



Environment: journeys through a changing world

Habituation - Advantages and Disadvantages

James Byamukama, International Gorilla Conservation Programme

Habituation of mountain gorillas is a process of making the wild group of gorillas being tolerant to the presence of human beings in their vicinity. But habituation is not intended, and has never been intended, to transform the behaviour of gorillas from being wild to being like tamed animals. They still maintain their wildness, feeding, mating, resting. Even when gorillas are habituated they still keep wild.

There are five habituated groups of gorillas in Bwindi, one is for research, another four are for tourism. Those groups were habituated between 1991 and 1993, so it took 2 years it requires a lot of resources. It's also a dangerous process both to the animals and to the people who do it. Mountain gorillas fear human beings, generally but what we do in habituation is to get a team of rangers approaching those wild groups. Which, normally, the gorillas tend to keep running away from them, or try to fight them. When the gorillas charge them they move backwards but insist on keeping close eye contact with them at the same distance. Quite often the silverback can become more threatening and do more chest beating and threatening, if they don't move it may come straight to them. There has been one incident where a silverback has attacked one of the rangers. During this process as the chase between the gorillas and the rangers continues, the gorillas begin to develop some trust and confidence if it's the same group of rangers appearing in the same uniform, looking the same way, behaving the same way. But this does not change them from being wild, that is why we recommend that the rangers keep at a distance of 7m. Because once they come closer, the gorillas, especially the silverback, tend to have a feeling that these human beings are trying to grab their infants. They are very, very defensive, especially when they have young ones. If you want to then introduce tourists you have to take it to another step whereby we bring in a few unfamiliar faces, in this case gorilla tourism here is dominated by whites. We start bringing in unfamiliar faces of white people, say two, or three, or four. So they come with this very familiar group of people and the gorillas may somehow change their behaviour because they are seeing different faces but eventually they will realise that these other faces, different faces also are not harmful. So they have to keep on doing their activity, normally, people keep watching them and the group will be prepared. Habituation of wild groups of gorillas comes with several advantages, because all tourist groups are monitored on a daily basis so their risk to which they are exposed from the poachers is also reduced. And we have also observed the habituated groups get more medical care because they are observed every day and their health situation is known, when they get sick, when they get trapped it also provides them with good care. People around here have actually complained that the gorillas have more medical attention than the human beings around.

Warden

It's too thick. I can't open.

James Byamukama, International Gorilla Conservation Programme:

Habituation of wilder groups comes with many associated risks to the gorillas. The first is, the gorillas are used to living in the wild on their own but once human beings come in and since they are closely related, so there is a likelihood of the transmission of diseases. So that's one very particular risk. The second, other risk, is that habituation tends to domesticate, to some extent, the gorillas. Gorillas have been moving out, some of them, to community groups for crop raiding. But we have observed that the habituated a group is the more frequent that group comes out into those communities. And this has several, or so, complications. Complications of disease transmission, but also increases the conflict between the communities, whose crops are destroyed, and the gorillas. Habituation has had also another impact we have observed that the infants that are born when the habituation process has taken place tend to understand that these people are so friendly, and want to interact with human beings.

That also is very dangerous for human beings, because if the infants come closer the wildness in the silverbacks and the mothers tells them that they might want to take away their children, so they fight for their young ones. So, habituation as a process tends to modify, over a period, the behaviour of the gorillas.

Habituation has also another dimension of risk for the gorillas. Once they get used to the human being then human beings can also take advantage. Gorillas can no longer now distinguish whether this is a friendly force or not a friendly force. The incidences of poaching, we've lost 8 gorillas to poaching since 1995 to 2003 and we've had 3 infants taken into captivity and they are all from habituated groups.