

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-21
Gorilla Action

Bururi, Burundi
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Peter,

While in most parts of the world one seeks to avoid guerrillas, here in the Great Lakes Region, tourists commonly seek gorillas out. This area is one of few remaining in the world where it is possible to see gorillas in action, in their native habitats.

The Great Lakes Region, or "Region de Grands Lacs", to which I refer is not that found in the central United States, but rather that found in Central Africa. This area, including parts of the countries of Zaire, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, includes major inland lakes such as Lake Tanganyika, Lake Kivu, Lake Victoria, Lake Idi Amin (formerly known as Lake Edward), and Lake Mobutu Sese Seko (formerly Lake Albert). Located at the center of the continent, historically this area was relatively inaccessible, due to rugged mountainous terrain. Consequently, the area was contacted relatively late by explorers, slave traders, colonizers, and missionaries. The terrain has also provided habitat for a number of primate species, including gorillas. Despite recent growths in human population densities, some remnant gorilla populations still exist in Uganda, Zaire, and Rwanda.

The Kahuzi-Biege Gorilla Reserve is located in eastern Zaire, about a fifty-minute drive north from Bukavu, near Lake Kivu. I had the chance to visit the reserve in November 1985, with nine other people. On the outskirts of the park, we stopped to pick up our guide, John. John looked very much the part of an African game warden -- wearing a green military-style uniform and a green bush hat. He also had a rifle, to use against poachers... he claimed to have killed six poachers within the past four years. Poachers, he told us, were generally more interested in elephants than gorillas.

At the park entrance, we stopped to pay our fees (\$4 entrance fee, plus \$1 for a camera permit), and to pick up the four trackers who were to accompany us. Then we drove a few kilometers further into the reserve and parked the truck. The trackers set off into the dense forest, clearing a path with their machetes, and we followed. After descending a fairly steep slope, we crossed a bog, where most of us got wet up to our knees. On the other side we re-entered the forest. The trackers found evidence that the gorillas had been there that morning -- as some bamboo had recently been ripped down and torn apart. (Young tender bamboo shoots are one of the gorillas' favorite foods.) The guides knew we were getting close. We wandered around a bit, then heard the gorillas' cries.

We crossed another section of swamp: on the far side we saw gorillas high in the trees, jumping around and breaking off branches. We entered this section of the forest, and over the course of the next hour or so, saw probably ten different gorillas. At one point, we were standing underneath a tree with a gorilla in it. He decided to come down, so climbed down and slide partway on a vine, landing on the ground only about 10 feet in front of us. The guide told us it was safest to stay put ... if we ran, the gorilla might chase us. The gorilla was a big silverback male. We stood there and took photographs until the gorilla got bored looking at us and wandered off. Later on, the scene repeated itself ~~when~~ a mother gorilla and offspring came down a tree, followed by an adult male gorilla and another young'un. Needless to say, this was much more dramatic and exciting than seeing gorillas in a cage at a zoo. Finally the gorillas wandered away, and the guides led us back out of the forest.

When we got back to the truck, we sat down and ate our sandwiches, chatting a bit more with the guides. They told us that the gorilla population is on the rise: whereas there were 115 gorillas in the sanctuary in 1971, now the population is estimated to number around 700. The "carrying capacity" of the reserve has been postulated to be 2000 gorillas.

A week later, I heard the local Zairian Conservator of Parks (Park Supervisor) talk about his work. The major problem facing the park staff is very limited funding from the central government. In comparison with the mountain gorilla reserve located in nearby Rwanda, the Zairian lowland gorilla sanctuary is not yet well developed, nor does it get as much tourist visitation. The German wildlife expert, who works with the Conservator, told us that raising entrance fees at the park for foreign visitors -- to generate more income for the park -- has been proposed, but he thinks that the park needs improvements before charging entrance fees of \$50 per person as does the Rwandan park. We also discussed the larger problems of trying to conserve wildlife when the human population has such a low standard of living, and constantly faced with temptations to poach wildlife, or becomes exasperated when the wildlife wander out of the reserve and damage their crops. Everyone agreed that broad programs of rural development were needed, so that the residents around the park would benefit directly from the park's existence.

In March 1986, I visited the mountain gorillas made famous by the American researcher, Dian Fossey, who studied them from 1967 until her death in December 1985, and published a book on her research, entitled Gorillas in the Mist. These mountain gorillas live in northwestern Rwanda, primarily within the confines of Volcano National Park.

Trips to visit the mountain gorillas are quite organized. Currently four groups of gorillas can be visited on a regular basis, plus an additional migratory group when it is found in Rwanda. One visit per day by a maximum of six tourists is allowed for each group of gorillas, and the tourist-gorilla contact is limited to one hour. Visitors must purchase tickets in advance from the National Tourism Office in Kigali, the capital. Tickets specify that tourists must arrive at the Park Headquarters between 7 and 8:20 AM, to meet the guides. The park, located outside of the town of

Ruhengeri, is a two-hour drive from Kigali. In our case, we got up at 5 AM and left Kigali at 6 AM to drive to the Park.

After meeting our two guides, we drove to the parking area for the trail for the group we were to see. Climbing out of the car, some members of our group donned our rain jackets, and then we set off, hiking along a trail bordering fields of delicate white pyrethrum flowers. (Pyrethrum is grown as a cash crop, sold for use in insecticides.) As we passed by several homesteads, or "rugos", children ran out shouting "mzungu" ("white person"). Before we reached the park entrance, a young European woman caught up with us -- a researcher working on habituating the gorillas to human contact.

We arrived at a bamboo fence, which constitutes the park boundary. There the guide instructed us on what to expect. The gorillas had been seen the previous day after a fifty-minute hike from the park boundary. When we got close to the gorillas, we were not to talk or to make any sudden movements. If a young gorilla approached -- as they often do, being quite curious -- we were supposed to back off gently, and not to try to touch them. If a gorilla became aggressive and charged -- most likely an adult defending a young one -- we were not, under any circumstances, to flee, but rather to crouch down on the ground and act submissive. Group #9, which we were going to visit, was a family consisting of one silverback male, three females, and four juveniles. (This is the only group of gorillas which children between the ages of eight and fifteen are permitted to visit. For all other gorilla groups, the Rwandan Ministry of Tourism requires that human visitors be at least sixteen years old. Presumably, thus, this group is a bit more docile than the others.)

Entering the park, we started up the trail. The trail was fairly steep and the ground a bit soft, due to recent rains. As we began climbing, the guide pointed out the various varieties of stinging nettles lining the path. Having been forewarned about these, most of us had brought leather gloves to wear. Pausing for a few minutes to catch our breath, the guide told us that we were already over 2500 meters (8300 feet) in elevation. As we climbed further, we could clearly see the volcanoes in the distance. The heavy smoker in our party had to stop and sit down for several minutes, before he was able to continue. We walked by a trail leading to a nearby volcanic crater, and saw the ridgeline that constitutes the Zaire-Nile Crest, separating the drainages of the Nile and Zaire (formerly Congo) rivers.

As we were getting close to the gorillas, we were reminded to stay close together and not to talk. We began descending into a small ravine, and our guide began to make grunting noises. All of a sudden, we came upon two gorillas. One was sitting in the branches of a tree, about fifteen feet off the ground. The second, a juvenile, was seated on the ground, chewing the moss covering off a stick. We got very close -- within a couple of feet -- where we watched the gorillas eating for ten minutes or so. We then followed our guide into a small valley and up the other side, where we had seen a silverback male. As we entered into a wooded area, we got quite close to three gorillas. Eventually the two we had seen previously came up to join their family...walking right by us, as we crouched low on the side of the trail. As we watched, the gorillas sat down and resumed

eating: two worked on chewing bark off the base of a small tree. The researcher pointed out one juvenile gorilla, not at all afraid of humans, who had lost one hand, which had probably been caught in a poacher's snare. He seemed, however, to manage quite well with his remaining hand.


After watching the gorillas for our allotted hour, the guides led us away. We took a shorter, but steeper, trail down the mountain, back to the parking lot. On the way down we crossed a recent landslide, where part of the slope above had given way and wiped out a section of the forest. By the time we made our descent, the clouds had moved in and the neighboring volcanic peaks were obscured.

Viewing the mountain gorillas in Rwanda was quite different from the lowland gorillas in Zaire. While the Zairian gorillas had engaged in more dramatic "displays" than those in Rwanda, the latter were more habituated to people and thus permitted us to come quite close and observe them for longer periods of time. It had also been more of a physical workout to get to see the Rwandan gorillas, due to the more rugged terrain and the elevation.

In both areas, however, the gorillas' continued existence is threatened by the encroachment of nearby farmers and other human pressures. In Rwanda, for example, the boundary of the bamboo forest where the gorillas live has been steadily receding: the park headquarters was originally built on the edge of the forest, but now is surrounded by farmland. The World Wildlife Fund has been supporting efforts to save the mountain gorillas in Rwanda. Coupled with the research and protection activities has been an extensive effort to educate the local population about why the gorillas are being protected, and how the Rwandan population benefits from protection of the gorillas through tourism revenues.

Similar efforts have not yet been undertaken in Zaire. For the time being, however, the Zairian gorillas receive fewer visits, as the area is more difficult for international tourists to reach. The major international airport in Zaire is located in Kinshasa, which is 1200 km (750 mi) from Bukavu. The closest international airport is located in Bujumbura, Burundi, from which tourists must travel 150 km (100 mi) overland, from Burundi, through Rwanda, into Zaire. Consequently, tourists going to East Africa on a wildlife safari find it much easier to add on a few days, and fly from Nairobi, Kenya to Kigali, Rwanda to see the gorillas, than to go to Zaire. It will be interesting to know which population of gorillas survives the best in the long run -- that currently being heavily protected, researched, and visited in Rwanda, or that receiving less attention in Zaire. But both groups constitute truly unique natural resources, which their countries are wisely trying to save as part of the cultural and environmental heritage for future generations.

Sincerely,



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Forest and Society Fellow

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