COVID-19 AND AFRICA'S GREAT APES

Challenges and Threats Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic for Sustaining Conservation through Responsible Great Ape Tourism

POLICY BRIEF





Conservation Programme SECURING THE FUTURE FOR MOUNTAIN GORILLAS



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Chimpanzee



Mountain Gorilla



SECURING THE FUTURE FOR MOUNTAIN GORILLAS







Key Messages

01

Tourism brings people and great apes into close contact and because of their closely matched DNA great apes are susceptible to human diseases like coronaviruses. Adherence by tourists and field staff to the **IUCN Best Practice Guidelines for Great Ape Tourism** is therefore critical.

African governments, donors and tour operators need to establish and/or strengthen measures that minimize the risks of infection and other related threats to the survival of great apes.

Responsible tourism using a One Health approach can help minimise the trade-offs between economic motives and great ape conservation.

Community-based long-term nature-based and nature-compatible enterprises at great ape sites should be supported by governments, donors and tour operators to promote diversified income generation to reduce direct dependence on great ape tourism.

Why this Policy Brief

This policy brief highlights the key challenges and threats facing Africa's great apes in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic and offers actionable recommendations for a One Health1 approach that can achieve great ape conservation, responsible tourism and community benefits.

Key Audience

Governments, tourism industry, private sector and donors.

The Challenge

Africa's great apes including bonobos, chimpanzees and gorillas face grave and growing threats including poaching, habitat loss and fragmentation and wildlife trafficking.¹ The emergence of the highly-infectious COVID-19 disease also presents great apes with a new threat additional to those posed by pre-existing transmissible human diseases.² Rangers, guides, porters, researchers, trackers, tourists and surrounding communities co-exist on the same land with habituated great apes and can transmit diseases to each other when they come into close proximity.³

Great Ape tourism is active at 26 sites in ten countries across west, central and east Africa (Cameroun, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda), involving seven species/populations (Mountain Gorillas, Grauer's Gorillas, Western Lowland Gorillas, Eastern Chimpanzees, Central Chimpanzee, Western Chimpanzees and Bonobo). For further details on these locations and populations see the addendum to this policy brief. Great ape tourism generates revenue that contributes significantly to national economies and community development with as much as 60% being allocated to wildlife management in the case of Uganda.⁴ Both the survival of great apes, and all these benefits to livelihoods and economies are at risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is, therefore great urgency for African governments to strictly and consistently enforce best practices in great ape tourism⁵ to protect and manage the health⁶ of endangered and critically endangered populations of great apes. A One Health approach enables this to be done at the same time as optimizing the benefits of tourism, especially to local communities, through peoplecentered and nature-positive approaches.

Key Threats

Infectious Disease Susceptibility

Great apes are susceptible to a wide range of human diseases, including measles, scabies, tuberculosis, common flu, and other respiratory diseases.^{7,8} Firstexposure time to an illness or virus that is

¹ The 'One Health' approach aligns priorities for human health and environmental health, recognizing that each is critical for supporting the other. 'One Health' is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals and ACBA's focus on Sustainable Use as a foundational principle for biodiversity conservation in Africa. See https://www. onehealthcommission.org/en/why_one_health/what_is_one_health/

relatively innocuous to humans can devastate an entire ape population. Because humans and great apes share over 98% DNA genetic material and have the same angiotensin-converting enzyme-2 protein receptors that the SARS-COV-2 virus attaches to, great apes can easily contract COVID-19 from people^{9,10}. Some apes, especially gorillas and chimpanzees, have in the past succumbed to respiratory viruses, including coronaviruses, which guickly spread within and between groups as they interact.^{11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16,} ¹⁷ If a novel disease like COVID-19 circulates in small vulnerable great ape populations causing significant morbidity and mortality, local or subspecies extinction can occur.¹⁸ Captive gorillas in zoos contracted COVID-19 from asymptomatic keepers29,30 providing direct evidence that great apes are susceptible to this novel coronavirus.

Although several governments have implemented policies to minimize the risk of disease transmission, enforcement of existing best practice recommendations remains weak. The great ape visitation rules, including viewing distance guidelines, are routinely violated, increasing the risk of disease transmission from humans.¹⁹

> I n a p p r o p r i a t e tourism marketing increases potential risky behaviours instead of reinforcing risk mitigation

Due to competition for clients, some tour operators ignore the tourism standards and best practices in order to make their products more appealing, while others are not even aware of them. Some operators post inappropriate marketing messages, including images of tourists close to or touching great apes, seemingly offering clients a similar experience.²⁰ Tourists also post similar images on social media.31 This kind of marketing not only sends the wrong message, it raises tourists' expectations and trivialises conservation efforts as some tour handlers may resort to unethical practices to allow their tourists to get closer to the wild animals²¹.

Lack of awareness or limited knowledge of great ape tourism rules puts great apes at risk from contagious human diseases

While some tourists are quick to disregard tourism rules in the absence of strict enforcement, others are simply unaware of them.²² Tourism site managers, tour companies, handlers and guides are sometimes reluctant to educate tourists about the great ape viewing guidelines before their adventure. Lack of knowledge leads to noncompliance to the rules, exposing the apes to both asymptomatic and visibly ill tourists. Tourists should be held accountable for failing to respect rules.

Inadequate capacity to manage disease outbreaks

With tourism revenue drastically curtailed by the coronavirus pandemic, tourism sites are struggling financially, and many are unable to provide adequate personal protective equipment, medicine, food and water to their staff. This in itself is demotivating to the teams responsible for the health of wildlife and management of tourists. Additionally, most great ape sites lack clear-cut contingency plans,²³ including operational funds and technical personnel to handle epidemics should they break out, making the situation even riskier²⁴.

Climate, economic and social vulnerability

A combination of factors creates a potential 'perfect storm' arising from increased and frequent contact between humans and great apes both inside and outside their habitats, compounded by the growing human populations surrounding most great ape habitats. Communities living adjacent to parks often lack adequate sanitation and hygiene and have limited access to basic health care services and clean water, forcing them to source many of these basic services from inside the protected areas.¹ Because of all this and more, disease outbreaks especially diarrheal and respiratory illnesses are a common occurrence.²⁴

Furthermore, these boundary communities usually survive on subsistence farming characterized by limited incomes and high food insecurity due to changing weather, adverse economic conditions, poor infrastructure and low literacy levels.²⁵

Recommendations

To African Governments:

Develop and adopt clear guidelines for the re-opening and management of ape visitation that include mandatory wearing of masks by park staff, tourists and researchers, Consider decreasing the number of people for each daily visit from 8 to 6 and increasing the viewing distance from 7 to 10 meters.

Enforce strict adherence to, the IUCN Best Practice Guidelines5,6 for disease prevention.

Consider testing and vaccinating park staff against COVID-19 and other preventable diseases.

Support local communities to develop both tourism and non-tourism dependent livelihoods that are compatible with great ape conservation, through nature-based and nature-compatible enterprises.

Enhance opportunities for transboundary collaboration and sharing of information and lessons on pandemics and conservation approaches that are people-centred and nature-positive and apply a One Health approach.

To Donor Partners:

Channel funding to critical conservation sites and issues including; the improvement of health systems around great ape habitats, equipping park staff with necessary protective gear and supplies and capacity building of park staff on disease identification, monitoring and management.

Support government agencies to establish an African Great Apes Emergency Fund for disease response and great ape conservation during periods of reduced tourism.

Support and invest in research on prevention of disease transmission between humans and great apes.

Support local communities to develop both tourism and non-tourism dependent livelihoods enterprises that are compatible with great ape conservation.

To Tour Operators:

Heighten vigilance to ensure adherence to best practice guidelines for responsible marketing of all tourism services.

Sensitize clients about great ape tourism best practice guidelines ahead of the visit guidelines and hold them accountable.

Sensitize clients about great ape visitation rules in advance and hold them accountable.

Encourage government agencies to enforce great ape tourism basic best practices.

Encourage clients to promote conservation at great ape sites by supporting local community initiatives.

Conclusion

Evidence clearly shows that great apes can and do contract human respiratory infections. With the current availability of effective vaccines against COVID-19 that prevent severe disease, there is an urgent need to further protect great apes from infection by making vaccines available to people interacting closely or sharing a habitat with them32, and ensure the promotion and circulation of information about vaccines with culturally-appropriate messages to combat vaccine misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. Such target people include park staff, conservation and tourism personnel, local communities and tourists.

Even after the current COVID-19 pandemic has been brought under control to the fullest extent possible, these recommendations should continue to be enforced to protect great apes and the tourism industry, against emerging zoonotic diseases and future pandemics.

An integrated 'One Health' response to the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to protect great apes and other wildlife whilst safeguarding the communities with whom they share their habitats, now and in the future.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: Acknowledgements

Annex II: Map of great ape tourism sites in Africa

Annex III: References and Notes



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Photo Credit: Bonobo images by Jo Thompson and Takeshi Furuichi; Chimpanzee images by Budongo Conservation Field Station and Takeshi Furuichi; Mountain gorilla images by Mgahinga Gorilla National Park and Neil Evermaven Osborne.

Map Credit: International Gorilla Conservation Programme/Stephen Holness; Site data compiled with support from UN-GRASP and IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group Section on Great Apes; PA data from UNEP-WCMC World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA).

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International Gorilla Conservation Programme is a coalition of Fauna & Flora International, Conservation International, and WWF.

Conservation Through Public is an NGO and non profit that promotes biodiversity conservation by enabling people, gorillas and other wildlife to coexist through improving their health and community livelihoods in and around protected areas in Africa.



ANNEX II - MAP OF GREAT APE TOURISM SITES IN AFRICA

This map represents sites that offer different types of primate viewing experiences and are at different stages of development. NOTE: We believe that Chimpanzee sites remain under represented.

Annex III -	- LIS	OF COUNTRIES AND TOURISM SITES							
Country	Map Code	Park	Mountain Gorillas	Grauer's Gorillas	Western Lowland Gorillas	Eastern Chimpanzees	Central Chimpanzee	Western Chimpanzees	Bonobo
Cameroun	1	Lobéké National Park							
	2	Campo Ma'an							
		Dja Faunal Reserve							
Central African Republic		Mbaéré-Bodingué National Park							
	3	Dzanga Sangha							
Republic of Congo	4	Lossi interzone							
	5	Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park							
	6	Odzala-Kokoua National Park							
		Loubetsi-Nyanga							
		Conkouati-Douli National Park							
DR Congo	7	Virunga National Park							
	8	Kahuzi-Biega National Park							
	9	Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve							
	10	Lac Tumba, Malebo							
		Odzala Kakoua National Park							
		Maiko National Park							
		Salonga National Park							
		Lomani National Park							
		Ntokou Pikounda National Park							
Equatorial Guinea		Monte Alen National Park							
		Altos de Nsork National Park							
Gabon	11	Parc National du Loango							
	12	Moukalaba-Doudou National Park							
	13	Lopé National Park							

	14	Ivindo National Park, Langoué,				
		Minkebe National Park				
		Akanda National Park				
		Bateke Plateau National Park				
		Birougou National Park				
		Crystal National Park				
		Mayumba National Park				
		Pongara National Park				
Guinea		Badiar National Park				
		Upper Niger National Park				
		Bossou				
		Gadha Woundou Classified Forest				
		Moyen Bafing National Park				
		Ziama Biosphere Reserve				
		Diecke Classified Forest				
		Mount Nimba Strict Nature Reserve				
Guinea Bissau	15	Cantanhez National Park				
	16	Boé National Park				
		Dolumbi National Park				
		Lagoas Cufada National Park				
Ivory Coast	17	Taï National Park				
		Assagny National Park				
		Banco National Park				
		Comoe National Park				
		Mont Peko National Park				
		Mont Sangbe National Park				
Liberia	18	Sapo National Park				
Rwanda	19	Volcanoes National Park				
	20	Nyungwe National Park				
	21	Gishwati-Mukura National Park				
Senegal	22	Reserve Naturelle Communautaire de Dindefelo				
		Niokolo-Koba National Park				

Sierra Leone	23	Outamba National Park				
	24	Gola National Park				
	25	Western Peninsula National Park				
	26	Loma Mountains National Park				
Tanzania	27	Gombe Stream National Park				
	28	Mahale Mountains National Park				
		Rubondo Island National Park				
Uganda	29	Bwindi Impenetrable National Park				
	30	Mgahinga Gorilla National Park				
	31	Kibale Forest National Park				
	32	Budongo Forest Reserve				
	33	Kyambura Gorge, Queen Elizabeth National Park				
	34	Kalinzu Forest Reserve				
		Rwenzori Mountains National Park				
		Semuliki National Park				
		Murchisori Falls National Park				

ANNEX IV: REFERENCES AND NOTES

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