Gorilla Journal

Journal of Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe

No. 72, June 2026

The Itombwe Nature Reserve: A Jewel in the Itombwe Massif

Management Activities in Itombwe in 2025

The APES Atlas

Female Networks

BERGGORILLA & REGENWALD DIREKTHILFE

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Cover: Three generations of mountain gorillas sitting together. Gutangara holding her infant daughter, next to her adult daughter Shishikara and grandson Kira. Photo: Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund

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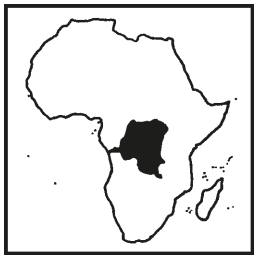

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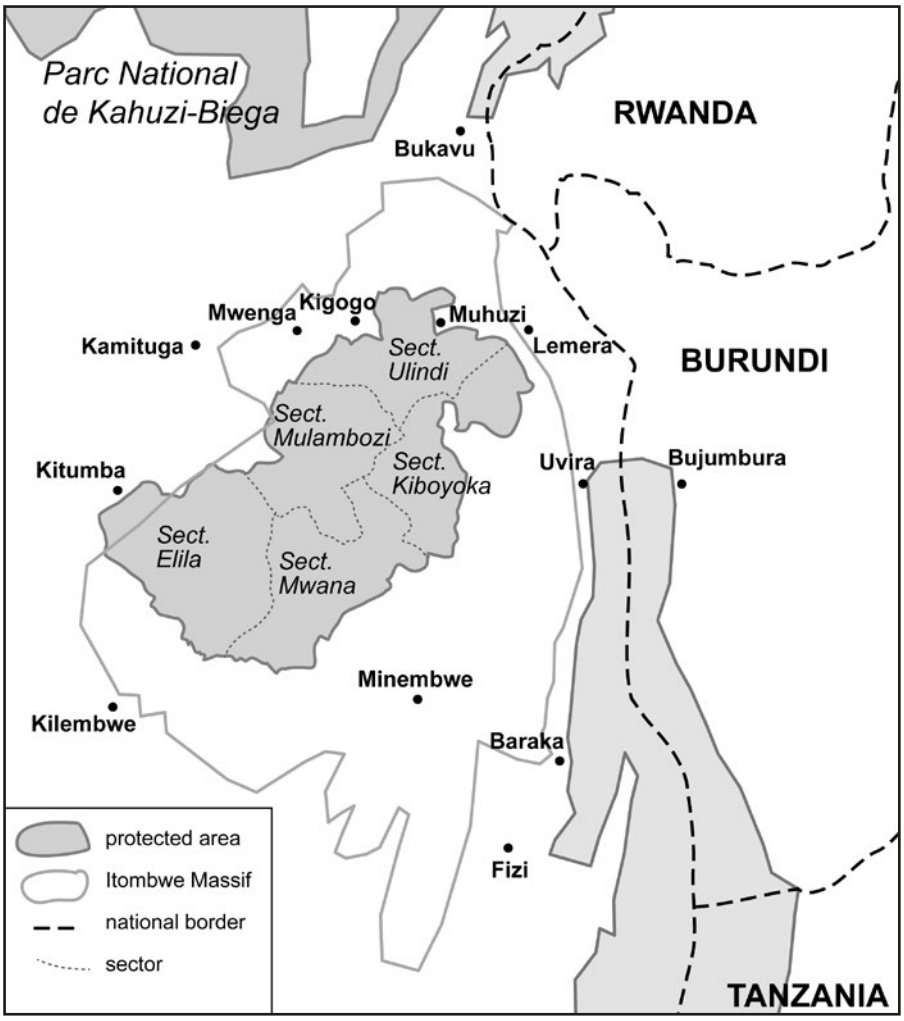
The Itombwe Nature Reserve: A Jewel at the Heart of the Itombwe Forest Massif

The Itombwe Nature Reserve (INR), located in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), is a sanctuary with exceptional biodiversity and a source of international scientific interest. It is home to a unique flora and fauna, including numerous endemic and endangered species. Yet it faces a multitude of challenges, ranging from geopolitical pressures to direct threats to its ecosystem. This article analyzes the ecological, political, and institutional dimensions of the reserve, as well as its crucial role in the global fight against climate change.



The Itombwe Nature Reserve and its sectors

Map: Angela Meder

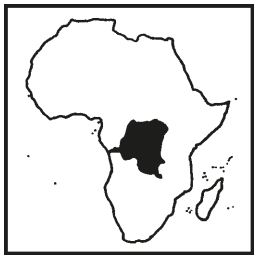
Introduction

Nestled in the heart of the Itombwe forest massif located northwest of Lake Tanganyika in South Kivu Province, the Itombwe Nature Reserve is an ecological gem of the DRC. Established by Ministerial Decree No. 038/CAB/MIN/ECN-EF/2006 of October 11, 2006, it is a jewel at the heart of the Itombwe forest massif, ranked among the richest biodiversity zones on the African continent; it is also considered a living laboratory for science and conservation. The Itombwe Massif represents the largest area of submontane forests in Africa. This massif, covering approximately 12,000 km^2, includes a continuous forest zone – the central massif – covering 6,500 km^2 at altitudes reaching up to 3,700 m.

The central massif harbors several exceptional forest habitats: bamboo, moorlands, humid transitional Miombo zones, and a high-altitude ecotone wooded savanna, as well as dense forest. It is home to significant populations of eastern chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*) and critically endangered Grauer's gorillas (*Gorilla beringei graueri*). The Itombwe Massif represents one of the most favourable zones for the conservation of great apes and endemic biodiversity of the Albertine Rift highlands. However, the coexistence between its natural wealth and human and political challenges is complex and sometimes conflicting or divergent.

Geopolitical and ecological context. The INR is located in the Albertine Rift region, a mountainous area with a high rate of endemism. This region is geopolitically unstable due to the multiple wars and ethnic conflicts also affecting the highlands, which drive populations to displace into the reserve to establish refugee settlements, engaging in mineral extraction for survival, with all the ecological consequences.

The DRC, although endowed with exceptional natural wealth, faces political tensions and security challenges that complicate the implementation of effective conservation policies. In this context, several threats directly weighing on the biodiversity of the Itombwe Nature Reserve can be cited: illegal de-



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Inspection by Conservator John Baliwa of the semi-industrial mining site near the Elila sector, in proximity to the INR

Photo: ICCN-RNI

forestation for agriculture or charcoal; poaching threatened emblematic species such as the Grauer's gorilla, chimpanzee, etc.; artisanal mining within and semi-industrial mining in zones near the INR (at Kitutu near the Elila sector and at Twangiza near the Ulindi sector); and demographic pressures from the creation of villages expanding to within the reserve's boundaries for agricultural and mining purposes.

Resilience of Conservation Actors

Despite the threats, several local and international actors contribute to the preservation of the INR. These include local community organisations such as the NGO ECO-CITOYEN, headquartered in Mwenga centre, which is involved in Conservation/ Development, the protection of large primates, and environmental education by training the population in ecological citizenship and community development. Local populations are also involved in ecological surveillance through the innovative system of "Community Patrols at the INR". Some international NGOs, notably Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe, contribute their expertise and financial resources in support of eco-guards and the purchase of rations for biomonitoring patrols, while also providing socio-economic support for local development (schools, lighting, etc.). Researchers, within the limits of their capacity, document biodiversity and propose sustainable solutions. The Pygmy indigenous peoples living in the chiefdoms of Lwindi, Basile, and Wamuzimu in the Mwenga Territory possess intimate traditional knowledge of the ecosystems, informing INR staff on the importance of conserving certain natural resources for their medicinal value, customary rites, the embodiment of traditional authority, and traditional totems, among others.

Ecosystem Functions of the Reserve in the Face of Climate Change

The Itombwe Nature Reserve plays a strategic role in the fight against climate change, both locally and globally, as follows:

Carbon storage. The Itombwe forests absorb and store millions of tonnes of CO_2 in their biomass. This capacity to sequester carbon makes it a powerful carbon sink, essential for mitigating the effects of global warming. However, the exact assessment of the tonnes of carbon sequestered by the Itombwe Nature Reserve remains partial and ongoing, due to the lack of implementation of the management plan and regular ecological forest biomass inventories, unlike the biomonitoring activities carried out by the eco-guards.

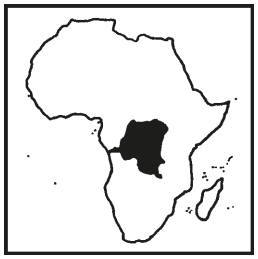
Despite this, through a scenario approach, the carbon sequestration potential can be estimated based on the area and density of the INR's forests – approximately 573,200 hectares. Given that tropical rainforests such as that of Itombwe can store between 150 and 300 tonnes of carbon per hectare, depending on their density and conservation status, an example calculation using 225 tC/ha yields the following median sequestration estimate: 573,200 ha × 225 tC/ha = 129 million tonnes of carbon stored by the INR.

Protection against natural disasters. The forest ecosystems of the Itombwe Massif reduce the risks of erosion, flooding, and landslides, which are exacerbated by climate change. They act as ecological buffers, stabilizing soils and regulating hydrological cycles.

Preservation of resilient biodiversity. The reserve is home to endemic species such as the Grauer's gorilla and other flagship species such as chimpanzees and buffaloes, which are indicators of ecosystem health. Rich biodiversity promotes ecological resilience, meaning the ecosystem's capacity to adapt to climatic disturbances.

Support for local communities. The Itombwe forests provide vital resources (water, medicinal plants, wood) to surrounding populations. Protecting the INR therefore promotes sustainable management that can improve food security and reduce community vulnerability to climatic and economic hazards. Some authors have subdivided these forms of support as following:

- Source of income: The INR can attract tourists, particularly owing to its biodiversity and unique landscape. This could generate revenue through entrance fees, ecotourism services, accommodations, and local guides, once the security situation permits and visits are organized.
- *Job creation:* The management of the INR mobilizes several professional categories: conservators, eco-guards, researchers, artisans, community patrollers, etc. This enables local professional integration.
- *Valorisation of natural resources:* The INR integrates sustainable use of resources (fishing, non-timber forest products, artisanal mineral extraction, etc.), allowing communities to derive benefits without compromising their regeneration.
- *Support for basic social services:*



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Through funds generated by conservation (external funding, public/private partnerships, trust funds, etc.), the INR supports the construction of schools, funding of agriculture, livestock farming, income-generating activities, health centers, and other vocational training.

– Framework for scientific research and education: The INR serves as a site for teaching ecology, biogeography, and sustainable development sciences, as well as for traditional initiation.
– Contribution to international commitments: The INR is part of the DRC's efforts to uphold the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is also supported by partners such as Berggorilla and The Gorilla Organization within the framework of conservation projects.

Challenges. All these vital functions make the INR a key actor in climate regulation, biodiversity protection, and support for local populations. Its preservation is therefore an ecological and human priority. It should be noted, however, that notwithstanding its ecological stakes and adaptation strategies, the INR is unfortunately fully subjected to the effects of climate change, which exert increasing pressure on it, altering its ecological balances and threatening its biodiversity through certain factors such as:

– *Disruption of climatic cycles*
Alteration of seasons: Rainy and dry periods have become unpredictable, affecting species reproduction and the agricultural cycles of local communities. This type of disruption frequently occurs in Mwenga centre, where farmers experience miscalculations in seasonal planting schedules. These irregularities are common in that one period may become longer than the other, causing the destruction of crops in the fields.
Reduction in precipitation in certain zones, leading to the drying out of marshes and declining river levels. This is the case for the Ulindi, Kitongo, Kikuzi, Zalya, and other rivers, which can be crossed on foot during dry seasons.
– *Increased risk of natural disasters*
Soil erosion due to more intense and irregular rainfall.
More frequent forest fires during prolonged dry periods, threatening carbon-rich forested areas.
– *Increased vulnerability of biodiversity*
Endemic species such as the Grauer's gorilla are already threatened by poaching and habitat loss. According to Plumptre et al. (2021), scientists sought to assess the impact of civil war on Grauer's gorilla populations, estimated at 17,000 individuals before the conflict in eastern DRC. The survey results confirmed their worst fears: numbers had fallen to approximately 6,800 individuals – a decline of more than half over 26 years. This study conducted by WCS in 2020 and published in 2021 at the Itombwe Nature Reserve in the Mwana Valley reported a critical status for these great apes. The results of the latest census showed that due to poaching, the number of gorillas living in this valley had dramatically decreased, falling from 211 individuals in 1996 to 73 individuals in 2020, the year the report was published.

Conclusion

The Itombwe Nature Reserve is not only a sanctuary for wildlife but also a barometer of conservation efforts in Central Africa. Its safeguarding requires coordinated commitment among institutions, local communities, and international partners. In a world facing ecological crisis, preserving the Itombwe Nature Reserve means acting for the future of the planet.

John Baliwa Kitoga Ngoy

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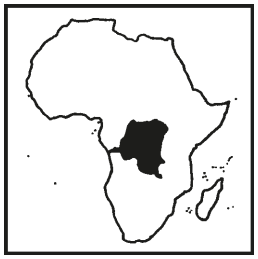

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Overview of Management Activities in the Itombwe Nature Reserve in 2025

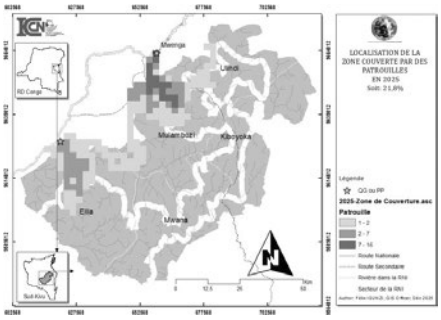
The Itombwe Nature Reserve (INR), like all protected areas in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, faces countless management challenges due to insecurity and armed conflict. During 2025, the INR operated in an adaptive manner in response to the persistent security instability. This situation has had negative repercussions across all sectors of life, including nature conservation.

The INR continued to benefit from the support of its partners, including Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe, Primate Expertise, The Gorilla Organization, ACOPED (Community Action for the Promotion of the Environment and Sustainable Development), and Strong Roots. Thanks to this support, and despite the difficult working conditions, several activities were carried out, notably surveillance patrols, species monitoring through camera traps, environmental awareness and education, monitoring and evaluation, as well as other routine activities.

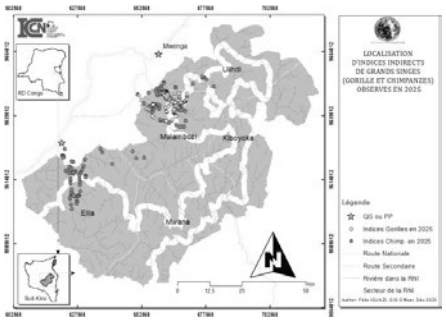
Over the past few months, the security situation within the Itombwe Nature Reserve has shown gradual improvement. Peripheral areas are now under the control of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and the Wazalendo groups, armed patriotic groups defending the nation.

Surveillance and Protection of the INR

As part of ongoing efforts towards conservation and sustainable natural resource management, 29 surveillance patrols, including 23 camping patrols, were conducted across three sectors: Mulambozi, Ulindi, and Elila. These patrols were organised not only to address the multiple threats facing the biodiversity of the INR, but also to strengthen sector coverage and ensure effective law enforcement through the active presence of ICCN staff in the field. Patrol orientation and planning were guided by the distribution of conservation targets through SMART analyses and available intelligence data concerning threats within the protected area.



Areas covered by patrols in the INR in 2025 *Map: ICCN-RNI*



Observation indicators of great apes (gorillas white dots, chimpanzees dark dots) in 2025

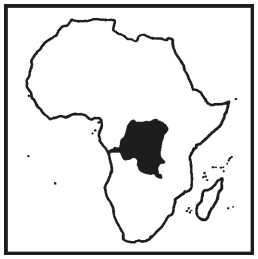
Map: ICCN-RNI

In terms of human effort and time, the 29 patrols extended over 192 days and involved 1,121 ranger-days. The results of these patrols were as follows:

- 21.8 % total coverage of the protected area;
- Recording of several images and videos of gorillas, chimpanzees, and many other wildlife species;
- Arrest, awareness-raising, and sensitisation of 30 poachers;
- Seizure of one firearm and 00 buckshot cartridges;
- Removal of 721 traps;
- Seizure of one spear;
- Closure of 10 pitfall traps;
- Seizure and destruction by burning of 153 pieces of smoked bushmeat;
- Destruction by fire of 14 campsites.

A gorilla caught by a camera trap

Photo: ICCN-RNI



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Distribution of great apes (gorillas and chimpanzees) in the INR in 2025

Common name	Scientific name	Elila Sector	Mulambozi Sector	Ulindi Sector	Total
Chimpanzee	*Pan troglodytes*	115	207	9	331
Gorilla	*Gorilla beringei graueri*	0	384	0	384
Giant pangolin	*Smutsia gigantea*	2	0	0	2
Total		**117**	**591**	**9**	**717**

Awareness-raising, Environmental Education and Community Conservation

The objective of this programme is to strengthen and maintain the involvement of neighbouring communities in the conservation of the reserve and integrated community development. During 2025:

– A total of 626 people were reached through awareness activities, including 264 schoolchildren, 118 older pupils, 67 teachers, and 177 other community members. During these sessions, participants showed great interest in learning about the importance of the INR, its objectives, conservation targets, and anthropogenic threats. They asked many questions about ways to protect these natural habitats. Several participants were surprised to learn that certain species exist only within this specific area and that their disappearance would have an irreversible impact on the environment. The main recommendations made by participants during the sessions with ICCN/INR were to:
– strengthen awareness sessions in all schools neighbouring the INR;
– organise inter-school competitions;
– establish environmental clubs within schools to continue raising awareness, among others; and
– support schools in setting up school gardens.
– Production and distribution of 1,000 calendars within spheres of influence including police stations, hospitals, churches, and other key institutions.
– Radio broadcasts on compliance with zoning regulations and the prohibition of killing fully protected animal species in the DRC. This programme reached approximately 2,700 people living around the reserve.

Challenges Affecting the Management of the INR

– Insecurity in certain sectors of the INR;
– Insufficient infrastructure within sectors and ranger posts;
– Some parts of the reserve still lacking clearly demarcated boundaries;
– Very limited staff numbers to control the entire reserve: 40 staff members for 5,372 km^2;
– Insufficient equipment for surveillance, data collection, and data processing.

Addressing these challenges would improve the management of the INR.

Claude Sikubwabo Kijengo and Séguin Caziga Bisuro

Community Leadership and Conservation Science Come Together at Tayna's 25th RGT General Assembly

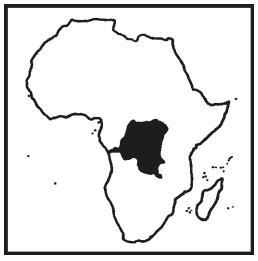
Tayna Nature Reserve is one of the earliest and most important examples of community-led conservation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Created and stewarded by local communities, Tayna protects critical habitat for Grauer's gorillas and other globally threatened wildlife, while supporting ecosystem services that benefit local communities and the global climate.

Protecting a reserve of this scale requires more than legal recognition. It requires strong local institutions, reliable ecological information, and trained community leaders who can monitor wildlife, detect threats, and support informed management decisions.

What makes Tayna exceptional is that this conservation model has been sustained for nearly three decades through local leadership. The community-elected management authority, Réserve des Gorilles de Tayna (RGT), has demonstrated remarkable long-term commitment to protecting forests and wildlife.

In April 2026, RGT held its 25th Ordinary General Assembly in Katoyo, Lubero Territory, North Kivu. The Assembly served as an important moment of reflection and collective planning for one of eastern DRC's most significant forest landscapes, helping to shape priorities for the year ahead.

The Assembly brought together a wide range of people and institutions involved in the governance and management of Tayna Nature Reserve, including political and administrative authorities, customary leaders, local community representatives, women's associations, and conservation partners. Among them was the Military Ad-



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ministrator of Lubero Territory, Colonel Alain Kiwewa, who thanked RGT and its partner GRACE for their commendable efforts to protect Tayna Nature Reserve, recognizing the reserve as a biodiversity-rich heritage site.

GRACE was represented by Country Director Jackson Kabuyaya Mbeke, who praised the commitment of all those involved and emphasized that Tayna is a source of both Congolese and global pride for the protection of Grauer's gorillas, a rare and endangered subspecies found only in eastern DRC.

Omer Paluku, Executive Secretary of the Union of Gorilla Conservation Associations for Development in Eastern DRC (UGADEC), also addressed participants, reminding them that UGADEC is a network of community conservation organisations. RGT is both a member organisation and an innovator of this locally led conservation model in the region.

Central to the Assembly was the evaluation of biomonitoring activities conducted between 2024 and 2025. Since 2020, locally hired monitoring teams have been conducting biodiversity surveys across Tayna Nature Reserve, an internationally recognized Key Biodiversity Area and one of eastern DRC's most important forest landscapes (see box). Forest Guardians completed the first systematic great ape survey of the reserve and have continued expanding scientific monitoring through camera traps, SMART, EarthRanger, and near real-time data collection systems.

This work is helping transform how conservation decisions are made in Tayna. Data collected by local teams has documented threatened and ecologically important species including Grauer's gorillas, eastern chimpanzees, okapi, buffalo, and elephants. A recent peer-reviewed publication on Tayna's great apes further reinforced the reserve's global conservation importance and the value of long-term, community-based monitoring.

The Assembly also highlighted how this proven approach is expanding beyond Tayna. In 2025, GRACE, UGADEC, and partners began applying the same monitoring methodology in the neighbouring Usala Conservation Corridor, where teams are surveying more than 150 transects across remote mountains and rivers. This effort will establish the first biodiversity baseline for Usala and support community-led protection across a larger connected landscape from Tayna to Maiko.

RGT Coordinator Jackson Kalungero presented achievements from the 2024–2025 fiscal year, highlighting progress in reconciling conservation goals with the active engagement of local communities.

The Bami of the Batangi and Bamate chiefdoms, including Mwami Stuka Mwanaweka and Mwami Shabani Mukosasenge, emphasized that community leadership and collaboration remain essential to improve the effectiveness of conservation interventions and ensure the long-term sustainability of Tayna's protection efforts.

The Assembly included a moving tribute to Honoré Masumbuko, GRACE's Education Manager, and David Mulamba, a territory chief within Tayna Nature Reserve who dedicated their lives to the protection of Grauer's gorillas and Tayna's biodiversity. Participants honored their courage, commitment, and lasting contributions to conservation.

The 25th RGT General Assembly demonstrated that conservation progress is built not only through data, technology, and formal management structures, but through trust, local leadership, and shared responsibility. In Tayna, community-led conservation has endured for nearly three decades. It remains a powerful model for protecting Grauer's gorillas, forests, and the communities whose futures are deeply connected to them.

Réserve de Gorilles de Tayna (RGT) and GRACE Gorillas

Biodiversity Surveys in the Tayna Reserve

Since 2020, locally hired monitoring teams supported by GRACE have been conducting continuous biodiversity surveys across the Tayna Reserve – one of eastern DRC's most important forest landscapes and a Key Biodiversity Area. Locally-hired teams of Forest Guardians completed the first systematic great ape survey of the reserve and have continued expanding scientific monitoring, using camera traps and near real-time data collection using SMART and EarthRanger technology.

In 2025, this proven methodology was expanded into the Usala Conservation Corridor, where teams are surveying more than 150 transects across remote mountains and rivers to establish the first biodiversity baseline for the region. Monitoring has documented threatened species including Grauer's gorillas, eastern chimpanzees, okapi, buffalo, and elephants, and a recent publication on Tayna's great apes further reinforced the reserve's global conservation importance.

For the first time, data is now being transmitted directly from remote forests using satellite internet and mobile systems – strengthening community-led conservation while creating employment opportunities that support long-term forest stewardship for thousands of local households.

GORILLAS

The APES Atlas: A Platform for Monitoring Great Ape Conservation

The APES Atlas was created in 2018 to centralize information on apes worldwide. It is an open-access platform that provides site-level information on ape population status, threats, conservation efforts, and research activities. Sites include protected areas (e.g., nature reserves and national parks) and non-protected areas (e.g., concession areas, community forests). The Atlas compiles information from scientific publications, reports, and expert knowledge. These data are standardized and regularly updated, enabling large-scale assessments, such as IUCN Red List assessments, and monitoring of long-term trends in population size, threats and conservation interventions. A key objective of the APES Atlas is to support ape conservation by building a robust, evidence-based foundation for decision-making.

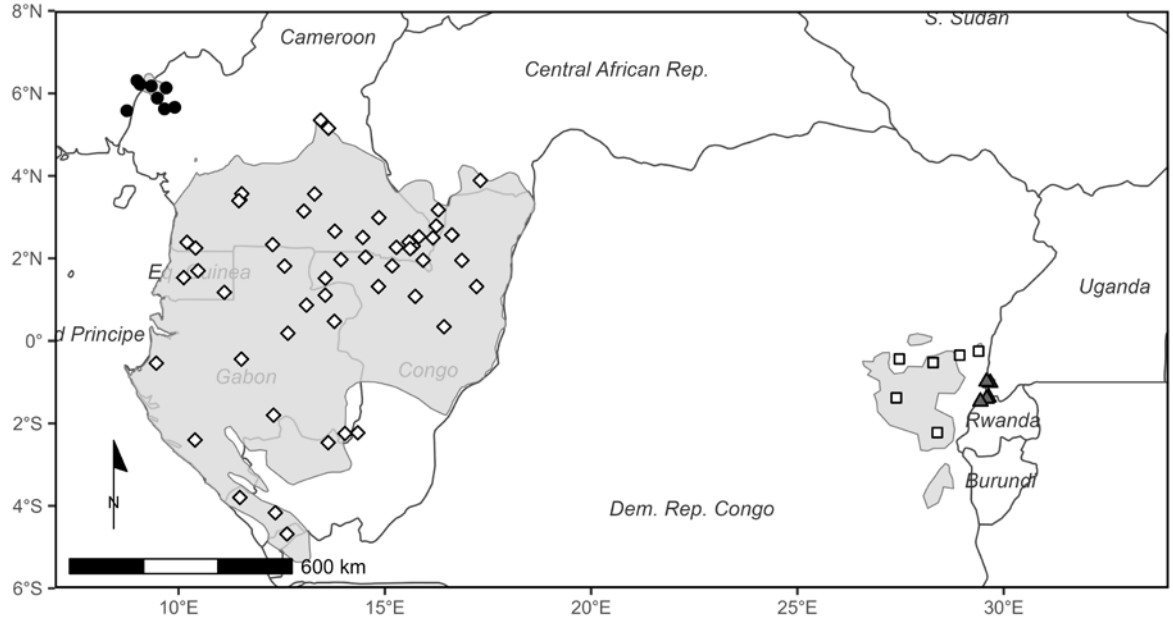
With contributions from more than 70 experts, the APES Atlas is a collaborative initiative, covering over 350 sites worldwide, including 70 gorilla sites as of January 2026 (see figure; APES Atlas 2026). Here, we summarize the threats and conservation activities reported at those sites between the years 2015 and 2025.

APES Atlas Gorilla Sites

Gorillas illustrate both the value and the challenge of compiling conservation data at very different spatial scales. Subspecies such as Cross River, mountain, and Grauer's gorillas occupy relatively small, well-defined ranges, allowing for highly detailed taxon-wide information. At broader geographic scales, such as the western lowland gorilla range, the proportional coverage is currently lower, so taxon-wide patterns are summarized through aggregated data rather than site-level detail.

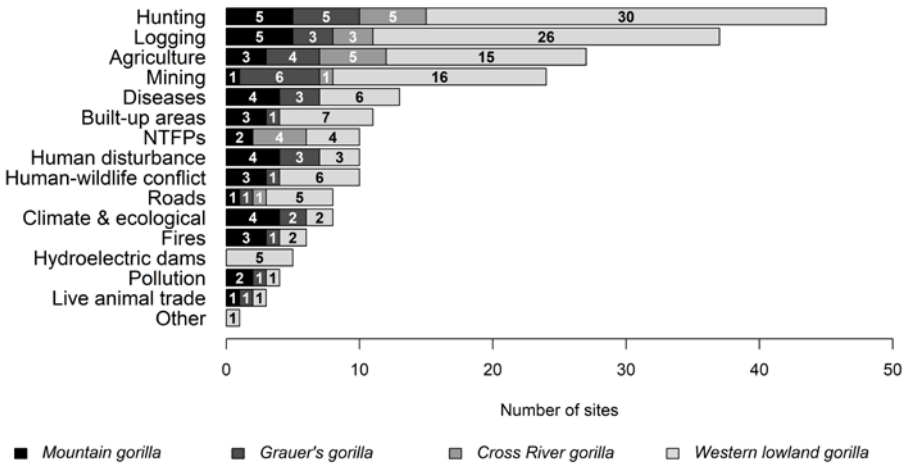
Across all gorilla sites, the APES Atlas highlights a consistent set of major threats, with hunting emerging as the most widespread, followed by logging, agriculture, and mining. Disease, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and infrastructure development – including roads and built-up areas – also represent significant threats across many sites. These threats can have compounding effects and are often reported together; for example, infrastructure development facilitates access to previously remote forests, leading to both habitat loss and increased poaching rates (Strindberg et al. 2018).

The relative importance of these threats certainly varies by taxa and socio-ecological context. For instance, mountain gorilla populations, which



Distribution of sites in the APES Atlas where gorillas are present

GORILLAS



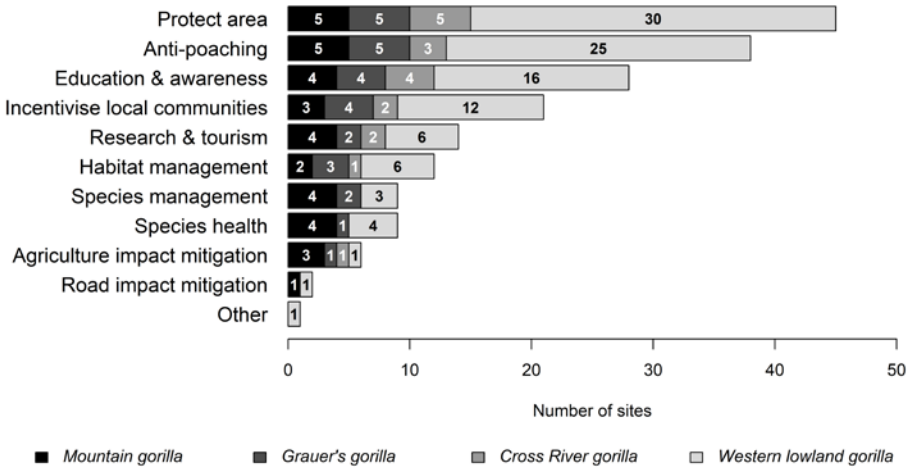
Threats reported across 69 APES Atlas gorilla sites between 2015 and 2025. The number of sites reporting a specific threat is indicated for each subspecies.

are restricted to small areas surrounded by high human population densities, are highly exposed to a diverse set of anthropogenic pressures. The risk of disease transmission is high, alongside threats from human disturbance, including recreational activities and armed conflict. Their limited range also increases their vulnerability to climate-related and ecological threats. Grauer's gorillas are notably threatened by mining across much of their range, consistent with reports of widespread artisanal mining controlled by armed groups and associated with hunting and illegal bushmeat trade (Plumptre et al. 2016). In contrast, Cross River gorillas are primarily threatened by hunting, logging, agricultural expansion, and the collection of NTFPs.

The most frequently implemented conservation activities include anti-poaching measures (e.g., patrols, bushmeat market inspections and snare removal), area-based protection (such as the establishment of national parks) and education and awareness initiatives. Although agriculture is reported as a major threat, relatively few gorilla sites report conservation actions specifically designed to mitigate its impacts, such as strategies to deter gorillas from crop fields or to promote more intensive farming in designated areas. This does not imply that broader and more commonly implemented interventions, including area protection, awareness-raising, and monetary or non-monetary incentives, are ineffective in reducing agricultural pressures. Notably, mountain gorilla sites report the implementation of all categories of conservation activities across nearly all sites, reflecting both the diversity of threats affecting these populations and the range of efforts required to address them. In particular, veterinary interventions and daily monitoring have been shown to contribute substantially to the successful recovery of mountain gorilla populations (Robbins et al. 2011).

Challenges in Data Collection across Gorilla Ranges

Collecting data across the geographic range of gorillas is inherently challenging, as populations occur in remote areas where access is constrained by logistical limitations, security concerns, and ongoing threats such as poaching, illegal logging, mining, and civil conflict. These realities lead to uneven data coverage, particularly in areas where sustained monitoring has been difficult. Consequently, spatial and temporal data gaps exist in the APES Atlas. Despite these limitations the APES Atlas represents the most comprehensive resource for standardized synthesis of gorilla conservation status and threats currently available, bringing fragmented field data together in a platform that supports conservation assessments



Conservation activities reported across 59 APES Atlas gorilla sites between 2015 and 2025. The number of sites reporting a specific activity is indicated for each subspecies.

and action. Where ranges are small and populations discrete, the APES Atlas can support detailed conservation planning; where distributions are extensive, it enables regional synthesis and strategic prioritization.

How to Contribute to the APES Atlas

The APES Atlas is designed to evolve through the addition of new site information, ongoing data refinement, and strengthened collaboration. By engaging researchers and practitioners, it captures local knowledge and connects field-based efforts to regional and global conservation assessments.

We encourage the readers to explore the APES Atlas (www.apesatlas.iucnapesportal.org) and contribute their knowledge and conservation experience, increasing the visibility of their work while strengthening the Atlas as a shared, open resource for guiding and monitoring gorilla conservation. Feel free to contact us at inemeth[at]rewild.org and amizero[at]gorillafund.org.

Isabel Ordaz-Nemeth and Aime Mizero Bazina

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Robbins, M. M. et al. (2011): Extreme conservation leads to recovery of the Virunga mountain gorillas. PloS one 6 (6), e19788

Strindberg, S. et al. (2018): Guns, germs, and trees determine density and distribution of gorillas and chimpanzees in Western Equatorial Africa. Science advances 4 (4), eaar2964

The Wildlife Trade in Equatorial Guinea

In tropical Africa the bushmeat trade is still very common. Some species are also killed or captured for other reasons: for body parts which can be sold in urban markets, or for the local, domestic, or international pet trade.

A study in 1990 surveyed the wild meat trade in the two main markets of Equatorial Guinea (Malabo on Bioko Island and Bata on the mainland coast). At that time, harvesting was unsustainable for two of the 17 species in the mainland: the western gorilla and the common chimpanzee. Most species were hunted sustainably. In 2025, a new survey monitored wild-trapped and shot vertebrates offered for sale in Bata and Malabo, plus wildlife sold along roads and villages across the country.

The 2025 surveys documented an extensive wildlife trade, mainly for meat consumption. Pangolins are of particular note: they are traded for body parts, and their meat is considered a delicacy. Most of the animals offered in the markets were mammals (80.0 %), followed by reptiles (14.1 %) and birds (5.9 %). 94.2 % of the animals were marketed for meat consumption, of which mammals made up 82.7 %. 4.4 % of cases were body parts offered for medicinal or ritual purposes (e.g. elephant tails, skulls and hands of primates including western gorilla and common chimpanzee). Only 1.4 % of the animals were offered as pets, mostly grey parrots.

The majority of the animals on the markets were freshly dead, 11 % were smoked, 5.1 % were alive (mostly reptiles and pangolins), and 0.5 % were rotten. In other Central African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, wild meat is usually smoked in order to be transported to markets, which requires long and difficult journeys. In Equatorial Guinea a road network now covers 2,900 km in a country with an area of 28,000 km^2. This facilitates the transportation of fresh and live animals.

There were important changes in species composition at the two markets between 1990 and 2025. A decline in primates and ungulates was observed, while carnivores, pangolins, birds and reptiles increased. These changes could indicate population reductions of certain taxa and their replacement by others in the markets.

Of the species offered at the markets in 1990, only the western gorilla and common chimpanzee were globally threatened according to the IUCN Red List. In 2025, 15 species were regarded as globally threatened and 8 as Near Threatened (NT): 26.8 % and 14.3 % of the total species recorded. Forest elephant, western gorilla and Bioko black colobus are listed as Critically Endangered (CR); common chimpanzee, red-eared monkey, white-bellied pangolin, giant ground pangolin and grey parrot) are listed as Endangered (EN). Of the total individuals surveyed in 2025, 17.4 % were globally threatened and 3.9 % Near Threatened.

An increase in hunting over decades may have caused the population decline of several species. A nation-wide survey in 2011 showed strong hunting pressures on large mammals even within protected areas. Hunting for food and medicinal products is a major global driver of extinction for terrestrial mammals. Current information suggests that hunting is unsustainable for many species traded in Equatorial Guinea. These species are more valued and as a result are scarcer and more difficult to find than decades ago.

The country's economic growth in recent decades has facilitated access to large tracts of previously inaccessible forests through new roads and highways. Vehicles and firearms are easier to access. Human population growth since 1990 has increased hunting pressure on wildlife. Urgent conser-

vation actions are required. Although hunting of several threatened species is prohibited by national laws, they are openly sold in the markets and streets of rural settlements, often right in front of the authorities. It is difficult to replace wild meat as it still is a relatively cheap and easy-to-obtain protein resource. Further, wild meat is preferred socially and traditionally over domestic meat. Targeted educational campaigns may change consumer attitudes towards wild meat and reduce its demand.

Original publication:
Tella, J. L., Palacios-Martínez, I., Romero-Vidal, P., Blanco, G. & Juste, J. (2026): Wildlife consumption is widespread across Equatorial Guinea and hunted species are more threatened now than 35 years ago. Biological Conservation 316, 111775

Female Networks

In many animal societies, individuals of one sex, and sometimes both, eventually leave their natal group to join another. In a smaller number of species, including humans and gorillas, individuals may change groups multiple times throughout their lifetime. This process, known as dispersal, plays a central role in avoiding inbreeding, promoting gene flow, and shaping social relationships.

Despite its prevalence and importance, dispersal remains incompletely understood. Most research has focused on the first stage of the process, departure, and has sought to explain why individuals leave in the first place. By contrast, the second stage, where individuals go after dispersing, has remained largely unexplored, partly because it is particularly difficult to track individuals once they have left their group.

In mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*), males typically become solitary during dispersal, whereas females transfer directly from one social unit to another. However, the factors that shape these destination choices remain poorly understood. The aim of our study was therefore to reconstruct the social histories of individuals in order to better understand how dispersal decisions are made. Using more than 20 years of data from the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, we show that dispersal destinations are far from random. Broad group characteristics, such as sex ratio or group size, had little influence but past social experiences were particularly important. Females avoided groups containing males with whom they had grown up and preferentially joined groups containing familiar females.

Because female mountain gorillas can live in groups with multiple males, paternity is often uncertain. Avoiding males they grew up with may therefore represent a strategy to reduce the risk of inbreeding, as the probability of relatedness is likely higher with familiar males from the natal group than with males from other groups.

What proved especially important for females was the presence of familiar females, particularly those with whom they had previously spent several years. Joining a new group can be risky, as resident females often show aggression toward immigrants. Selecting a group that contains pre-existing social partners may therefore facilitate both social acceptance and faster integration into the new group.

These findings suggest that dispersal is not only about avoiding inbreeding or finding mating opportunities but is also strongly shaped by same-sex social relationships. It is often assumed that individuals who disperse repeatedly will invest less in social bonds, as they or their partners may leave at any time. However, our results challenge this view. Rather than ending social bonds, dispersal can allow individuals to reconnect with previous partners, even after years apart. This highlights the long-term importance of social relationships and suggests that social bonds can persist beyond group boundaries.

Victoire Martignac

Original publication:
Martignac, V., Eckardt, W., Mucyo, J. P. S., Ndagijimana, F., Stoinski, T. S.,

A Twin Year for Virunga

For the mountain gorillas of the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2026 started in a very special way: on 3 January, twins were born to Mafuko in the Bageni group. This is the largest group in the park with 59 members. The park authorities waited for some time to see whether the babies would survive, and when they were 2 months old, they were named Uzima and Urithi. Both are males.

In March, there was a new sensation: another set of twins was born in the Baraka group, which now has 19 members. One of them is female and one is male.

In the Virunga National Park, twin births were recorded already in 2016 and 2020, but in those cases, the twins did not survive (in 2016, the mother was also Mafuko, both of them died within the first week, in 2020 one of them after a few days). Several gorilla twin births were recorded in other places, but usually either one or both babies died at a very young age. Let's hope it will be different with these twins!

News from the park:
https://virunga.org/news/

Vecellio, V. & Morrison, R. E. (2025): Dispersed female networks: female gorillas' inter-group relationships influence dispersal decisions. Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 292, 20250223

Post-reproductive Lifespan in Wild Mountain Gorillas

Post-reproductive lifespan, the period of life after females stop reproducing, seems to be a paradox as it is unclear whether and under what conditions this trait has evolutionary benefits on fitness. For females, it would be more beneficial to reproduce until the end of their lives. Besides humans, post-reproductive lifespan has only been documented in a few long-lived mammal species, particularly in toothed whales.

Researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Germany, and the University of Turku, Finland, examined the occurrence of post-reproductive lifespan in wild mountain gorillas. Using long-term data on 25 female mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, the researchers analysed female reproductive patterns and life span.

Seven out of 25 females were classified post-reproductive. The post-reproductive phase represented a considerably large proportion of the females' adult life span. Females stopped reproducing on average at age 35 years but continued to live for more than 10 additional years.

Overall, the study suggests that the prolonged post-reproductive lifespan observed in mountain gorillas may reflect menopause and no other causes of sterility. According to the researchers, this is supported by the lack of mating activity observed in these females and previous endocrine analyses of old females at another location.

The researchers discuss different hypotheses that could explain the evolution of post-reproductive lifespan in mountain gorillas. For example, the *reproductive conflict hypothesis* posits that old females stop reproducing to avoid competition for limited reproductive opportunities with younger and possibly related individuals. Another hypothesis discussed in the publication is the *grandmothering hypothesis*, which suggests that old females cease reproduction to increase their fitness by helping to raise descendants. However, gorilla social and ecological structure do not support these two hypotheses. The *mother hypothesis* seems to have more support. It states that old females rather invest into existing offspring than into reproduction and hence cease reproduction. However, further research is needed to clarify the evolutionary drivers of post-reproductive lifespan in mountain gorillas. According to the researchers, the results of this study add to the knowledge of post-reproductive lifespan in primates and humans and hence contribute to the understanding of the evolution of life history in humans and their ancestors.

Original publication:
Smit, N. & Robbins, M. M. (2025): Post-reproductive lifespan in wild mountain gorillas. PNAS 122 (42), e2510998122

The female Siato in Bwindi at the ages 48 years (left) and 51 years (right) *Photos: Martha M. Robbins*

READING

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BERGGORILLA & REGENWALD DIREKTHILFE

2026 Members' Meeting of the Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe

This year the Members' Meeting took place in Leipzig, where 69 members (a record!) gathered on Saturday, 9 May. Thanks to the coordination of Martha Robbins, the event was hosted in the foyer of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI-EVA). After the welcome by Burkhard Bröcker and our host, Martha Robbins, Laura Hagemann gave a brief introduction to the MPI-EVA and its history before guiding us through the day's programme. We heard two fascinating presentations. The first was given by Katja Liebal on "Cognition in Great Apes" in which she challenged the long-held assumption that gorillas are "nice but dumb". The second presentation, given in English by Charlotte King, examined evolutionary aspects of "locomotion in gorillas".

Charlotte King during her fascinating presentation
Photo: Angela Meder

Subsequently, Angela Meder reported on the projects that B&RD has recently supported and provided updates on current developments in the gorilla regions. Particular attention was given – accompanied by many photos – to the successful release of four adult Grauer's gorillas females at Mt. Tshiaberimu. The animals had previously lived at the GRACE Center. The session concluded with a video report from Claude Sikubwabo, our on-site manager.

The day ended at the traditional Leipzig restaurant "Auerbachs Keller" where everyone enjoyed good food and lively conversations.

On Sunday, 10 May, participants visited the gorillas at the zoo. Expert guides provided detailed insights into the life of the gorillas and the other inhabitants of "Pongoland" (chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans).

We would like to express sincere thanks to all those who contributed to making the 27th Members' Meeting of the Berggorilla & Regenwald Direkthilfe a rewarding and enriching experience once again.

Eva Schweikart

The participants of the member' meeting in front of the Max Planck Institute

Photo: Manfred Hartwig

BERGGORILLA & REGENWALD DIREKTHILFE

Finances

Income in 2025	
Subscriptions	25,220.00 euro
Donations	169,672.93 euro
Sales, mobile phone recycling	4,457.01 euro
Penalties	1,820.00 euro
Currency differences	76.00 euro
Total	***201,245.94 euro***
Expenses in 2025	
Administration	2,279.46 euro
Gorilla Journal	2,096.84 euro
Website	543.00 euro
Items for sale	150.00 euro
Postage	2,080.70 euro
Refund	199.44 euro
Pay/top-ups	15,800.00 euro
Sarambwe	
Support of trackers, kitchen, supplies, medical care	32,300.00 euro
Equipment	2,125.00 euro
Support tracker families	650.00 euro
Community projects	8,569.00 euro
Patrol post repair	1,622.00 euro
Mt. Tshiaberimu	
Tracker top-ups	14,700.00 euro
Equipment	3,530.00 euro
Support tracker families	4,745.00 euro
Community project	6,370.00 euro
Renovation schools	4,090.00 euro
Student training	4,760.00 euro
Itombwe	
Ranger top-ups, food for patrols, med. care	31,800.00 euro
Office rent	3,000.00 euro
School renovation	5,015.00 euro
Maiko	
Ranger top-ups and medical care	31,200.00 euro
CoCoSi	2,700.00 euro
Bwindi	
Tree network	10,400.00 euro
BACEP	8,400.00 euro
Research	9,000.00 euro
Renovation school	5,000.00 euro
Virunga Conservation Area	
Gorilla Doctors	2,000.00 euro
Total	***215,125.44 euro***

Our Donors

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We are also grateful to all the people and institutions that contributed to our mobile phone collection campaign. This were – among others – the E-Jugend (E youth) of the soccer team Waldkicker, SPVGG. Waldbrunn, and Martina Bittruf, Mittelschule (secondary school) Ebern.

Many thanks to all donors, also to those we could not name here!