



Deadly double threat to gorillas as COVID pandemic spreads

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undo the progress made through decades of conservation work. Gorillas are not only at risk of the disease itself but, as the economic slowdown hits already-impoorished communities, they risk becoming accidental victims of increasingly desperate poachers.

Nowhere is this dual threat more apparent than the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda. The lush forests are home to around 460 mountain gorillas, roughly one-third of the total population. But this is also one of the most densely-populated parts of Africa. Communities push up to the very edges of the gorilla habitat and, despite the efforts of the authorities, the boundaries are not always respected.

Since the gorillas share more than 98% of their DNA with their human neighbours, there is a real risk of COVID-19 being transmitted to them. While there have been no reported instances of this happening so far, the case of Ebola, which killed an estimated 5,500 lowland gorillas between 2002 and 2003, provides a stark warning from history.

'If one falls ill, they all do'

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, veterinarian and Gorilla Organization Trustee, warns: "COVID-19 is not just a health crisis for humans. If just one gorilla becomes infected, the effects could be devastating. Gorilla can't social distance. They live in close-knit groups and groom each other daily. So, if one falls ill, they all do. That's why we cannot allow COVID to spread from humans to gorillas."

To this end, the Gorilla Organization has stepped up its



Poachers don't set out to target mountain gorillas. But, as the case of Rafiki shows, they can become accidental victims of desperate times

funding of ranger patrols. This 'green wall' will be vital for keeping the gorillas safe from infection. It will also help protect against the related threat of poaching, previously on the decline but now back, as the tragic death of Rafiki made painfully clear.

Desperate times

The killing of silverback Rafiki shocked not just conservationists but everyone who had come to know the charismatic gorilla through visiting Bwindi or seeing him on TV. The leader of the Nkuringo group, Rafiki (meaning "friend" in Swahili) was found dead in June. He had been stabbed repeatedly with a spear. Four men were swiftly arrested and charged.

The poachers claimed they acted out of self-defence after stumbling

across the silverback while hunting for bushmeat. The fear now is that such clashes between gorillas and poachers will become more commonplace. Communities around Bwindi, as well as other protected areas that are home to gorillas, rely on tourism to support livelihoods. With the pandemic bringing international tourism to a standstill, people could become desperate and tempted to venture into the forests to poach.

"Our community development work has steadily reduced reliance on the forests, giving people the chance to earn a living without putting gorillas – or themselves – at risk," Director Jillian Miller explains. "The horrific death of Rafiki highlights the lengths some people may go to in order to survive. Safeguarding gorillas

in these difficult times then is not just a matter of keeping them free from infection, but also of working directly with the communities to reduce the temptation to poach."

This will be no easy task, however. In March and April this year, rangers found 820 snares in the Bwindi forests. In the same period of 2019, they found just 21. As the economic toll of falling tourist numbers continues to be felt, with the most vulnerable suffering the most, this number could keep on rising.

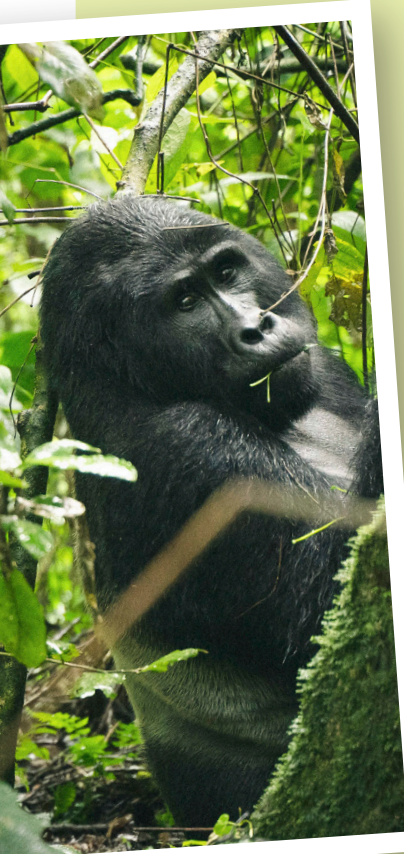
A crisis unfolds

- 10 March: DR Congo reports first case of COVID-19
- 11 March: WHO officially declares a pandemic
- 22-24 March: Gorilla range countries close their National Parks
- 17 May: Gorilla Organization launches emergency appeal
- 1 June: Rangers report massive increase in snares
- 12 June: Poachers arrested after silverback Rafiki found dead

Which Hollywood superstar has pledged \$2 million to keep Virunga's brave gorilla rangers safe? Find out inside.

A work trip to remember

When Leo Gripari founded That Gorilla Brand (TGB) he had two big ambitions: to shake-up the fashion world. And to help protect gorillas in the wild.



An hour in the company of Bwindi's mountain gorillas

A famous friend helps out

Hollywood superstar Leonardo DiCaprio responded to the tragic killing of 12 rangers (see page 3) by donating \$2 million to the Congolese Wildlife Authority to help keep the mountain gorillas of the Virunga National Park safe.



The A-lister, who was a founding patron of the Gorilla Organization, made the landmark donation through his Earth Alliance initiative. The funds will be used to maintain ranger patrols within the Congolese national park and to help the families of those rangers who have lost their lives in the fight to keep the gorillas safe.

So far, so good! The clothing company donates €2 to the Gorilla Organization for every item sold. And in March, Leo, along with photographer Harvey Gibson, musician Ben Mount and champion free runner Human Timothy, got the opportunity to see where their donations are spent. The TGB team joined Director Jillian Miller on a trip to Uganda. As well as seeing the endangered gorillas up-close, they also paid a visit to several projects.

Alternative livelihoods the key

At the Reformed Poachers Project, they saw first-hand how providing alternative livelihoods is key to keeping the forests free from snares, while at the beekeeping centre, project manager Jovia explained how honey now provides sustainable incomes for whole communities.

“Meeting the Gorilla Organization staff, seeing the projects and visiting the gorillas all highlighted the importance of taking a community-based approach to conservation,” says Leo.

“Every day was unique and the trip inspired us to do even more as a company to ensure gorillas stay safe in these difficult times.”

And the experience left a lasting impression on the company – as the pandemic spread, TGB switched their factory from making baseball caps to protective masks.

In all, 10,000 masks were delivered and donated to communities living on the edge of Bwindi as well as to all the gorilla rangers!

Pictured right: reformed poachers stop work for a group photo

Sharing is caring

Have you found any long-forgotten share certificates during your lockdown spring cleaning? Well, those small pieces of paper can make a big difference for gorillas.

ShareGift collects shareholdings large and small (and very small!) until there are enough shares to sell. They then donate the proceeds to a wide range of charities.

So far, they have donated more than £4,000 to the Gorilla Organization to support

Leo (centre) and his team go back to school



Our Africa Diary

Day 7: It's the last day of what has been the trip of a lifetime. And this has been the best day of all – almost as good as seeing the gorillas! Today we visited a small school at Rushaga, just outside of the gorilla habitat. The welcome was one I will never forget. The children welcomed us with songs. Their voices ricocheted through my soul. It was amazing to see what we are supporting as a brand and how we are helping inspire this next generation of gorilla guardians.



How can you help raise funds to save the gorillas?

conservation projects in Africa.

If you have share certificates that are doing nothing for you, find out how they can pay dividends for gorillas at help@sharegift.org

The gifts that keep on giving

In the last few months, increasing numbers of people have been moved to make or update their Will. Many are also choosing to remember their favourite charities with a gift.

For instance, a gift in a Will

could help plant thousands of trees in Walikale, protecting gorillas for many decades.

There is another way you can pay tribute to a loved-one's support for The Gorilla Organization – by making an 'in memoriam' gift in their name.

Please call us on 020 7916 4974 or email legacy@gorillas.org. You can also find out more about gifts in Wills – including a simple downloadable codicil – at www.gorillas.org/legacy.

Rangers remain determined in face of Virunga's darkest day

It was, says Virunga National Park Director Emmanuel de Merode, a “devastating day, not just for the park but for the surrounding communities”.

Towards the end of April, 12 rangers were killed in the line of duty. They had gone to the assistance of a community under attack from rebel militia when they were ambushed. Alongside the rangers – all aged between 24 and 40 – a driver and four other civilians lost their lives in the incident, which happened just a short distance from the park’s headquarters at Rumangabo.

The attack was the bloodiest day in the long history of Africa’s oldest National Park. However, it was far from unprecedented. Established in 1925 and stretching over 7,000 square miles, the Virunga National Park is famed for its biodiversity. As well as its famous mountain gorillas, it is home to elephants, lions and okapis. It is also rich in natural resources, resources which armed groups will go to any lengths to exploit.



Rising gorilla numbers give rangers a vital morale boost

The Park suffered through the civil wars of the 1960s and then from 1997 to 2003. When a fragile peace returned to DR Congo, hopes were high that tourism could drive economic and social development. However, ongoing insecurity has made this an impossible dream.

Hundreds killed

Jillian Miller, Director of the Gorilla Organization, has seen the situation worsen over the past couple of years. “Attacks on rangers have become all too commonplace, and around 200 have been killed over the past 20 years. Right across the

region, there are many conflicts playing out, each with their own dynamics, though large, well-organized militia pose the greatest threat to the rangers, wildlife and the integrity of this unique habitat.”

Few of the armed groups hiding out in the dense forests of the Virungas paid much heed to the United Nation Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire in order to allow governments to effectively respond to the pandemic. Indeed, in the communities around the park, there are fears that the situation could continue to deteriorate before it gets any better.

Coupled with the economic worries caused by the pandemic and the growing population – more than 4 million people now live within a day’s walk of the park – the burden being shouldered by the park’s rangers is greater than ever.

A growing burden

Their work now goes far beyond watching over the park’s wildlife. They are also responsible for the safe passage of civilian vehicles through the protected zone, and ambushes are commonplace. With more training and better equipment, the rangers have succeeded in drastically reducing the number of such attacks, as well as the number of civilians being killed in the park.

However, it is their success in keeping mountain gorillas safe against all the odds that gives rangers and conservationists the greatest hope. Mountain gorillas are the only sub-species of great ape in the world whose numbers are rising, with more than 1,200 individuals now living in DR Congo as well as across the border in Uganda and Rwanda.

“For most rangers, this isn’t just a job but a passion,” Jillian Miller explains. “For all the danger they face, they are determined to protect the wildlife they live alongside and to protect their home. For many, the mountain gorillas are the ultimate sign of why they make the sacrifices they do, and the rising numbers provides a real morale boost in the face of ongoing tragedy.”

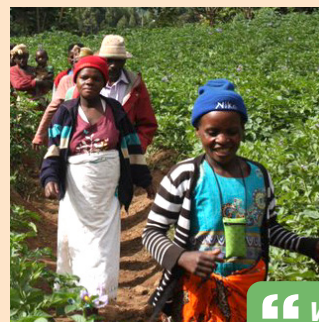


As the death toll rises, Virunga’s rangers are more committed than ever to protecting the park’s endangered mountain gorillas

Feeding hungry communities a priority in rural Uganda

As the Gorilla Organization’s project manager in Uganda, Dr Samson Werikhe works directly with the communities living around Bwindi National Park. And since the pandemic brought tourism to a standstill and hit the local economy hard, he has been working overtime.

“What I hear a lot these days is: ‘We’re worried we’re going to die of hunger before the virus gets to us’,” Samson says.



With tourism at a standstill, farming is vital

“Many are unable to reach the fields they usually work on. They need food. And they require support so they don’t feel the need to break the law and go into the gorilla habitat.”

In response, the Gorilla Organization has stepped up its sustainable agricultural programmes. A new agronomist has been hired to help get the most out of the soil, and a newly-recruited technical assistant is now busy showing people how to make a living from farming.

Over the coming months, the project will keep growing, building long-term resilience for the communities and reducing their reliance on the natural resources of the protected forests.

“ We’re worried we will die of hunger before the virus gets to us ”

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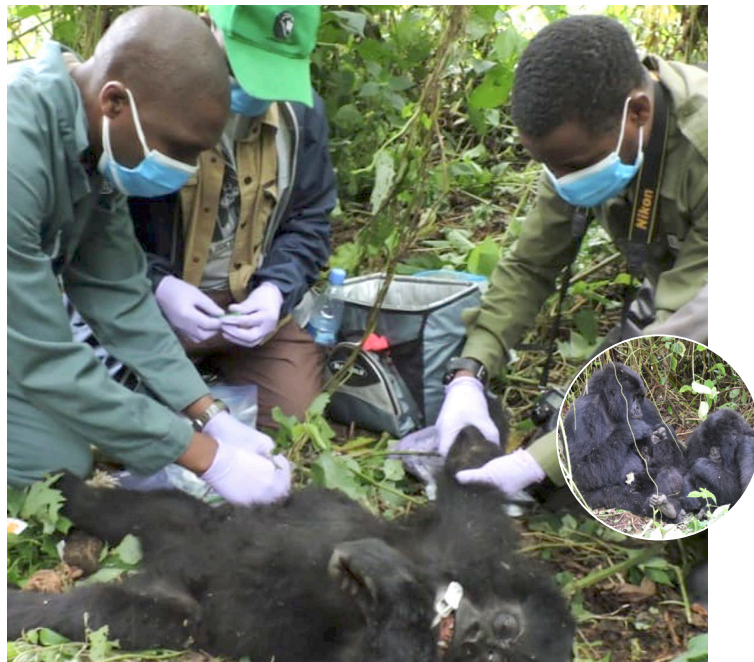
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Rangers to the rescue!

Thanks to the rapid response of rangers and vets, two-year-old mountain gorilla Theodore was cut free from a nylon snare – saving his hand and possibly even his life.

While checking up on the Humba Group, rangers patrolling the forests of the Virunga National Park noticed that the youngster had a crude nylon snare wrapped tight around his wrist. They alerted the Gorilla Doctors, specialist vets working alongside the local wildlife authorities.

While rangers kept the group's protective silverback distracted, the vets worked on Theodore. They also had to anaesthetize his mother Kanyalire during the procedure. Fortunately, they intervened just in time. While Theodore's left hand and arm were swollen due to the restricted circulation, an amputation was not necessary. The snare was cut away and both mother and infant rejoined the rest of the Humba Group.



(Above) Vets remove the snare from Theodore's wrist and (right) Theodore stays close to his mother as he recovers

Graduates giving back

Literacy means livelihoods. That's why the Gorilla Organization has long made empowering the indigenous Batwa people of Uganda a priority.

Community development projects in Kisoro District offer people a chance to earn a living without needing to chop down or burn trees, building a brighter future for people and gorillas.

Future in good hands

And the future of these projects is in good hands. For the first time, two Batwa students have graduated from university. Elias Segitondo and Tumwebaze Scorah gained degrees in social work and business administration.

Degree in hand, Elias immediately got to work alongside the Gorilla Organization's literacy

saw an unnamed female closely guarding an infant who appeared to be around one week old.

As usual, both mothers are keeping their new babies close to them at all times, and the groups' silverbacks are being more protective than normal. This means it will be some weeks before the sexes of the infants can be confirmed. Until then, conservationists are simply celebrating two new reasons for hope amid a backdrop of uncertainty.



Literary training is the key to driving female empowerment – and nobody is too old to learn in the Batwa communities

programme team, teaching vital skills to children and adults in two villages.

Tumwebaze, meanwhile, is now working for the Uganda

Wildlife Authority, and further strengthening the excellent relationship between the Gorilla Organization and the government department.

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The loss of a silverback can seriously upset the balance of a gorilla group. So, with the violent death of Rafiki (see page 1) rangers watching the Nkuringo group were worried that the family could split up or even be taken over – perhaps violently – by a lone silverback.

However, after a period of confusion, it appears Rwamutwe, the strongest

adolescent black back male in the group, has stepped up and taken charge.

It's hoped that, as Rwamutwe matures and develops his distinctive silver back over the next couple of years, the group will keep thriving under the watchful eye of rangers – and of tourists when it is safe for them to return to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest.

A mini baby boom in lockdown

Even as much of Africa went into lockdown, rangers continued to patrol the Bwindi National Park to check on its most famous residents. And in the space of two days, they shared two pieces of good news. New babies had been born to not one but two gorilla groups.

In the Nghongi group – the family to which the Gorilla Organization's adopted gorilla Raha belongs – Kabagyenyi gave birth at the start of May. Then, when the rangers checked up on the Muyambi group, they

