



Frontline of gorilla defence hit hard by killer mudslides

For more than two decades, The Gorilla Organization has inspired, empowered and equipped the frontline in the fight to save gorillas: the communities they live alongside.

This first line of defence is where the difference between survival and extinction is made. It's determined and resilient. But it's also vulnerable, especially in the face of natural disasters like the mudslides that hit parts of DR Congo, as well as neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda, in May.

The rain started falling in the early evening. In Kalehe, a rural, underdeveloped area of Congo and the base for gorilla conservation efforts in the region, it was market time. Buyers and sellers took shelter in whatever home they could. But the wall of mud was just too big and powerful. Stones weighing several tons each washed over the communities, covering an area 1.5km long and 500 metres wide. In some places, the mud was 15 metres deep.



Clearing up after another tragedy

"What we witnessed was simply beyond our comprehension," Henry Cirhuza, Project Manager in Congo, reported when the earth had stopped moving. Whole communities had been destroyed. Hundreds of people were dead, including two valued beneficiaries working at The Gorilla Organization's tree-planting projects. It's these projects that hold the key to addressing the root causes of the threats facing gorillas in the wild, namely habitat loss and a lack of sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

A green buffer destroyed

The mudslides were shocking. But they were not unexpected. Indeed, this was a tragedy a long time in the making. The destruction of forests in this part of Africa has been ruthless and relentless. Ironically, Bushushu, where The Gorilla Organization has established a tree-planting nursery, is also a hub of charcoal trading. Huge areas of forest are cut down to supply the largely-illegal trade. For the endangered mountain gorillas, it means their habitat is steadily shrinking, bringing them closer to people and increasing the risk of harmful encounters. The loss of trees also increases the risk of flooding and landslides. The soil in this part of Africa is sandy and fragile. Without trees to serve as a natural defence, water and mud can cascade downhill uninterrupted, bringing death and destruction like the communities witnessed in May.



Rebuilding community projects will be key to addressing the threats to gorillas in the wild

Even though they have been hit hard, the affected communities are determined to rebuild. Such resilience is shared by the teams at The Gorilla Organization's tree nurseries. This first line of defence for the gorillas is quickly being rebuilt. At Nyamubuki, the clear-up operation is well underway and work will begin again soon, with the aim of planting as many as two million trees to provide a buffer between people and gorillas. The work has already caught the attention of the European Union's representatives in Kinshasa and could be replicated on an even-bigger scale.

Hand-in-hand with the reforestation efforts, community

development programmes will be vital in reducing demand for charcoal and giving people a chance to earn a living without having to rely on the natural resources of the gorilla habitat. So too will empowerment. For the Batwa village of Biizi in Uganda, hope lies in youth. Elias, whose uncle was badly injured in the landslides, is the first member of his community to graduate from university.

With The Gorilla Organization's support, the Batwa people are slowly going from marginalised to empowered, equipped with the resilience to overcome future setbacks and the knowledge needed to reduce their likelihood, even if just a little.

Reflections on “Walking with Gorillas”

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka is one of the most famous naturalists in the world. The winner of countless awards, a National Geographic Explorer and a United Nations ‘Champion of the Earth’, she is a pioneer connecting human health and gorilla conservation. She’s also a valued Trustee of The Gorilla Organization, a role many years in the making. Dr Kalema-Zikusoka picks up the story...



“As I celebrate the release of my book *Walking with Gorillas*, I have to thank Jillian Miller and The Gorilla Organization for all the

great support they have given me on my journey.

A remarkable career

“This began in the 1990s when as a veterinary student at the Royal Veterinary College in London, they gave me the opportunity to volunteer and so I spent my days stuffing envelopes to send to donors.

“When I was appointed as the first veterinarian for the Uganda Wildlife Authority in 1996, The Gorilla Organization donated the first darting equipment. It arrived just in time to successfully handle the first fatal disease outbreak in the then critically endangered mountain gorillas of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.”

Since then, Dr Kalema-Zikusoka has set up her own NGO, Conservation Through Public Health, and continues to advocate for better futures for



Acclaimed conservationist Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka became the Ugandan government’s first wildlife veterinarian in 1996

both gorillas and the people that they live alongside. As *Digit News* goes to press, we have just heard that Gladys has been awarded an

Honorary Doctorate from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in London in recognition of her work protecting mountain gorillas.

Gorilla rangers all kitted out



forests even longer, tents and other camping equipment.

When the rangers at Walikale, Maiko, Itombwe and Kisimba-Ikobo reserves asked for replacements, The Gorilla Organization’s supporters rushed to help. The value of the average gift to the appeal for ‘Ranger Boxes’ was much higher than expected. This means that

boxes, filled with everything a ranger needs for a year in the field, are on their way to where they will make a real difference over the tough months ahead.

New uniforms for rangers

The Walikale Community Gorilla Reserve rangers now really

do look the part thanks to new uniforms donated by the Canadian Environment Agency. Henry Cirhuza (pictured below) received the consignment in June. Gorilla Organization logos have been sewn onto the fresh new uniforms, transforming the team’s appearance as committed professionals dedicated to making a difference for the gorillas they protect.



PhD success for Samson and Jean-Claude

Two long-standing members of The Gorilla Organization family have been recognised for their leading expertise in conservation.

Dr Jean-Claude Kyungu Kasolene recently received his PhD from the University of Kinshasa for his research into the coexistence of local communities and Grauer’s gorillas at Mount Tshiaberimu.

Jean-Claude joins Uganda Regional Programme Manager Dr Samson Werikhe who received his PhD in conservation biology from Antioch University New England in the USA.

Regular ranger patrols deter poachers and find sick or injured gorillas. The hundreds of rangers we support each month know this. They go out to patrol or conduct research but it’s not easy. They need supplies like raincoats, sturdy boots, provisions and, to stay out in the

Water project hits milestone

A lack of fresh water has long been a major problem for the communities living around Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda.

It’s forced countless people to trespass into the protected habitat, bringing them into contact with the endangered mountain gorillas. With

A shallow well at Kanyamahene village

funding from That Gorilla Brand, The Gorilla Organization has been installing wells and water harvesting systems in villages and schools alongside the park boundaries.

Using schools makes sense because they tend to have large roofs that can be used to capture and channel rainwater into storage tanks.

So far 19 villages, including three schools and a health centre, have benefitted, which means a massive 10,000 people have access to clean water for the first time.

And now, Phase 3 of the project is set to get underway to give even more people access to clean water and so keep gorillas and humans safe.



Hope and tragedy seen on Mount Tshiaberimu

Mount Tshiaberimu is located in the troubled Central Sector of the Virunga National Park. Its name means “mountain of the spirits”, so called because the indigenous Baswagha clan used to talk of dark-haired spirit animals living deep in the forests.

For almost a decade, The Gorilla Organization ran a pioneering conservation project here. Despite the immense logistical challenges, not to mention the high levels of insecurity, the team led by Jean-Claude Kyungu managed to build strong working relations with local communities, bringing levels of poaching right down. More importantly, the project succeeded in raising the numbers of ‘spirit animals’, in reality Grauer’s (or eastern lowland) gorillas up from around just 12 to more than 26.

Over recent years, however, numbers have been steadily declining. The area has fallen under the control of rebel militia on countless occasions. Poaching has been rife, and gorillas killed. And a serious decline in breeding

age females has pushed the whole population to the brink.

Tragically, in March 2023, the insecurity claimed the life of Freddy Mahamba (pictured above inset), the first ranger to be employed by The Gorilla Organization to guard the Grauer’s gorillas. Mahamba will be sorely missed by all the Virunga park rangers who risk their lives in the line of duty.

But still, there’s reason for some tempered optimism. After a thorough feasibility study, plans are underway to relocate two more female gorillas to the mountain. Translocation as it’s called in conservation circles comes with no guarantees.

Nevertheless, following the birth of two gorilla babies on Mount Tshiaberimu over the past three years, hopes are high that the incomers will help kickstart recovery, providing the ideal legacy for Mahamba and all the people who have given so much to preserve the habitat and wildlife of this mystical mountain.



Grauer’s gorillas are critically-endangered and, inset, Freddy Mahamba who was murdered whilst protecting them

A generation on, a conservation culture emerges among the young

Their fathers were poachers. Their grandfathers too. But for the young people living near Bwindi National Park, the forests they live alongside

are to be protected rather than exploited.

The Gorilla Organization has been working in the region for

almost 20 years, making slow but steady progress in not only creating sustainable livelihoods but in building a true conservation culture among people of all ages.

The Reformed Poachers Project has been pivotal in driving this generational shift. The children of beneficiaries now realize the value of protecting gorillas and their habitat. Local staff explain that “the young people here now want to be rangers or even wildlife vets. They value the gorillas in a way previous generations didn’t. The cycle has been broken.”

Pupils at Gitenderi School aspire to work in conservation



World Women Ranger Day



In celebration of women rangers, meet Moreen Tumukurature Ayebare. Seen here with Frances Tugumisirize, head of The Gorilla Organization’s Children For Sustainable Conservation project, she is a ranger with Uganda Wildlife Authority.

Although pregnant when this picture was taken, Moreen had spent the day training school teachers in the Bwindi forest. In June, she gave birth to a baby boy – a young conservationist of the future!

The Gorilla Organization
110 Gloucester Avenue
London NW1 8HX
Tel: 020 7916 4974
info@gorillas.org
www.gorillas.org
Reg. Charity No. 1117131

Trustees:
Ian Redmond OBE, *Chairman*
Bishu Chakraborty
Giles Clark
Steve Crossman
Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka
Lord Spencer J Phillips
Professor Stuart Semple
Belinda Wakeling

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James Lewis, Hayley Mills,
Dr Nathan Myhrvold

Digit News
Editor: Jillian Miller

Deputy Editor: David Hewitt

Photographs: CTPH, Henry Cirhuza,
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Taking the slow boat to support projects

Political insecurity and violence are a recurring issue in Goma. But right now, the problem has come even closer to home for The Gorilla Organization team.

As violence rages, the endangered mountain gorillas of the Virunga National Park have been left more vulnerable than ever as rangers struggle to reach them.

At its height, fighting was reported just 20km north of Goma, where The Gorilla Organization has its headquarters. The conflict has



Henry and colleagues take to the water to reach projects

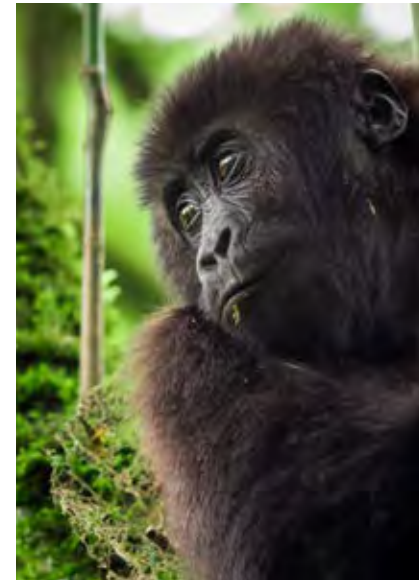
made the N2 road too treacherous to use. The road is not only a lifeline for trade and resources. It's also the main – often the only – way of getting to the National Park from Goma.

Without the road, rangers are unable to reach the gorillas. And Henry and his team cannot drive to the projects they are equally committed to running.

But where there's a will, there's a way. For more than 15 years, Henry Cirhuza has led The Gorilla Organization's projects in DR Congo. They really have seen it all. From earthquakes and the eruption of the Mount Nyiragongo volcano through to public health emergencies and blackouts, they have kept their conservation and development projects going whatever the challenge. And so, over recent months, they have found a way to adapt to this new problem, the encirclement of Goma by rebel forces.

Instead, the team have started taking to the water. Though more time consuming, taking a boat across Lake Kivu is a far safer way to get to the projects.

"We need to take more precautions to supervise our projects these days," Henry



Mountain gorillas are isolated as rebel activity closes roads

explains. "The city is almost completely surrounded and the roads are dangerous."

So, for now, at least, travelling by water remains the safest way to get from the Goma Resource Centre to the projects, allowing the team to maintain their proud record of always being there for the communities that rely on them.

One silverback, many benefits



Binyindo leads a family of nine mountain gorillas in Bwindi

Binyindo may not be the most handsome of the silverbacks living in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, but these days, he's certainly one of the better known.

Sporting a wonky nose, the result of a long-ago altercation with another adult male gorilla, he now leads a family of nine, all of them well known to the park's rangers. They are also well-known to the tourists who visit the park hoping to spend an hour in the company of wild gorillas.

The Gorilla Organization's Tuver Wundi went to meet one of the guides looking after the

Binyido group, Lameck Monday. He's been working in the park for ten years and has seen first-hand how tourism has helped transform the lives of the communities living alongside the gorilla forests.

With 20% of all tourist revenues redistributed locally, and projects such as The Gorilla Organization's long-standing community conservation programme, the people of the Bwindi region have less reason to trespass into the park to poach or collect firewood.

For the Binyido family and the 450 other mountain gorillas living here, that means the chance to live and thrive in peace.

Dr Nelson Bukamba wins award for gorilla health research

The Gorilla Organization has named Ugandan veterinarian Dr Nelson Bukamba as the winner of the 2022 Ymke Warren Memorial Conservation Award.

The award recognises young African primatologists whose research is contributing to a better understanding of wild gorillas and other great apes. Dr Bukamba has been working with the wildlife veterinarians Gorilla Doctors in Uganda since 2020 and is currently completing a Masters degree in Conservation Medicine at the

University of Edinburgh where he studies gorilla epidemiology.

The Gorilla Organization established the award in memory of Dr Ymke Warren, an internationally renowned primatologist and conservationist who died while conducting field studies in Africa in 2010.



Nelson Bukamba (centre) accepts the award from Senior Warden Moses Turinawe and Dr Samson Werikhe