



Rwanda's gorillas benefit from community-based eco-tourism **An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston**

In June of 2008 I travelled to Rwanda to report on the progress of the country's hugely successful gorilla conservation program. I had first visited Rwanda in 2004 during the last official census of mountain gorillas, which was later to reveal that the population had increased 17% since 1989, despite the fact that just ten years before, the people of Rwanda were involved in one of the swiftest, most brutal genocides in man's history. Importantly I wanted to understand the basis for this success, to see what lessons could be learned and investigate the possibility of creating a framework for conservation that could be used elsewhere. What I discovered was startling in both its simplicity and logic.

The key to Rwanda's conservation success is community-based eco-tourism. The government, with the help of outside non-governmental organisations, (predominantly the Mountain Gorilla Project), has developed an entire industry around its population of gorillas. It is well organised, well managed and profitable, bringing in revenues in excess of US\$7 million per annum – the third highest foreign currency generator in the country, after tea and coffee (source: Office of Rwanda Tourism and National Parks (ORTPN)).

Engaging the community

Importantly, the tourism industry directly benefits the local villagers, those people having to live and survive on the edge of the forests that the gorillas inhabit. In the past, the villagers would use the forest to harvest timber for building and firewood, as well as for hunting animals such as deer for food. Directly and indirectly, such activities affected the gorillas, which were often caught inadvertently in traps and snares, or were killed through fear when their paths accidentally crossed those of the human trespassers. As Theodore Mgerageze, a porter in one of the villages that skirt the edge of the forest told me, "Before tourism gorillas had no meaning to us because we got no benefit from their being here. Now the whole village looks out for the gorillas, protects them, because we earn our living from the tourism they bring."

In total around 76% of the jobs related to gorilla tourism are filled by local villagers (source: ORTPN), which ensures that those people affected most by the presence of the national park, with all its associated rules and restrictions, benefit the most from the tourist dollar the park provides. And there are additional benefits. As well as the jobs directly linked to tourism – forest rangers, trackers, guards, porters, guides – the government set up a scheme of revenue-sharing that diverts 5% of income generated through gorilla tourism directly to the villagers.

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The money they receive pays for wood and food, negating the need to plunder these vital resources from within the national park boundaries, reducing the potential for human-gorilla conflict. Additionally, an 80km-long dry-stone wall has been built at the park boundary, keeping the grazing animals inside, which protects the valuable crops grown by the farmers owning land abutting the park. No longer concerned with the potential loss of their crops, the farmers have ceased laying snares to catch deer and, as a result, accidental mortality of gorillas has been all but eradicated (source: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)).

The local communities also benefit indirectly from the tourism program. Road building to aid tourism has had the knock on effect of making it easier and cheaper for farmers to transport their products to the markets, increasing their yield. Additionally, the national treasury has provided funding for community-based projects. For example, in 2008 ORTPN unveiled in Musanze and Bulera, two districts along the frontier of the national park, community facilities costing Frw410 million, which included a community lodge, health centres, school classrooms and water tanks (source: ORTPN).

Conclusion

While recognising that there is room for improvement, the steps taken by the Rwandan authorities to protect and preserve gorillas clearly work, both for the community and for the animals. The villages around the national park are thriving and the wounds from the events of 1994 are healing. Rwanda's gorillas are also thriving. Each year the park authorities hold a Kwita Izina – a naming ceremony. It is advertised countrywide and is an opportunity for all Rwandan's to become personally involved in the naming of young gorillas. Between 2005, when the ceremony first took place, and 2007, eighty gorillas were given names. A further twenty gorillas were named in 2008, when the ceremony lasted a week and included concerts, community work, a national conference and the unveiling of a gorilla monument in an effort to highlight the progress made in promoting government-community partnerships in gorilla conservation.