



International Gorilla
Conservation Programme

THE SILVERBACK STANDARD

MOUNTAIN GORILLA CONSERVATION THROUGH THE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Photo by: Neil Osborne

Mountain gorillas are highly susceptible to COVID-19 and other human related illnesses.

Message from IGCP - COVID-19: Lessons for Mountain Gorilla Conservation

Over the past two years, our lives and work have gone through a period of unprecedented change. What provides us with hope amidst the difficulties and concern about our families, colleagues, partners, and the mountain gorillas as well, is our collective ability to collaborate and our intrinsic resiliency.

Very early on in the pandemic, IGCP together with other conservation organizations and authorities quickly organized to respond at site level, national level, and regional level. With a long history of this kind of collaborative approach to information sharing and problem-solving, a quick realignment of standard operating procedures was made possible, each organization and institution doing what was within our ability to support each other.

Community dialogue and engagement through all this uncertainty is the cornerstone of continuing to build positive and constructive relationships among people, parks and wildlife. Efforts to collectively find ways to avoid and mitigate crop raiding by wildlife during this period had an increased sense of urgency, to safeguard livelihoods. Water, sanitation and hygiene projects and their link with a One Health approach are vital, and significant progress under the Water4Virungas project has been registered this year. Reassessment of tourism revenue dependency to fund park operations and community projects is ongoing.

We must not forget that even though we might not be able to see each other as often - and when we do we keep our distance and

wear a face mask - that we are still together, we can still actively and empathetically listen to each other and work together to find solutions to any challenge we face, including COVID-19. We are certain that we as a collective community here focused on mountain gorillas, and indeed a global community, will show our commitment to working with each other and help each other be resilient in this difficult time. Gorillas, and for most other threatened and endangered species we share this planet with.

Although down listing the Mountain Gorilla from Critically Endangered to Endangered is a positive sign, that confirms the effectiveness of conservation measures implemented by the governments of DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, it is imperative that these protective measures continue and that emerging threats are addressed. The threat of potential disease outbreaks due to close proximity of humans could, in the near future, rapidly reverse the gains made during the last three decades. The Mountain Gorilla will remain a conservation- dependent species for the foreseeable future and all IUCN best practice guidelines for great ape conservation should be implemented and effectively enforced throughout the Mountain Gorilla range. There is therefore no room for complacency in our efforts, and instead we need to build on what works – engagement, dialogue and collaborative action – so that we secure the future for mountain gorillas.

Desperate Conditions Call for Desperate Measures! Nelson Guma, Chief Park Warden, Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area



When the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in East Africa, we were all worried about the safety of both the staff and the mountain gorillas. We quickly acted and heightened measures to minimize chances of disease transmission to the Endangered mountain gorillas; first mountain gorilla tourism was suspended to limit exposure of the gorillas to humans as a way

of minimizing the risk of disease transmission. Three months later tourism was re-opened to operate under stricter regulations including increase in the viewing distance from 7-10 meters, routine COVID-19 testing of field staff, compulsory wearing of masks by everyone, disinfecting boots before visiting the gorillas, regular washing and sanitizing of hands especially before approaching the gorillas, allocation of more time (from 4-6 or 8 hours) to monitor and observe gorillas daily. This helps in understanding their social dynamics better. Health monitoring was also enhanced with timely veterinary interventions. Precisely, the Standard Operating Procedures were reviewed to erase any loopholes that could expose mountain gorillas to COVID-19. We are grateful these interventions have paid off, till date no positive case



of COVID -19 has been reported among the mountain gorillas. With vaccines now available all our staff have been vaccinated and continue to observe the recommended SOPs. Sensitization of surrounding communities about COVID-19 and the risk it poses to mountain gorillas continues to be done. Protecting Mountain gorillas against COVID-19 is an uphill task but with strict measures, we can keep them safe!

Park Edge Communities Join the Park to Fight COVID-19 Prosper Uwingeli, Chief Park Warden, Volcanoes National Park.

It is not conservation if the community is not involved. In-order to ensure effective protection of the mountain gorillas, the Volcanoes National Park vigilantly sensitized the surrounding communities on their roles and responsibilities in protecting the Endangered mountain gorillas from COVID-19. This action plus the long-term investment in community partnership helped much in creating a vigilant and supportive team against COVID-19. During this period, we have seen the communities get more interested in mountain gorilla conservation, always asking questions about gorilla health and what more they can do to ensure the continued survival

and safety of mountain gorillas. People have learnt that mountain gorillas share a close DNA with humans and are highly susceptible to human infections and this has driven them into saving the Endangered primates. It is a lesson that parks alone cannot protect mountain gorillas but with the involvement and support of the park edge community and other stakeholders a lot can be achieved! Thanks to the efforts of every stakeholder involved, no single mountain gorilla has tested positive for COVID-19 to date.

Tourism and business around the park has also started to take shape, giving hope for a better tomorrow.

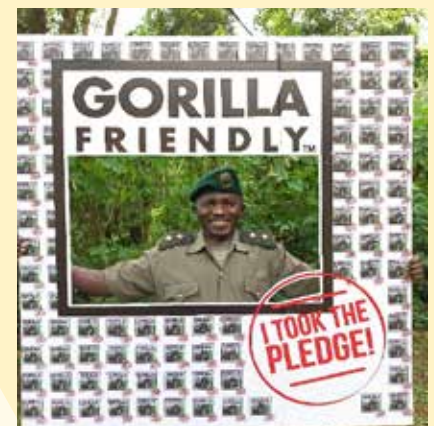


Promoting Responsible Tourism through the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge

“Infectious diseases like COVID-19 pose one of the greatest threats to mountain gorillas which share 98.4% of our DNA. As mountain gorilla tourism picks up again after the pandemic-related halt, it’s critical that visiting or potential tourists receive optimal support and knowledge to uphold best practices in visiting the great apes to ensure the safety of the endangered species and the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge is a great first step.” says Wellard Makambo, Acting Director, International Gorilla Conservation Programme.

The Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge is an online awareness raising campaign aimed at encouraging all those planning to visit the mountain gorillas - and even those who are not! - to pledge to observe gorilla tourism rules during treks and to share feedback on their trekking experience after the visit through the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge website – www.gorillafriendly.org.

Since the re-launch of the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge campaign in Sept 2020, IGCP has trained over 300 tour operators and guides, park staff –



Over 800 people have taken the pledge to protect mountain gorillas.

rangers, trackers, guides and hoteliers in Uganda and Rwanda on the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge with the aim of creating awareness about the pledge and securing their commitment in popularizing this important campaign since they meet and interact with a lot of tourists from time to time. Several conservation and tourism institutions including Rwanda Tour and Travel Association, Association of Uganda Tour Operators, Rwanda Tourism Chamber, Rwanda Development Board, Uganda Wildlife Authority, Uganda Tourism Board, have also been engaged to endorse and support the campaign.

Other actions include development and dissemination of I.E.C materials

including a short video - https://youtu.be/U_9ejcedM8Q a social media campaign. These actions and more have facilitated increased awareness about the gorilla visitation rules and the dire need to observe them especially now during the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers of people pledging to observe gorilla visitation rules continues to increase too. It is the hope of IGCP that these will gradually contribute to the overall safety and protection of mountain gorillas.

Taking the pledge gives one the chance to contribute to the continued safety of mountain gorillas while sharing tracking experience gives one

the chance to share their opinions and provide feedback that helps conservationists and park managers to strengthen measures that safeguard mountain gorillas as well as improve the tourism experience.

“There isn't any better time than now during the pandemic, if we take the Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge we shall be able to protect the mountain gorillas better” Nelson Guma, Chief Park Warden, Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area. Be a responsible tourist today, take Gorilla Friendly™ Pledge St... www.gorillafriendly.org and contribute to the safety, protection and survival of mountain gorillas!

IGCP Donates Emergency COVID-19 Support to Parks

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the region plus the closure of tourism and other economic activities did not only affect the community but national parks too. Protected Area Authorities and communities alike all struggled to provide and or maintain a steady supply of food and other basic necessities for their staff and families.

To supplement park efforts, IGCP has since the onset of COVID-19 been supporting the parks with various supplies including; face masks, sanitizers, infrared thermometers, water dispensers, back pack bags, water bottles, dust bins, tippy taps, hand washing facilities, rechargeable batteries, Jik, soap and other related detergents, cooking oil, over 21.8 tons of maize flour, 15 tons of beans, 11.7 tons of rice, sugar, salt, baking flour and powder, biscuits, toilet paper, firewood, Nitrile powderless gloves among others. The purpose of this was to ensure adequate provision and safety of park staff that have dedicated their lives to monitor and



protect the mountain gorillas during the pandemic period.

In addition, IGCP supported a portion of the stipends for the community members supporting Virunga National Park staff as Human Gorilla Conflict Resolution teams (HuGo) around Mikeno sector and also procured new uniforms and rain gears for the teams.

Advanced site-level planning and coordination of in kind, logistical, and additional support like what is mentioned above is ensuring that core park operations – gorilla monitoring, patrols, and maintaining positive, low-risk

engagement with community members is maintained.

Park managers, staff, and protected area authorities are grateful for the support extended to their staff during this challenging time. “The food ratios found and kept us at the out posts, this minimized ranger interaction with the outside community hence reducing the risk of disease infection. We never lacked and we are grateful because it enabled us to continue work without much worry” says John Kanyaraju, Ranger from Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

Faustin Habimana, a Ranger from Volcanoes National Park also notes that “The donations were timely. The back pack bags for example help us to carry most of our necessities for the day including water and sanitizers. This has eased work and we thank IGCP for the continued support”

Thanks to IGCP's Coalition partners, WWF-UK ,FFI, WWF Sweden, WWF Norway that made (and continue to make) this action possible.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Community Livelihoods

For many households around mountain gorilla parks, tourism had been their life line, that is until the COVID – 19 pandemic affecting the tourism industry quickly and profoundly.

“Life was hard for most of the porters because none of us saw this coming and unfortunately very few of us had alternative sources of income, Nicholas Banyezaki” porter Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Nicholas adds, “COVID-19 has taught us a big lesson - to diversify our income options, improve on our saving culture and always have plan B for hard times in future.

Sources of income were curtailed, prices of commodities increased while movements were restricted leaving very limited survival options. There was evidently vulnerabilities among the communities.

“The pandemic hit hard. It affected all our main sources of income causing a lot of poverty and hunger among the park surrounding communities. Some families could hardly afford a decent meal let alone a piece of soap to keep their hands and homes clean and sanitized.” Richard Ngabirano, a resident of Buhoma in Bwindi.



Park edge communities generate income from tourism enterprises such as baskets and wood curvings.

While the communities struggled with the economic challenges posed by the lockdown and suspension of tourism, there were fears that the community would resort to poaching and harvesting of other park resources for survival. Some reports indeed indicated an increase in poaching since the on-set of COVID-19. Jean Damascene Hakizimana, Acting Monitoring and Research Warden for Volcanoes National Park reveals that “Poaching and illegal activities like bamboo cutting in the park increased during the pandemic”. Similarly, Mr. Nelson Guma, Chief Park Warden, Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area says poaching increased in the conservation area “About 150 snares were found and destroyed monthly during the lockdown. However, monitoring and patrols were heightened, and this saw to a decline in the number of snares from 150 to 20 monthly starting Nov 2021”.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact on the livelihoods of people, especially the park edge communities, highlighted several lessons and calls for the development of resilient action plans. Today, several organizations have come in to support the park edge communities to start up and or boost other livelihood initiative options, for example IGCP donated USD 11,253 to the Human Gorilla Conflict Resolution Teams (HuGos) to start up a Savings and Credit Scheme in Uganda and USD 17,000 was donated to about 12 Village Loans and Savings Associations in Rwanda to improve their lending capacity.

Contact Us

Head Office

International Gorilla Conservation Programme

A Coalition of Conservation International, Fauna & Flora International and WWF
Regional Office ; Scola House, KN 8 Ave., Kacyiru
P.O. Box 931, Kigali, Rwanda
Email : info@igcp.org
Website: www.igcp.org

Field/Country Offices

DR Congo: Goma 31, Avenue Pélicans, Quartier Le Volcan, Goma, DR Congo
Rwanda: 1st Floor, Seventh Day Adventist North Conference Building, Rue de la Coopération, Musanze District
Uganda: Plot 4 Coryndon Road, Makanga. P.O. Box 659 Kabale, Uganda

Important Updates

Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Africa’s Great Apes

IGCP together with Conservation Through Public Health in collaboration with IUCN Section on Great Apes and GRASP, spearheaded the development of a policy brief on COVID-19 and Africa’s great apes under the Africa CSOs Biodiversity Alliance (ACBA) <https://africanscos.com/resources/policy-brief/> Two webinars were conducted to discuss the policy brief with particular focus on the challenges facing Africa’s great apes especially now during the pandemic times and key recommendations were made to respective players including governments, tourists and park managers. The policy brief will be launched in February 2022 at a high level Webinar targeting government leaders, associations of tour operators and guides, conservationists and Park authorities from all African countries where great ape tourism is happening.

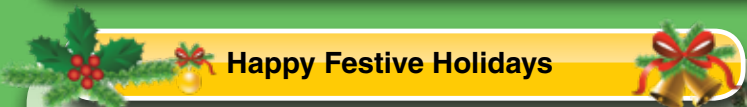
COVID – 19: Contingency Plan for Mountain Gorillas

IGCP in collaboration with other conservation partners, developed a contingency plan with the aim of protecting mountain gorillas, conservation personnel, tourists and park adjacent communities from SARS CoV-2, the emergent coronavirus that causes the human disease COVID-19. The web-based resource designed to be effective and practical in a transboundary context is provided in both English and French and is hosted at www.gorillaplan.org. The web portal is managed by IGCP and was developed by Geo Gecko with funding from UNESCO and Columbus Zoo and Aquarium.

★ Baby Boom amidst COVID-19 Pandemic ★

There is always a silver lining for every dark cloud. Irrespective of the tough times, Mother Nature blessed the region with a record-breaking baby boom. The first of its kind in the history of mountain gorilla conservation; Around 22 mountain gorillas were born in Virunga National Park and 17 in Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Area between July 2020 and June 2021.

In the same vein, 24 baby gorillas were named at Rwanda’s first ever virtual Kwita Izina ceremony last September. Thanks to strengthened conservation efforts that created an enabling environment for the mountain gorillas to thrive.



Happy Festive Holidays

It’s been a busy and quite challenging year but we made it! It is this time of the year again that we take a break off the busy work schedules and reunite with families, travel, laugh, rest and make merry. Thank you for walking this year with us and for your unwavering support towards mountain gorilla conservation. From all of us at IGCP, we say **“Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year 2022 ahead!”**



A Coalition of

