrols, it's now believed that 351 gorillas, divided up into 45 family groups, are living here. What's more, careful observation has also provided valuable data on the age and sex of many of the gorillas in the Walikale forests.

Lost forever

With eastern lowland gorillas now classed as critically-endangered, just one step from being lost forever, the emphasis now is on safeguarding these 351 apes from the many and varied dangers they face. Here, community collaboration is key. The team regularly visit villages and communities to conduct outreach sessions. Community leaders, including village chiefs, are reminded of the importance of using the resources of the forest in a rational and sustainable way. They are also given advice on how to take only what they need from the forests without harming not just gorillas but other species protected by Congolese and international law, including chimpanzees, leopards and the giant pangolin.



The vast Walikale forest is lush and highly biodiverse – but in many places its also unmapped and lawless

According to Henry Cirhuza, who heads up the Gorilla Organization's projects in the country, such an approach is already proving effective. "We respect the local customs, but still, we keep a watchful eye on hunting, trapping and honey harvesting in the forest. Since we recruit from the local communities, we have built good links with the people and they are starting to see how protecting the gorillas and their forest habitat benefits them as well." The health clinics that the project supports help build up levels of trust with the communities, while the education and outreach programme

reached around 250 students in 2017, bringing the message of conservation to a new generation.

Despite its remote location, the Walikale area isn't completely cut off from the rest of the country. With DR Congo seemingly slipping back into a state of civil war, rebels and warlords now control some sections of the forest. Eastern Congo is largely without authority and instability is spreading from the cities into the countryside. "There is no quick solution to this," says Henry. "However, the staff here have come to be seen as a stabilising force and many value our support as they struggle to meet the challenges they face."

The Walikale project in numbers



24

community outreach sessions held



33

rangers employed



260

ranger patrols carried out



1,602

snares removed from the forest floor



4,000

people directly impacted by our healthcare projects



33,000

hectares made safe for wildlife



351

newly identified gorillas living in 45 families

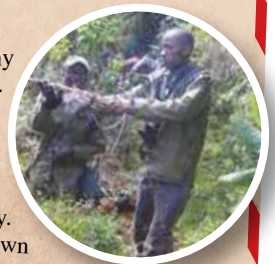
Postcard from the field

Here in eastern DR Congo, there are many places where the state authorities are absent. The Walikale forest, where we run our expanding Walikale Gorilla and Forest Conservation Project, is one such place. Here, local customs and laws are more important than state laws. That's why we tread carefully.

Instead of arresting poachers or cracking down harshly on instances of habitat destruction, our staff bring cases before village chiefs. The community leaders are reminded of what is expected of them, and the benefits of looking after the forest and the gorillas living there are made clear.

I'm pleased to say this approach is working. André, the leader of the Walikale project recently submitted his report to me. He noted that "the community values our respect for its traditional legal customs in the forest." This doesn't mean that we won't be tough on anyone who harms the gorillas. But rather, it shows that, however difficult the circumstances get, the Gorilla Organization must stick to its founding principles: only by working *with* local communities instead of against them can we build a better future for both people and their gorilla neighbours.

Henry Cirhuza



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On Labour Day in Uganda, Dr Samson Werikhe proudly collected an award from the Kisoro District Local Government in recognition of the Gorilla Organization's "valued service" to the people of the region.



Gorillas in the House

On a summer evening in mid-June, the Gorilla Organization was at the House of Commons for a special reception. Hosted by dedicated environmentalist Zac Goldsmith MP, the event was aimed at both celebrating the ongoing increase in mountain gorilla numbers while showcasing the Gorilla Organization's field projects.

In particular, Director Jillian Miller shared news from

the Walikale Gorilla and Forest Conservation Project, where research suggests an additional 351 eastern lowland gorillas could be living. "The esteemed guests were delighted to hear how, despite the challenges we face every day, our field projects keep making a real difference and, in Walikale, we have a chance to be behind one of the most notable conservation success stories of recent years," Jillian says.



In Memoriam: Ruth Keesling

"The Grandmother of Gorillas"

When Ruth Keesling saw mountain gorillas for the first time, there were just 248 of the great apes left in the world. When she died in April of this year aged 88, the mountain gorilla population stood at 880, with hopes high that the total will soon hit 1,000.

"There's no doubt that Ruth played a huge role in this conservation success story," says Jillian Miller, Executive Director of the Gorilla Organization and long-time friend of the American philanthropist. "She will be terribly missed but leaves behind a remarkable legacy."

As a young girl in New Jersey, Ruth grew up surrounded by animals. Her father, a respected veterinarian, Mark L. Morris, ran a small animal hospital. He also developed prescription pet food, creating a successful business and then used a portion of the profits to establish

the Morris Animal Foundation. In 1948, Ruth joined the board of the foundation, using the family wealth to fund research into illnesses afflicting both domestic and wild animals.

A promise she intended to keep

It wasn't until 1984, however, that Ruth developed an interest in gorillas. On a trip to South Africa, she met Dian Fossey and then invited her to speak at a conference on gorillas at the San Diego Zoo. It was here in California that Ruth made her famous promise to the pioneering primatologist. According to Ruth's son, Frank Keesling, Fossey told her new friend: "Mountain gorillas are going to die, and I am going to die with them unless I get some help." There and then, Ruth made a vow to do whatever she could.

Tragically, Dian was right about

her own fate. She was murdered in December of 1985. But this only made Ruth more determined than ever. She established the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project (MGVP), a pioneering organisation that brings in-field veterinary care gorillas in the wild. Ruth also looked after Dian's legacy, serving as the president of the Digit Fund – which would soon become the Gorilla Organization – from 1991 to 1993.

Over the years, she donated millions of dollars to gorilla conservation projects, though the training of gorilla vets was her biggest passion. Thanks to her generosity, a School of Veterinary Medicine was established at Makerere University in Uganda. The university awarded Ruth an honorary doctorate in 2015, in recognition of the role she played in training new generations of conservationists and gorilla vets.

"There's a little bit of Ruth, and not just her money, but her personality and passion in almost every gorilla charity working today, ourselves included," says Jillian. "She never forgot the promise she made to Dian all those years ago, and so we should never forget everything she did to keep mountain gorillas from disappearing forever. We owe her an enormous debt of gratitude."



Ruth with her favourite silverback, Shinda, in Uganda

Chairman remembers legendary gorilla filmmaker

In 1978, David Attenborough, Ian Redmond and cameraman Martin Saunders went deep into the Rwandan jungle and made history. Their encounter with wild mountain gorillas introduced the great apes to millions, and it remains the most popular sequence in the history of the BBC.

After a long and successful career, Martin died recently, leaving behind a huge collection of work.

However, his long-time friend and Gorilla Organization Chairman Ian notes, no one film ever quite had the impact of that piece of work.

"None of us at the time knew we were making television history," Ian says, "But it is no exaggeration to say that Martin's film of the gorillas helped to change the fate of the species, and that is just one topic out of many he helped bring to the world's attention."

