



**Berggorilla & Regenwald
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Gorilla Tourism – Pros and Cons

Intensive gorilla tourism was set up in Rwanda in the late 1970s: groups of mountain gorillas were habituated to humans with the specific purpose of taking tourists to visit them. The same procedure was followed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Uganda. To make sure that the animals are not adversely affected by visits, the tourists have to comply with strict rules. The question arises, however, as to whether using the gorillas as a tourist attraction is actually a beneficial protection measure – tourism may also have negative effects on the animals.

Advantages for the gorillas

- ◆ A higher degree of safety: the regular presence of people deters poachers.
- ◆ Better monitoring: regular visits help to record births, deaths and other population changes, to identify health problems in individual gorilla groups and to record illegal activities in the protected areas.
- ◆ Source of foreign exchange: the considerable income generated from gorilla tourism safeguards the maintenance of the protected areas. The national park authorities benefit from this income, as does anybody who generates income from tourism including, albeit to a smaller degree, the resident population.
- ◆ Popularity: being charismatic animals, gorillas generate a lot of interest – both from the media and scientists.

Disadvantages for the gorillas

- ◆ Gorillas lose their natural shyness toward people: as a result they raid crops and no longer flee from poachers.
- ◆ Infectious diseases: diseases can be transferred from humans and domestic animals to gorillas.
- ◆ Behavioural changes: the presence of humans may generate stress.
- ◆ Population pressure: an increasing number of people hope to profit from tourism and therefore move closer to the protected areas. People living in the neighbourhood of the gorillas but making little or no profit from tourism are often frustrated and, as a consequence, they may hinder protection measures.
- ◆ Habituation of too many gorillas: the range countries may become too dependent on gorilla tourism and habituate more and more gorilla groups.
- ◆ Within national parks habitat is lost for tourist facilities and vegetation is destroyed.

You can contribute to the conservation of gorillas by supporting our work!

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The following extracts of articles that were published in our Gorilla Journal explain some of the advantages and disadvantages of gorilla tourism in more detail.

Gorilla tourism in Rwanda

Originally, gorilla tourism was not considered feasible in Rwanda as people were not supposed to enter the national park; but in fact, the resident population grazed thousands of domestic animals there, and hundreds of people used the park in some way. As a result, the rate of destruction of the gorillas' habitat was high. 10 years after the tourism programme was initiated, the cattle were gone and gorilla poaching had practically ceased. Gorilla tourism became Rwanda's third largest source of foreign income, and the country benefited from the international interest it received and made the mountain gorilla its national symbol. The Rwandan experience is that the gorillas in the country would be much worse off today if it had not been for tourism. Tourism should therefore be considered positive overall, but only as long as risks are minimised and controlled.

Gorilla tourism in Bwindi

Tourism helped Bwindi Impenetrable National Park develop into a major centre for employment of the local people. On the other hand, the prospect of work lured many people into the region and as a result the population in the vicinity of the park has increased dramatically. Clean water, food, schools and accommodation exist only to a limited degree in this area; eco-tourism development therefore faces a considerable challenge. For this reason, educational and development projects need to balance the interests of people and those of nature conservation.

Visits to the gorillas – theory and practice

It has been known for a long time that the presence of visitor groups may stress gorillas and cause changes in their behaviour. Stressed animals may represent a risk to tourists and rangers. How tourism precisely influences the behaviour of gorillas has been studied in some depth in Bwindi. While the tourists were present, and even after they had left, the gorillas spent less time feeding and more time scanning their surroundings; and while visitors were present, group members stayed more closely together and remained mainly in the vicinity of the silverback. If visitors approached the gorillas to less than 7 m, or were noisy, or pulled up plants, or pointed at the animals with their fingers, or imitated gorilla vocalisations, the gorillas interrupted feeding, moved further away or showed threatening behaviour. Again, while visitors were present, the gorillas scratched and groomed each other more than usual, which is a sign of excitement and stress. Clear rules exist which are aimed at minimising the health risk to gorillas posed by visitors. Scientists in Bwindi studied whether or not these rules are actually enforced. They found that the prescribed minimal distance is frequently not

observed: tourists approach the gorillas very closely, which means that the risk of transferring diseases is greater than had been assumed. For this reason it might make sense to require visitors to wear paper masks. Stricter conditions relating to their state of health might be another option – such as providing proof of vaccinations.

It is often the movement of the gorillas rather than the visitors that decreases the distance between animals and humans; even so, the misapprehensions of tourists also contribute to the problem (e.g. they often wish to have direct physical contact with the gorillas as Dian Fossey occasionally had). This is dangerous in several respects: not only can diseases be transferred much more easily through direct contact, but adult gorillas may view an approaching stranger as a threat and react accordingly. The search for the perfect photo can also tempt visitors to go closer to the gorillas than they are supposed to. Visitors need to be informed and educated about these issues so that they can understand why they are not allowed to do certain things. Gorilla tourism must not result in endangering these animals further.

Why is a visit to the mountain gorillas so expensive?

Frequently, biologists and animal lovers express their desire to observe the gorillas without other tourists present, and many would like to pay less. Although these attitudes are understandable, it is not possible to accommodate them. Habituating apes takes several years and represents a considerable investment of manpower and funds. The pressure exerted by tourism on mountain gorillas can easily be demonstrated if you consider that only a proportion of the mountain gorilla population (about 700 individuals) is habituated for tourism. For the protection of the animals, a gorilla group may be visited only for one hour per day, and the group of visitors must not exceed 8. In spite of the high fee, there is frequently a year-long waiting list for the available permits. An application for an individual exception or waiver of the usual conditions has virtually no chance of success. The income generated from gorilla tourism is used to finance at least part of the protected areas' running costs. Every single dollar is needed to maintain the parks.

Compiled with excerpts from texts by Alexander Harcourt, Wilhelm Möller, Fortunate Muyambi, John Bosco Nkurunungi, Chris Sandbrook and Stuart Semple

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