



Environment: journeys through a changing world.

Contact with Gorillas

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka. CEO Conservation Through Public Health

In the Gorilla Clinic we carry out laboratory analysis on faecal samples collected from mountain gorillas once a week and it's only from the habituated gorillas that the rangers are able to follow on a daily basis. The health benefits for habituated groups are that it's much easier to monitor them and follow them and if gorillas are showing abnormal appearance or abnormal behaviour you can tell and make a follow up and treat them, if you have to treat them. With unhabituated groups you can't get that close to them and it's very hard to treat them. Gorillas are very susceptible to our diseases because we share 98.4% genetic material and so we can easily get diseases from them and they can easily get diseases from us, and they can easily get very sick.

[tourists with gorillas]

Guide

Move the other side

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka. CEO Conservation Through Public Health

In 1996 I got a report that the gorillas were losing hair and developing white scaly skin. So we wondered what it could be, it could be ringworm, scabies, So we went out and looked at the clinical signs. Dated a juvenile gorilla, he was scratching even under anaesthesia and that's a very common sign of scabies. They all looked terrible, especially the young ones. We gave him a treatment for scabies. Which was ivermectin, a week later a mother dropped her infant, and the infant was crawling with mites and she was dead. We were able to prove that it was scabies. The vets were able to compare those samples with samples from the people around the area and were able to tell that the genetics were very similar and most likely the scabies came from the people.

Tourist:

He pushed you out of the way

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka. CEO Conservation Through Public Health

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 5m they can get diseases from us. Another way is through direct contact.

Guide

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

Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka. CEO Conservation Through Public Health

The Park staff have to be very strict; I know they feel tempted to let the gorillas go close because they can get tips, because the tourists are so excited. We're spending a lot of time explaining to them it's not a good thing to do, because if they lose the gorillas through disease they've lost a sustainable source of income for an area that doesn't have many other alternatives. So we're trying to get them to become stewards and want to protect the gorillas and want to protect their health. What they need to do is that if the gorillas get close they need to frighten them back; basically keep the gorillas back and keep the tourists back. If a gorilla licks a tourist's clothing they will pick up bacteria, viruses or even parasites from the tourists, depending on how hygienic they are. That would be very detrimental because once that one gorilla gets it; they could easily spread it to the rest of the group.

Female Tourist 1

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

Male Tourist

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

Female Tourist 1

They're so gentle.

Male Tourist

Yes, they are.

Madi Tumugabiirwe, Gorilla Trekking Guide

We have to keep a distance of 7m but sometimes I have visitors who are very stubborn. You tell them to do this, they do the opposite. But they are very few. I try to convince that visitor, to explain that what they are doing is not good. But most of the visitors accept the rules.

Male Tourist

They said that we would be around 7m away from them but if they approach you there is not much you can do about it.

Interviewer

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

Tourist

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

Interviewer

Why do you think there is the 7m rule?

Tourist:

I understand that our DNA is so similar that if we have some kind of illness that it could easily be transferred to those guys and they might get sick. I kind of figured that if they approached me that I wasn't really too much in the wrong.

Moses Mapesa, Exec. Dir. Uganda Wildlife Authority

The first time I heard about this was in Brazil. I was in Brazil and someone came and said to me 'When I was in your country I saw your gorillas and I touched them'. I said 'You touched them! How can that be? You're not supposed to have touched them' and then I have heard it again recently. This is something that we definitely will have to address very seriously. It is the 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 try to stop. We won't allow this kind of scenario to happen. We must not stress the animals. We mustn't be driven by actions that could ultimately further endanger the existence of the mountain gorillas or their habitat.

Interviewer

What do you think about how close they came?

Female Tourist 2

Mixed, because it makes them more accustomed to humans which makes them more vulnerable and that makes me a little nervous for them. But I was also a little jealous that they touched other people but they didn't touch me. I know I shouldn't be jealous but I was jealous.

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