



Environment: journeys through a changing world.

The Negative Effect of Gorilla Tourism

Dr Paul Williams, Bwindi Community Health Centre

Of course, as well as there being benefits of gorilla tourism in this area, particularly in the village of Buhoma, there are also some harms. One of the harms that I see in particular, as a doctor here, is that indirectly tourism has contributed to the spread of HIV Aids here. In the past there have been some security issues here and 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's 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. There is a direct correlation, a direct connection, between the areas where the soldiers are and people are having sex with soldiers, local people, and HIV. The connection with tourism is that the reason the soldiers are in this area is that the soldiers are here to protect the tourists. So I see that as a definite negative.

Another negative that I see in this area around tourism is about the relationship that's been created between tourists and local people and there are many people in this area that have learnt how to tug on the heart strings of tourists. And what it does is 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 tell to tourists when they befriend them, with the real aim of trying to get money from tourists. I don't begrudge anybody trying to do that but what it does is it distorts the relationship between white people and black people, between Europeans, North Americans and Africans here. And it makes people perceive the North Americans and Europeans as being superior and rich and it makes them inferior and in some ways begging.

Tourists visit a local Batwa village:

Tour Guide

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 on the fruits of tourism. Most of their children now know how to write and read. If you tell them to go back to the forest now, they tell you they can't go back because now they are happy. Now we have a singing and dancing group for entertaining the visitors.

[singing and dancing]

James Byamukama, International Gorilla Conservation Programme:

When tourists came to this area, for the first time people started seeing 'mazungu' (white people). For the first time people started getting exposed to dollars and their demand and interest for money increased. What does that imply? Their social behaviour started changing, it's not normal, for example, here in Uganda to see people kissing one another in public, but today it's a common trend. It was not common to see video halls around here; of people fighting which also taught people how to do crimes, so people now have sophisticated means of stealing from tourists, from their neighbours. So it has also changed, impacted negatively on the livelihood of the people.

Tour Guide

If you wish you can look at the handicrafts, then we'll go back to the lodge.

Tourist:

Are they selling the handicraft?

Tour Guide

Yes, they are selling

Tourist:

Did they make it?

Tour Guide

Yes they are trained by the trust. The trust trains them how to make the gorilla carvings and other handicrafts.

Dr Paul Williams, Bwindi Community Health Centre:

I think if more groups of gorillas are habituated and then other towns are used as a base for trekking those gorilla groups, I'm almost certain that the things that have happened in Buhoma, the advantages and disadvantages, would be repeated in those other towns.