



Environmental responsibility

Responsibility and ecotourism in Uganda

Voiceover

Mountain gorillas are one of the world's most endangered species. Today they survive only in the forests of Central Africa, where they have endured years of civil war, habitat loss and poaching.

Tugumisirize Yese

We used to see the gorillas. There were very few but those few people never feared killing them. They are vermins like other vermins, they were killed, they were poached, there was no problem.

Voiceover

For decades conservationists have tried to protect the gorillas and their habitat.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

Mountain gorillas are one of our closest living relatives. We share 98.4% genetic material and when you go out to see them, it's very therapeutic, they look into the eye and you feel like you're connecting with a close relative.

Voiceover

But the number of gorillas has continued to fall.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

There's only 700 mountain gorillas left in the world.

Voiceover

The future for these gorillas is looking brighter. A new conservation approach is heralded as the answer to their long-term survival. It's called ecotourism.

The huge revenue generated from foreign tourists visiting the gorillas pays for the protection of the forest and development for the local people.

Ghad Kanyangyeyo

Everybody's now putting on pressure on conservation because we are benefiting from wildlife. Everybody's benefiting from tourism.

Voiceover

But is gorilla tourism really the solution? Can it provide the best future for the gorillas, the forest and for local people? Or could it lead to an environmental and social disaster?

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

These gorillas could end up dying as a result of too much human contact and then we'll lose the resource forever.

Voiceover

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda is home to half the world's remaining mountain gorillas. It's been designated a World Heritage Site.

James Byamukama

This forest is important both internationally, nationally and locally. Besides mountain gorillas, this is a very high biodiversity forest. We have a lot of other primates, we have forest elephants, we have a number of birds – a variety of them – we have a number of butterflies, so many trees. A wonderful forest. Just look out and see how beautiful it is. It's scenic beauty, wonderful.

Voiceover

But the forest is under threat from people eager to use the land. The area surrounding Bwindi has been consumed by agriculture.

Charity Bwiza

The population pressure is increasing, and the population in the south-western Uganda is the highest in Uganda and it is also said it is highest in Africa.

Voiceover

The Park is an island of forest under threat from the ever-rising tide of people. In 1991 the Uganda Wildlife Authority was charged with protecting Bwindi. Local people's access to the Park was stopped. This was enforced by armed rangers and was called Fortress Conservation.

James Byamukama

Originally the communities were allowed to access a number of resources. They would access firewood, they would get mushrooms, they would get wild meat, they would get bamboo shoots, bamboo and many handicraft products. And when it was made National Park then these rights were removed. The removal of any of the forest products was stopped. And therefore the communities came out in rage.

Charity Bwiza

Communities used to set fire intentionally to the protected area, then communities used to fight with the law enforcement. So the communities were really, really very hostile

Voiceover

As conservation by force wasn't working, a new approach was needed. This conflict had to be resolved. For gorillas to have a sustainable future, local people needed to be involved in their conservation rather than excluded from the forest.

James Byamukama

A question had come. Say oh, conserving for who?

And therefore we had to make a shift from that Fortress approach to an Integrated Conservation and Development approach and put the people into conservation.

Voiceover

The Integrated Conservation and Development approach works by linking wildlife conservation with the improved welfare of the people around the Park.

Moses Mapesa is the Chief Executive of the Uganda Wildlife Authority. It's his job to decide how Bwindi is managed.

Moses Mapesa

We had to review and rethink the strategy to look into how to make these conservation areas more relevant to the people who live close to them or who even have ancestral claims to the land. And that is how the whole notion of integrated programmes started.

Voiceover

Communities were helped to develop new livelihoods to replace those lost from their restricted access to the Park.

One was beekeeping, which replaced the need to burn wild hives in order to collect honey.

Charity Bwiza

We have taught them how to harvest good honey without setting fire to the forest. Originally they would use a lot of fire to chase away the bees. But now with protective gears they harvest without being stung by bees and the honey is clean and has higher value.

And this one has become income-generating activity, because many people want this honey which is organic, and people come as far as from Kampala to buy this honey.

Voiceover

Now conservation was actually benefiting the local communities and their view of the forest began to change.

Ghad Kanyangyeyo

In the beginning everything like wildlife to me it was like useless because there was nothing I was benefiting from them, many local people were just taking anything as if it were nothing and they'd chop the trees down, they could kill the animals anyhow but now things have changed. Everybody's now putting on pressure on conservation because we are benefiting from wildlife.

Voiceover

The most significant new approach adopted in Bwindi was the introduction of ecotourism.

Alastair McNeilage

An organisation was starting up a gorilla tourism programme, trying to find ways that the forest could generate income sustainably without being harvested, without being cut down, without killing animals so that that provided income both to pay for the management of the Park itself, to pay for all the salaries of the rangers and the guides and the Park staff and the maintenance of the forest, but also to generate income for the local communities.

Voiceover

In 1993 the first gorilla tourists came to Bwindi. Today 12 000 ecotourists visit every year.

Female tourist 1

My partner and I have always wanted to see the gorillas, so took the opportunity to come here to see the gorillas.

Male tourist 1

I'm very curious about how they behave in the bush.

Male tourist 2

The more and more people that can come here and help do this, not just have the experience but also to contribute to the local community and to preserve these wonderful, wonderful animals – it's just amazing. It almost brings tears to my eyes.

Voiceover

Within Bwindi there are four families of gorillas that are visited by tourists once a day. This is possible because these wild gorillas have been habituated. This means they have become tolerant to the presence of humans.

To do this, wildlife rangers repeatedly visit a gorilla group, getting closer each time. This process can take up to two years until the animals are accustomed to the proximity of people on a daily basis.

James Byamukama

Habituation is not intended, and has never been intended, to transform the behaviour of gorillas from being wild to being like tamed animals. Even when gorillas are habituated they still keep wild.

Voiceover

Habituation allows tourists to get close to wild gorillas, a key requirement for tourism. But these visits are regulated in order to protect the gorillas. Each visit is restricted to a group of no larger than eight tourists.

Moses Mapesa

We keep the groups of people visiting the habituated gorillas to a bare minimum to avoid stress, because gorillas are social animals. They spend most of their time eating and grooming and they need their privacy, so to say. If we have too many people going to see these groups, too often then you begin to stress them and it begins to impact on their social behaviour.

Voiceover

So visitors must keep their distance from the gorillas and follow strict rules.

Madi Tumugabiirwe

Eating, drinking and smoking are not allowed when we are nearby the gorillas. And when we are out there we should not leave any rubbish, we must pack them and bring them here. Reason being if you leave them there, some animals are so funny they might come and start feeding on them, which can be too dangerous for them.

Voiceover

Ecotourism is based on the simple economic principle that there is more money to be made from tourist dollars than from selling off the natural resources. Each visitor pays a 500 US dollar permit fee for one hour with the gorillas.

Moses Mapesa

We stopped timber companies or timber harvesting in Bwindi and we earn a lot more money from the great apes tourism, from the gorilla tourism, than we would ever earn from timber production.

Voiceover

Each year, Uganda earns nearly six million US dollars from the sale of tourist permits alone.

Tugumisirize Yese

We respect the gorilla because of tourism. It's a bigger income to our country.

Voiceover

But for the conservation of the forest to continue, it must also benefit the people immediately surrounding the Park. The revenue sharing scheme puts a percentage of gorilla tourist fees directly into the development of the local communities.

Enoch Turyagyenda

You know there is some little money which normally comes in some parishes every year. We call it revenue sharing. It is the money that these whites normally contribute to visit this Park to help the citizens who live around the Park.

Voiceover

Local people also benefit from the extra trade and jobs created by tourism. This is particularly obvious in Buhoma, now the centre of tourist activities in Bwindi.

Alastair McNeilage

This has been really quite successful. There's a lot of employment, there's a lot of small business opportunities that people can take advantage of and particularly in those areas, people are very positive towards the Park now because they see tangible benefits that they can get from it.

Phili

I work as a porter in Bwindi. I have been doing this for seven years. I carry bags for tourists and I get some money which can help me and my family. So I buy food, I pay school fees, I'm trying to build a good house, where I'll be staying with my family. I'm almost finishing it, it has six rooms and remaining is plastering and maybe if God wishes I will put the electricity.

Voiceover

Tourists also make direct contributions to development projects such as health centres and schools.

Manaseh Twinamasiko

The changes I can tell you, we had no any permanent building house, we had no any school around. But by now you can see we are just roofing with iron sheets and education is totally changed because children used to go far from here, schooling far from the village, but tourism has supported us and by now I can tell you we have got a secondary school nearby here being run by the community.

Voiceover

Buhoma also has a well-equipped health centre. 80% of its funding comes direct from tourists' donations.

Paul Williams

Tourism has made this area richer, and there is a direct connection between economic wealth and health. Richer people up to a point are healthier people, and many of the diseases that we encounter in this area are diseases of poverty.

In the last year, through spraying inside all of the houses and by helping people to access mosquito nets at prices that they can afford, we've managed to almost eliminate malaria as a big problem in this area. You can't be complacent about a disease like malaria, but malaria has become a rare disease just within the last year rather than a common disease.

Voiceover

But ecotourism has not only brought benefits to the people of the area. There are disturbing signs that the influx of tourists is creating problems here too.

Paul Williams

A negative that I see in this area around tourism is about the relationship that's been created between tourists and local people. There are many people in this area that have learnt how to really tug on the heartstrings of tourists. And what it does is that it's created a kind of dependency. The primary motive is to get money. There are sad stories, sometimes true and sometimes with bits of truth and bits of fiction, that people have that they tell to tourists when they befriend them with the real aim of trying to get money from tourists. Now I don't begrudge anybody trying to do that but what it does, it makes people perceive the North Americans and Europeans as being superior and rich, and it makes them inferior and you know, in some ways, begging.

Batwa

They used to live their hard life in the forest before it was gazetted as a National Park. Now they are happy because now they are eating from the fruits of tourism here in Bwindi.

Whenever you tell them to go back to the forest, they can't go back. Because now they are happy. Now they have a singing and dancing group for entertaining the visitors.

James Byamukama

When tourists came into this area, for the first time people starting getting exposed to dollars and that meant an interest for money increased. What does that imply? Their social behaviour starting changing. It was not common to see video halls around here of people fighting, which also told people how to do crime. So people now have sophisticated means of stealing from tourists, from their neighbours. So it has also impacted negatively on the livelihood of the people.

Voiceover

Another negative of ecotourism is that it's had an unexpected harmful effect on the health of the people.

Paul Williams

Indirectly, tourism has contributed to the spread of HIV AIDS here. In the past there have been some security issues here – there was an attack on some tourists here in 1999. And as a consequence of that, and because of the importance of this area to the Ugandan economy, there is a large presence of Ugandan soldiers here. And right where the soldiers are based there is a burgeoning sex industry. What does that mean when lots of people are having sex? Well, if people are having unprotected sex then it increases the chance of HIV. And so there is a direct correlation, a direct connection between the areas where soldiers are and people are having sex with soldiers, local people, and HIV. And of course the connection with tourism is that the soldiers are here in order to protect the tourists. So I see that as a definite negative.

Voiceover

Despite these problems, ecotourism is still perceived as an overwhelming positive by many of the local people.

Martin Musinguzi

Benefits of tourism have been concentrated around the Buhoma area, and therefore the local people themselves are very vigilant and ready to defend the forest at all costs, because of the benefits they are seeing being derived from tourism activities in Buhoma.

Voiceover

But outside Buhoma, are the benefits of ecotourism really enough to make up for the loss of the Park's resources?

Alistair McNeilage

You're talking about maybe helping people to move from being very poor to poor, but they're still poor. And so just because they may be able to cultivate more crops and raise some goats, doesn't mean to say that they still don't have great needs which could still be met by getting resources from the Park.

Voiceover

Poaching continues and snares are still found by rangers in the forest.

Moses Dhabasadha

Still there are those who are stubborn that they want bushmeat. Because culturally they believe when their children don't eat bushmeat they fall sick. Or their ancestors, great-great parents who have passed away, will curse them if they don't go and hunt, which was the activity of the ancestors. So still illegal activities continue.

James Byamukama

These snares are found in the same locality. We still have some incidences of poaching.

Start of subtitled section

Norida Mpungu

There were many children in the family and we couldn't afford meat, so my father poached. He caught animals every day. On the day he died there was bushmeat in the house.

End of subtitled section

Voiceover

The highest incidences of such illegal activities are found in areas that benefit the least from tourism.

James Byamukama

Communities that don't have tourism around their areas, really you can see the difference and they envy them very much.

Voiceover

Buremba is one of those communities. It's on the edge of the Park but far from the main tourist centres. It's a district of 3000 people, but its two primary schools are rudimentary compared with Buhoma. The clinic is poorly funded and there is very little external trade.

Enoch Turyagyenda

Now if we could be having those gorillas here this town could be changed completely. But now we are suffering too, too, too, too much. We lack all those things.

Norida Mpungu

The school and clinic are a long way away. Even if the clinic was closer I couldn't afford to pay for medicine or treatment.

Voiceover

But are these inequalities and the harmful effects of tourism the price to be paid for rapid development and saving the mountain gorillas? Some conservationists argue that although imperfect, ecotourism has still been hugely successful here in Bwindi.

Moses Mapesa

We can begin to talk about a very positive trend, in the conservation of Bwindi and the gorillas specifically.

Voiceover

In 2006 a census found a total of 340 gorillas in the Park, an astonishing 12% increase in the population over the preceding decade.

Moses Mapesa

We have seen a steady rise in the gorilla population and the habitat is still large enough to accommodate a few more gorilla families.

Voiceover

It would appear that ecotourism has turned the tide, from a gorilla population crashing into extinction to actual sustained growth.

But recent research has raised questions about the sustainability of gorilla tourism. There are now growing concerns that it could further endanger the creatures it is claiming to protect.

James Byamukama

Habituation tends to domesticate to some extent the gorillas, so once they get used to the human beings then human beings can also take advantage.

Voiceover

Data suggests that the gorillas used for tourism are more vulnerable to poachers.

James Byamukama

The gorillas can no longer now distinguish whether this is a friendly force or whether it's not a friendly force. In the incidences of poaching, we have lost eight gorillas in the history since 1995 to 2003 and we have had three infants taken into captivity. And they are all from habituated groups.

Voiceover

It was hoped that habituation would merely allow people a closer look. But it has proven to have had a profound effect on the gorillas.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

Habituating all the groups to a certain extent affects the behaviour of the gorillas. The ones that are habituated tend to feed less and move around more. And when they do this then they may impact on the range of the groups that are not habituated. So the whole forest is kind of changed as a result of habituation.

Voiceover

Added to this, the habituated gorillas are watched every single day. These frequent visits appear to be stressing them to such an extent that they are reproducing less than normal.

Moses Mapesa

We think there is a positive correlation in terms of the visitation and the stress factor. In fact, from the last census results we noted that the population increase was largely from the wild groups, while the habituated ones had less and less infants.

Voiceover

So gorilla tourism comes with some very definite harms and some considerable risks.

But there is another, potentially greater problem – one that threatens the future of the gorillas and therefore the continued development of the area.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

If they lose the gorillas through disease, they've lost a sustainable source of income for an area which is very ... doesn't really have many other alternatives.

Moses Mapesa

It can take one month to wipe out the population and you may never rebuild it.

Voiceover

Are humans getting too close for comfort?

Ranger

Move the other side.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

Gorillas are very susceptible to our diseases because we share 98.4% genetic material. And so they can easily get very sick.

Ranger

Come behind, come this way. Let's keep the distance.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

If you have a bad cold or anything that's airborne such as measles, and you get close enough to them – at a distance of less than 5 metres – they can get diseases from us. And another way is through direct contact.

Female tourist 2

Ah, he pushed you out of the way!

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

In 1996 I got a report that the gorillas were losing hair and developing white scaly skin. So we went out and looked at the clinical signs.

Voiceover

Dr Kalema treated an entire group of habituated gorillas, all suffering from what was a suspected outbreak of scabies. But this was not enough ... a week later, one of the infants died.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

The infant was crawling with mites. And the vets were able to compare those samples with the samples of the people around the area, and were able to tell that the genetics were very similar and most likely the scabies came from people.

Female tourist 2

It licked you, didn't it? It licked your hand and your trouser.

Male tourist 3

He licked my trousers and then he came and licked my hand.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

If a gorilla licks a tourist's clothing they will pick up bacteria, viruses or even parasites from the tourist. And that would be very detrimental, because once that one gorilla gets it, they could easily spread it to the rest of the group.

Madi Tumugabiirwe

You have to keep a distance of 7 metres, but sometimes I have some visitors who I can say they are stubborn. You tell him to do this, he does this. I try to convince that visitor, to explain what he's doing that it's not good.

Male tourist 3

They said that we would be around 7 metres away from them, but obviously if they approach you then there's not much you can do about it.

Female tourist 2

Did they say that in the briefing? What did they say about this close contact that sometimes can happen? Do you recall?

Male tourist 3

No, I guess I missed that part, hey. But I'm kind of glad that I did though.

Female tourist 2

What do you think about how close they came?

Female tourist 3

Actually a little mixed. Because it makes them more accustomed to humans, which makes them more vulnerable, which made me a little nervous. But honestly, I was also a little jealous that they touched other people and didn't touch me. But I knew I shouldn't be jealous, but I was.

Voiceover

Breaking the 7 metre rule seems not to be uncommon.

Moses Mapesa

I was in Brazil and somebody came to me and they said, 'Oh, you are from Uganda.' And they said, 'Oh, I came and saw your gorillas and I touched them.' I said, 'You touched them? How could that be? You're not supposed to have touched them.' And then I have heard it again here recently. So this is something that we definitely will have to address very seriously. I agree with you that it is a responsibility of all of us: the guides, the rangers, the staff on the ground, and the tourists and the tour operators. It is something that we definitely will continue to strive to stop.

Voiceover

Currently there are four gorilla groups used for tourism in Bwindi. Each group can be visited by nearly 3000 different people each year. But this will increase. There is pressure to sell more gorilla permits, either by enlarging visitor group size or habituating more gorillas.

Martin Musinguzi

At the moment there are so many tourists who have been looking for gorilla permits and they have not been able to get them because of the overbooking. For example, people have booked gorilla permits as far as three years to come. Even now, as I speak, there are people who say why you don't increase the number of habituated groups of gorillas.

Voiceover

The greater income from tourism would mean more resources for protecting the Park, but this would also put extra pressure on the gorillas themselves.

Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka

The advantages of habituating is that there's more income for the Park, there's more income for the communities and all these other benefits. But they have to be weighed against the fact that these gorillas could end up being so compromised and could end up dying as a result of too much human contact, and then we will lose the resource forever. So it's a big balance between what is needed now and what is needed for the future.

Voiceover

Uganda Wildlife Authority is currently habituating two more groups of gorillas for ecotourism in Bwindi.