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Gorilla Journal

Tourist Killings in Bwindi

About 100 armed men entered Uganda from the Democratic Republic of Congo on March 1st to raid 3 tourist camps in Buhoma, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Buildings were looted and set on fire, vehicles were burnt, and 17 people were kidnapped and taken into the forest. It seems likely that the attackers had been told about the whereabouts of the tourists by Ugandans. After freeing some hostages, the kidnappers hacked 8 tourists to death with machetes (4 Britons, 2 Americans and 2 New Zealanders). One Ugandan, the Community Conservation Officer John Ross Wagaba, was shot and his body set on fire.

It is not clear to which group the murderers belong. They spoke Kisuaheli, French and Kinyarwanda. Some people described them as Interahamwe, others as Hutu militia. They themselves said that they belonged to the ALIR (*Rwandan Liberation Army*) which has become notorious for their numerous raids in northwestern Rwanda. Since the war in Rwanda, some ten thousand Rwandan rebels, militia and bandits are said to roam the forests of eastern Congo and the Virunga National Park. Afterwards, a group calling itself NALU (*National Army for the Liberation of Uganda*) claimed responsibility for the murders. This could not be confirmed.

After the massacre, the rebels forced a Ugandan to show them the way back to the Congo. Ugandan and Rwandan troops immediately took up the chase. By the end of March, they had killed 35 Rwandan rebels and captured 4. One of them confessed to have participated in the Bwindi killings. It is not certain that the rebels killed were actually involved in the massacre. Troops were posted in Buhoma to ensure security in the future. One source reported that another 15 Rwandan militia were killed 30 miles inside Congo, at Kihito, in May.

Uganda declared a month of mourning for the victims of the massacre. Gorilla tourism was suspended during that month. The tour companies using the raided camps withdrew from southwestern Uganda and removed their equipment from Buhoma.

Before the attack, tourism was Uganda's second largest source of foreign currency after coffee export. About 75% of the tourist money was derived from gorilla tourism.

After the mourning, the parks were re-opened on April 1st. During April 82 tourists visited Bwindi and 47 visited Mgahinga. Some 60 soldiers were constantly present and worked together with the park staff. One gorilla group (Nyakagezi) can be visited in Mgahinga and 2 (Mubare and Habinyanja) can be visited in Bwindi. The Nkuringo group in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park continues to be habituated. Apparently, there have been no gorilla casualties from the attack.

Angela Meder

Acute Danger for the Virunga Park

The rangers and the administration of the Virunga National Park as a whole need our support now.

The situation is serious. As it is easier for Claude Sikubwabo to travel to Uganda than for us to enter the Congo, we met him in Kisoro. During a long conversation, he described the current situation of nature conservation in his country.

The Virunga National Park can no longer be protected effectively and is therefore severely threatened. The park urgently needs support, especially for the gorillas whose number has already been reduced. The rangers and their superiors don't receive any salary or any other form of support. There are several military posts in the park. As the soldiers don't always receive their salaries either, they take to poaching. They also cut trees to make charcoal which is sold in the villages. The rangers are helpless as their weapons were confiscated when Kabila came to power. All we can do at the moment is to try to inform the military and the political decision-makers about the problems of the national park and increase their awareness.

If nothing is done, the gorillas will certainly vanish. However, it is not only this sensitive species which needs protection: the park's whole ecosystem is under threat. Having declared the Virunga National Park a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, the international community has recognized its outstanding value. Now, at a time of severe threat, the involvement of the international community is required to save the park.

Recently, a poacher was caught with 1,050 kg of hippopotamus meat. This illustrates the fact that the threat extends to all the animals in the park. Without salary and other forms of support, some rangers leave their posts; those who stay cannot go on patrols. Therefore we are very grateful for the support of the Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe for the Sarambwe and Mt. Tshiaberimu rangers. The DFGF (Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund) has also helped with US\$ 25,000 for the whole park. However, this is still not sufficient for a park with an area of 800,000 ha, administered by approximately 750 people, 700 of whom are rangers.

Currently, the government cannot do anything for the park. However, financial support from the international community might encourage the government to contribute something as well. For example, if the rangers had their weapons returned and received their salaries, they could be sufficiently motivated to resume patrols in the park.

I do want to emphasize that many rangers have stayed on duty even though they have no longer received a salary or rations. As soon as they are paid a salary, they can further protect the park by going on patrols. If every European could give just US\$ 2, we could perhaps save the park the unique ecosystems in the Virunga National Park, to save its biodiversity and the mountain gorillas. In this situation, we need a lot of support from all sides: the Congolese government, foreign governments, NGOs and individuals. We want everybody to be involved in the protection of our national park.

In December 1998, all parties responsible for the southern sector of the Virunga National Park met to develop an overview of the situation in view of the crisis. In the Mikeno area, 4 out of 5 posts are still guarded. In the Nyamulagira area, 8 posts out of 13 are still guarded. In both areas, the park boundary is not respected. "Uniformed" persons are involved in poaching; trees are cut, especially in the Nyamulagira sector, to make charcoal and for other purposes. There are 104 rangers responsible for the two areas, but at the moment they are essentially powerless. Financial and material support for the rangers and their superiors in the ICCN (*Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature*) would help to protect the biodiversity of the park. It could also demonstrate the park's significance to the current political decisions makers in the region.

In January, I was able to hand over equipment for the rangers of Sarambwe donated by the *Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe* to Claude Sikubwabo. This equipment included sleeping bags, backpacks, tents and other items. He also received a computer for his scientific work (on Mt. Tshiaberimu among other areas) and US\$ 400 advance funding for a study on Mt. Tshiaberimu which he will start in August. This is a start, but in view of the crisis which Claude Sikubwabo Kiyengo has described so clearly, our involvement continues to be required.

Ursula Karlowski

Activities of the GTZ/ICCN Project

The GTZ's involvement in Kahuzi-Biega will be continued, but the budget has been reduced drastically. In 1999, the rangers will be paid by the project, but many other things are lacking, for example equipment. We therefore offered material from our storage to the Kahuzi-Biega rangers.

The park station was looted completely during the war. However, it was possible to save most of the project's remaining equipment, including the vehicles, when the war started in August 1998. This helps the rangers now to continue their work.

Since March the situation in Kahuzi-Biega National Park has improved a little. The Mai-Mai left the old park sector and therefore the rangers were able to resume their patrols. During these recent patrols they found the mandible of a silverback male gorilla near Kasirusiru. It is possible that it belongs to a former member of the Mubalala group because this group lived in the area. There are also positive news: The local administration supports the park and wants to stop cattle ranching in the narrow corridor.

During a meeting in April, the organizations involved discussed the conservation of the 4 World Heritage Sites in eastern Congo – the National Parks Kahuzi-Biega, Virunga and Garamba as well as the Okapi Faunal Reserve in the Ituri Forest. All those sites are critically endangered, especially because poaching has increased and the surveillance has collapsed. The UNESCO promised US\$ 250,000 to cover the most urgent costs. It is planned to secure the funding in the future by a trust fund. Important activities would include the support and training of the rangers, improved monitoring etc.

Summary of information provided by Guy Debonnet

Another Study for Kahuzi-Biega

Mbake Sivha, who has been carrying out research on gorillas and chimpanzees with our support, is now carrying out another study to improve the conservation of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park. She uses funds from the *Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe* for this research.

The aim of this new study is to reduce the human pressure on the park's resources and to determine whether these resources can be supplied otherwise. It is planned to

- identify animal and plant species used by the human population,
- determine how each species is used, both in terms of quality and quantity,
- identify other areas outside the park where these forest products also occur,
- arrive at a strategy for the protection and sustainable use of these resources in order to make them available to the population living close to the park. It is especially planned to use the knowledge of indigenous peoples such as the Twa.

The study is conducted in the area along the road between Kajeje and Tshibati (at the eastern part of the park), as this is the only accessible region at the moment. Five villages are included, two of which are pygmy villages. Most pygmies depend on the resources of the park. They exert a pressure which should not be underestimated. In general, they don't own land and only a small number of them earn a salary as guides in the park.

The study puts special emphasis on women because in traditional African culture they play an important role in the utilization and protection of natural resources. Unfortunately, this has changed with the switch from subsistence to market economy.

Consequently, the women are now forced to destroy the local resources to obtain cash, which in many cases is still not sufficient.

A New Publication: *Le Gorille*

For several years the GTZ/ICCN project has produced *Kacheche*, a newspaper for children about nature conservation and the national parks in eastern Congo. Now the Kahuzi-Biega National Park is starting a new publication, *le Gorille*. It is targeted at populations living close to the Kahuzi-Biega National Park and will be distributed twice per year. It will, for example, provide information about the activities in the park, discuss the cooperation of the park administration and the population and feature an animal.

Each issue of *Le Gorille* will be printed in 20,000 copies that can reach about 200,000 people who live close to the eastern part of the park. The population will also be involved in its production and distribution. It is not yet certain how this project will be funded. In any case, the *Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe* will support it.

Gorillas in African Culture and Medicine

Paul Du Chaillu (1861) already wrote about gorilla stories he had heard from the Fang people. For example, the Fang were convinced that if a pregnant woman or her husband were to see a gorilla, even a dead one, she would give birth to a gorilla, rather than to a human child.

It is very difficult to find published information on this subject, as little has been written since about the importance of gorillas for African peoples. One exception is Günter Tessmann's study of the Pangwe (Cameroon and Gabon) published in 1913. It contains a detailed description of a secret society whose cult centers around the gorilla. It was widely spread and called Ngi or Ngui among the Fang and Nji among the Bulu. Ngi means gorilla and is the symbol of fire and positive power (the chimpanzee represents evil). During the Ngi celebration, a large sculpture was made after the vigorous dance of a healer. Certain objects were placed in and around that sculpture, for example, parts of dead people (but not gorillas), and rituals were performed. For the members of the Ngi secret society, Ngi was watching their manners. He punished them with illness, for example with leprosy, if they broke the rules. Ngi also protected the society members as he rose at night to fight sorcerers who had left their bodies to kill people. According to Jordi Sabater Pi, the Ngi cult has disappeared completely. However, Klaus Paysan heard from a chief's son in Cameroon, far away from the present gorilla distribution area, that the Ngi society was still active, but all information was kept absolutely secret.

Vanishing Traditions

In the meantime, much has changed. Since Du Chaillu's and Tessmann's days, new religions and medicine as well as new political, economic and social structures have spread across Africa. They changed the traditional societies and the old rituals considerably or even eradicated them in many regions. However, in many places the gorilla is still respected. For example it is the totem of some Fang clans like the Essangui (essa=father, ngui=gorilla), the clan to which the President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang, and former high-ranking politicians belong.

Some traditions have changed during the last few decades. The Anyang in Cameroon near the border to Nigeria were formerly only allowed to hunt gorillas for the initiation of a new chief, when a gorilla had to be killed (Paysan, pers. comm. – information by a chief's son). The chief had to eat the brain and another high-ranking person ate the heart. Anyone who hunted gorillas on other occasions was sentenced to death. In the 1960s, the chiefs and the traditional structure were still strong, and this taboo was observed. At that time, the chief was the highest ranking and respected person. Now, rich businessmen are held in more esteem than the traditional chiefs, and the taboo is no longer observed. With money, they can obtain whatever they want.

In many forest areas where traditions are still important, medico-magical products made from gorillas are regarded as more powerful and are therefore more popular than those made from chimpanzees. In modern societies with socio-economic competition between individuals, e. g. in Cameroon, products from chimpanzees are more sought after. The gorilla is a symbol for quiet power that prolongs the lifespan of people, whereas the chimpanzee is essentially bad; it increases luck and fortune (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

Not to Be Told to Strangers

Although the Ngi secret society has been described in detail by several researchers, there may be other cults that have never been revealed to researchers or to members of other peoples. In Cameroon, for example, in the 1960s it was forbidden to talk about the ritual use of gorillas and leopards because in that case the fetishes would lose their power. It is also still strictly forbidden to talk about initiation rituals to strangers (Paysan, pers. comm.).

Nowadays, Africans influenced by western thoughts sometimes no longer observe this restriction. However, they often do not talk to foreigners about traditional medicine, especially medical plants, because they are suspicious that foreigners, e. g. pharmaceutical companies, will exploit this knowledge.

Myths and Legends

All over their distribution area, gorillas play special, but very different roles in the thoughts of the peoples living there. The apes are feared, hated, avoided or admired. In some regions of the Congo Republic, they are a symbol for inexhaustible strength. Pregnant Bantu and pygmy women who work in plantations close to the forest go there only if accompanied by an armed man,

and the other women avoid them, because silverbacks are said to attack pregnant women to kill their baby. Kota hunters from northeastern Gabon talk about mystic transformations between humans and gorillas or chimpanzees: A hunter may swear that he has shot a gorilla, but afterwards it is discovered that a person from the village had died from this shot (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

Near the Virunga National Park, the gorilla is considered as a bad spirit. Everyone who pronounces its name (Ngagi) in the morning before eating or drinking something is supposed to lose all luck that day and to be exposed to bad things (Sikubwabo, pers. comm.).

Merfield and Miller reported in 1956 that the Maka in Cameroon, who lived in the area of the Dja Reserve, believed certain persons were able to transform themselves into animals. They are convinced that a single male elephant, gorilla or another large animal can have a human soul, often that of their own father or grandfather.

Permission only to Certain Persons

Merfield and Miller noted in 1956 that 60 km south of Yaounde, women were not allowed to eat gorilla meat. Only a few years ago, Bowen-Jones (1998) reported that in the Odzala region (Congo Republic) women do not eat gorilla meat because they are afraid that if they did so, their husbands would become as brutal as gorillas.

The traditional importance of gorillas for Bantu women is often different from that for men, and the medicine made from gorillas is therefore very different too. Women's medicine has psychosomatic effects; proven healing methods are used always. The knowledge is passed from the mother to the daughter. This does not seem to be the case in the traditional medicine of male Bantu.

In the pygmy peoples (Baka in northeastern Gabon, Bakola in northwestern Congo, Babendjele in northern Congo) traditional medicine is apparently known and used by men and women alike – except for medicine used for children's and women's illnesses. However, the kinds and the number of medicines forbidden for women is different from that for men (Hecketsweiler pers. comm.).

Klaus Paysan noticed in 1964 that gorillas which were transported on trucks as bushmeat in southern Cameroon did not have heads. The head and the heart had to be given to the chief. The Fang in Gabon occasionally carve figures with the sagittal crest of a silverback gorilla. In some regions, masks with the sagittal crest can be found or masks with gorilla teeth to give them the power of the apes. Among the Bamileke, only the chief is allowed to wear the mask with the sagittal crest. In the region of the Anyang and Nyang sometimes fetish shields are decorated with gorilla skulls to transfer the animals' power to the shields. Only chiefs may use these shields. This habit was after 1980 even spread to northwestern Cameroon. The Fon of Babungo had two of these shields with baby gorilla and chimpanzee skulls in the palace. The Ekoi or Nyang had ancestor masks with gorilla skin and hairs (Paysan, pers. comm.).

The Kwele (northern Congo) have a circumcision ceremony called Beka. The initiates as well as some of the guests are obliged to eat gorilla or chimpanzee meat. This is a symbol of power and virility (Gami, pers. comm.).

Different Peoples in Different Habitats

Two peoples living in the same region do not always have the same medical/magical relationship towards the two types of ape. There are differences between pygmy and Bantu, but also between forest and savanna Bantu.

Adolf Friedrich Graf von Mecklenburg reported from his trip to the Virunga Volcanoes in 1909 that for the Twa he met the gorilla was umuzimu (totem) and they were not allowed to kill it. In the distribution area of the western lowland gorillas, the pygmies generally have more respect for gorillas than for chimpanzees. They are not afraid of gorillas but are suspicious of chimpanzees. However, recently pygmies have also killed gorillas because they get money for selling the most highly esteemed body parts to the Bantu. Bantu are more afraid of gorillas than of chimpanzees (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

The Bulu in southern Cameroon, the Fang of Woleu, the Ntumu in northern Gabon and the Kwele in Congo/Cameroon are more interested in the chimpanzee for medical/magical purposes. On the contrary, Bantu peoples living in the forest (Kota in Gabon/Congo, Lumbu and Yombe in southern Congo) and pygmies in general prefer the gorilla. They do not kill and eat chimpanzees because they look similar to humans and because they do not taste as delicious as gorillas. A favourite dish in the villages is soup from gorilla intestines (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

Even some savanna peoples who are not living within the gorilla distribution area use gorillas. The Bamileke let their male children drink from bowls made from gorilla skulls to give them strength. The Ibo in Nigeria hire hunters to bring them gorillas for certain magic offerings that are believed to bring good luck. These rituals are no longer performed by the chiefs today but by businessmen who can afford it (Paysan, pers. comm.).

The Chamba in northwestern Cameroon live in the savanna but use some powerful rain forest animals – elephants, buffaloes and gorillas – for certain purposes. For example, during his initiation a new chief has to eat gorilla brain as it is also usual among some forest peoples. This ritual is still performed today.

Medicine, Magic and Fetishes

In some regions, for example in the D. R. Congo, most traditional healers have been replaced, and much of the knowledge about traditional medicine has vanished because the people are treated with western medicine. However, in many regions the traditional use of gorillas is still common.

Eating gorilla meat often is a ritual act to incorporate the gorilla's power. Chimpanzees are not eaten for this purpose (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.). The Fang in Río Muni often eat gorillas as simple bushmeat, but a few parts of these apes are kept as fetishes, for example the canines for good luck during the hunts and the fingernails and dried hands for good luck and female fertility (Sabater Pi, pers. comm.).

Paul Du Chaillu noted in 1861 that the Fang
very carefully saved the brain ... charms were made of this – charms of two kinds. Prepared in one way, the charm gave the wearer a strong hand for the hunt, and another it gave him success with women. ... Nothing makes a man so brave as to have a fetish of gorilla's brain. This gives a man a strong heart.

Merfield and Miller reported in 1956 that 60 km south of Yaounde a witch doctor filled his magic horn with gorilla blood and performed rituals to ensure the success of future gorilla hunts.

Some parts, especially the head and genitals, are still widely used in southwestern Cameroon and notably neighbouring regions in Nigeria for medical purposes. The hairs are sometimes used to manufacture local charm (Usongo, pers. comm.). Nigerian farmers use belts, necklaces and bangles made of wild animal by-products (for example gorilla skin) embedded with herbs for protection against witches and for immunity from all diseases and enemies (Adeola, 1992). In Cameroon, some gorilla parts are also used to transfer power, for example by rubbing the back of a person with gorilla hands (Paysan, pers. comm.).

A silverback's canines are a fetish for strength and are sometimes worn in a necklace together with leopard, crocodile and forest hog teeth. A concoction of ground canines and herbs is used to heal caries and to strengthen the jaws (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

Certain groups of the Mbochi in the Congo Republic place a gorilla femur into the bath of babies to give them strength (Gami, pers. comm.). In other areas, a piece of bone of the lower arm is used like this to give power, strength, good bone structure, good constitution and more hair. If a pregnant woman wants her baby to become strong and powerful, she drinks water only from a hollow bone that has to be immersed in water all the time. If ground, dried bone is brought into the nose, it is believed to give power; moreover, if the respective person meets a gorilla in the forest, it will be calm. A concoction of ground, dried bone with herbs gives strength or accelerates the healing of a bone fracture. It may be possible that the intake of ground bone or the immersion of bone in water helps against calcium deficiency (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

A similar practice is found in the eastern distribution area. The Tembo from Bunyakiri believe that dust from burnt gorilla bones can make one stronger when applied to incisions in the skin. Some regions of the skin are preferred: forehead (to make the head stronger); wrist (to make the punch more violent); knee or ankle (to make the kick violent). In any case, bones from silverbacks (skull and hand) are considered more useful than those of younger or female gorillas. This belief is also accepted by other forest peoples like the Lega from Mwenga (Basabose, pers. comm.).

Burnt and ground bones of the lower arm and ribs, together with powder of burnt plant products are used for cupping. Cupping at wrist, elbow and shoulder strengthens the arm, cupping at foot and knee strengthens the leg, cupping in the face, at the temple and forehead strengthens the head and improves the reaction during quarrels, cupping in the back of the neck and at the loin strengthens the back – especially in pygmies who sometimes have to carry heavy loads. Ground burnt lower rib is used for cupping on the breast, which gives strength and resistance in breast and belly during quarrels. It is used on the trunk during cupping or massage (with palm oil and plant powder) to heal the illness called "maladie de côte" (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

The fetish Nzobi, one of the most powerful and highly esteemed fetishes in eastern Congo, contains several dozen components, including gorilla finger (Bouquet 1969). Ian Redmond found gorilla hands being sold at all fetish market stalls in Brazzaville that he visited in 1989. Usually the fingers were removed because a potion is made from them which gives the strength of gorillas. The finger bone is burnt until it is black and ground to powder; then an incision is made in the arm and the powder is rubbed into the incision to mix it with the blood.

The dried skin of the supraorbital ridges is carried close to the body for protection by the Mboko in northern Congo; if the person who carries it meets a gorilla, it is submissive and disappears without causing any problems. From the naked skin of silverbacks' breast a fetish against punches is produced by the Kwele in Gabon. A few long hairs that have been collected in a fresh gorilla nest are carried in a bag or between ear and head; this is said to protect against attacks because the one who carries them is invisible for gorillas (Baka in northeastern Gabon). A dried gorilla hand is a fetish which improves the punch during fights and the resistance against punches (Hecketsweiler, pers. comm.).

Sometimes, the object for magic does not have to be a gorilla body part. Peoples in North Kivu believe that if a branch from a gorilla nest is put on or under the bed of a man, this man will beat his wife and drive her away. If a branch or other material from a gorilla nest is dropped in an office, the head of the office will have many problems with his superior and staff and can lose his job (Sikubwabo, pers. comm.).

Although many old traditions are lost, gorillas still play an important role in the life of many Africans. For many medicomagical purposes the apes have to be killed. However, so far it has not been reported from anywhere that this poses a real danger for the gorilla populations.

Angela Meder

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Gorillas in the Takamanda Forest Reserve

An isolated population of gorillas has been known to occur in the Takamanda Forest Reserve and the adjacent Okwangwo forests of eastern Nigeria since the early 1900s. In 1904, Paul Matschie described the gorillas from this area as a distinct species, *Gorilla diehli*. Later taxonomic work reduced this species rank to that of a sub-species and eventually amalgamated it with other lowland gorillas, *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*. However, more recent research, including DNA analysis of hair and the re-measurement of Nigerian gorilla skull records, has provided new information that suggests that these gorillas are indeed more taxonomically distinct than previously thought.

Until recently, little attention had been paid to the population of gorillas on the Cameroonian side of the border and it was unclear whether gorillas still existed in the area until a WWF expedition in 1987 confirmed their presence. Furthermore in 1996 Jacqui Groves visited the Takamanda Forest Reserve and collected information from the local people indicating the continued presence of gorillas. In 1997 a large mammal census focusing on the gorilla population was undertaken, for which the field work, funded by WWF Cameroon, lasted for 14 months.

The Takamanda Reserve covers approximately 700 km² of which only about 20% is classified as "highland" (for the purposes of this study, areas were categorised as highlands when higher than 700 m) which predominate in the north and east of the reserve. The results of the recent survey show that hunting is clearly higher in the lowlands than in the highlands and that, as a result, gorillas are virtually absent from the lowland areas. Although gorillas are still present in the Takamanda Reserve, they are now almost entirely confined to the highland areas, which are subject to lower hunting pressures, by the local communities. A very rough estimate of gorilla density in the highlands is in the order of 1 gorilla/km². In the lowland forest, the estimate was approximately 0.06 gorillas/km², one of the lowest recorded in Africa.

If gorillas are found in roughly the same density in all of the highland areas as in two highland areas surveyed, it would provide an estimated population of 140 weaned gorillas. However, a further highland area surveyed in Takamanda provided no evidence of gorillas at all; this was near to a large village and almost no indication of any large mammal species was found in the area. Therefore population estimates must be heavily weighted, and adjusted, by the proximity of highland patches to village areas, where hunting is the main economic activity.

The Mawne (sometimes referred to as Mone) Forest Reserve and the Oko Mountain area to the east of the Takamanda Reserve are also comprised of a mosaic of highland and lowland forest. Recent gorilla skull records collected during this study from the Mawne Reserve indicate their continued presence in this area. Further surveys have been recommended for both reserves, focusing on areas that are the furthest from human habitation.

Jacqui L. Groves

Lowland Gorilla Tourism in Central Africa

The EC-funded central African forest conservation program ECOFAC has been running since early 1992. It focuses on protected areas in 6 countries of the sub-region (Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé e Príncipe). In the course of the survey work undertaken by the program, certain sites have been shown to harbour unexpectedly high numbers of lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*). This is particularly true of the Odzala National Park in northern Congo which has very extensive areas of open canopy Marantaceae forest, a habitat particularly favoured by gorillas. In certain areas the density may be as high as 10 gorillas/km² (Bermejo, 1995).

The surveys in the north of the park also revealed the presence of over 100 forest clearings (called "bais" or salines) some of which attract astonishingly high numbers of large mammals, in particular forest elephants, gorillas, forest buffalo, bongo, sitatunga, giant forest hog and bush-pig. Observations over an 8-month period in one of these salines (called Maya north) showed that it was visited by at least 36 different gorilla families and 18 solitary males, representing some 420 individuals (Magliocca et al., 1999). Furthermore it was shown that gorillas were present on over 80% of the days!

First Steps to Tourism

Simultaneously to the survey work in the park, a Spanish couple of primatologists, Magdalena Bermejo and Germain Ilera had been undertaking a study of gorillas in an area of Marantaceae forest some 30 km to the southwest of the park at a site called Lossi. In the course of their work since 1993 they have succeeded in habituating a couple of gorilla families using the classic method of tracking them day in and day out with the help of skilled Congolese trackers. This has been a major breakthrough as until now nobody had ever succeeded in habituating lowland gorillas, and many people had begun to believe that Virunga-style gorilla tourism would never be possible in the lowland forests of central Africa.

These discoveries mean that Odzala now has genuine tourist potential as it offers on the one hand the rare possibility of good-quality viewing of spectacular rain forest mammal species in the salines, and on the other the classic close-up experience of gorilla tracking in the forest. Over the last 3 years ECOFAC has, therefore, invested a considerable proportion of its energy to developing the tourist potential of Odzala National Park and its buffer zone. The outbreak of the war in Brazzaville in June 1997 could not have come at a worse time as tourism was just beginning to take off in Odzala with visitors coming in on the weekly flight into the park's air strip at Mboko in the savannah/forest mosaic section of the south of the park. Since then the security situation has meant that it has not been possible to bring in visitors on a regular basis but all park management activities (anti-poaching, monitoring of salines, gorilla tracking etc.) have continued almost without interruption and once the situation normalises tourism activities will be able to resume rapidly. The war has meant that road links between Odzala and Brazzaville (750 km) have deteriorated very considerably and the park is now virtually cut off from the capital. However, Odzala is only 60 km from the Gabonese border, where roads and communications are excellent, so paradoxically this has meant that ECOFAC's logistical problems have been considerably eased as the project has had to develop its links to Gabon (rehabilitation of the old, abandoned border road). Currently all the logistics for the park are now run directly out of Gabon (thanks to the support of the Gabonese authorities).

Tourist Activities in Odzala

The salines. A trip up the Mambili river by motorised dug-out canoe to the area of salines in the north of the park. To get the best out of this trip 6 or 7 days are required. The trip starts out from the tented camp (east African style) at Mboko in the forest/savannah zone of the south of the park. The trip up the river is a pleasant 6-hour ride (excluding stops) passing through forest all the way and with plenty of opportunities for observing wildlife. From the tented camp at Ekania a large number of salines are within easy reach, all of which are regularly visited by the large mammal fauna including gorillas. At the Maya north saline (1 hour pirogue, followed by a 3-hour walk) there is another, more basic, camp. In the saline a 4 m high observation hide provides excellent viewing.

Gorilla tracking at Lossi. Lossi is just outside the Odzala National Park some 28 km to the south of the village of Lengui-Lengui on the road between Mbomo (park headquarters) and the border with Gabon. The walk to Lossi is currently long (9 hours) but not difficult. A motorable track of 16 km will be reopened once tourism resumes. The accommodation is basic (local style cabins). A team of 5 highly experienced trackers follow the gorillas every day thus ensuring an almost 100% guarantee of seeing them. Two families are habituated. The vegetation is extremely thick so viewing conditions are not like those of the Virungas, although these gorillas, being mainly fruit eaters, spend a lot of time in trees where they are easily observed.

The interesting aspect of Lossi is that this area of forest "belongs" to the villagers of Lengui-Lengui who have asked ECOFAC to help them develop tourism in the forest where they and their ancestors have practised their traditional activities. The revenue from tourism will thus go directly to the traditional "owners" of the forest who have understood that conservation of the forest for gorilla tourism may well bring much greater long-term benefits to them than hunting the wildlife – a perfect example of community conservation. A visit to Lossi, with 2 gorilla visits, would thus take 4 days allowing for the walk in and out.

Currently, access to Odzala is by road from Gabon, via Makokou and Mekambo. There are regular weekly flights from Libreville to Makokou and three flights a month to Mekambo. The road trip from Makokou to Odzala Park headquarters at Mbomo takes some 6 hours.

More Sites for Visitors

Encouraged by the success in Congo, 2 other components of the ECOFAC program, Gabon (Lopé Reserve) and Equatorial Guinea (Monte Alen National Park) have also decided to develop gorilla tourism programs. These are both protected areas where tourism (on a small scale) already takes place so the addition of gorillas to the attractions proposed will be a considerable asset. Magdalena Bermejo has helped identify suitable areas in both protected areas and work has already progressed well in Monte Alen although the hilly terrain makes the task of keeping track of the gorillas every day somewhat more difficult than in Congo. However, despite the fact that no family has yet been habituated, during the 1998 summer period all those visitors who opted to spend 2 or 3 nights in the park in the gorilla area all managed to see gorillas.

In Lopé work is only just beginning to habituate a family but it is hoped that by the end of year 2000 it may be possible to propose gorilla tourism here also. Lopé has very good communications (good road from Libreville, as well as train) and an excellent hotel on the shores of the majestic Oogoué river.

Conservationists' eternal problem is how to make sure that their activities translate into real long-term improvements in protected area management and conservation. Making protected areas pay is certainly one of the ways of demonstrating the value of conservation and thus convincing national decision-makers to take wildlife conservation seriously. Rarely, however, has this been achieved in the rainforest environment and eco-tourism has perhaps too often been held up as the panacea for conservation. However, the special case of gorilla tourism really is different because of its ability to generate very large amounts of revenue as has been repeatedly demonstrated in ex-Zaire, Rwanda and Uganda. ECOFAC also hopes that the development of gorilla tourism in Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea will help focus international attention on the extraordinary riches of the Congo basin forests and the threats that they are facing (logging and bushmeat trade).

Conrad Aveling

For further information contact:

*ECOFAC Coordination
B.P. 15115, Libreville, Gabon
Tel: (241) 732343/4
Fax: (241) 72345
e-mail: coordination@ecofac.org
Web site: <http://www.ecofac.org>*

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Editor: Angela Meder

journal@berggorilla.org