

Mountain Gorillas



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The world's smallest population of mountain gorillas—a subspecies of the eastern gorilla—is split in two and scientists have debated whether they may be two separate subspecies. A bit more than half live in the Virunga Mountains, a range of extinct volcanoes that border the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. The remainder can be found in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. Since the discovery of the mountain gorilla subspecies in 1902, its population has endured years of war, hunting, habitat destruction and disease—threats so severe that it was once thought the species might be extinct by the end of the twentieth century.

As their name implies, mountain gorillas live in forests high in the mountains, at elevations of 8,000 to 13,000 feet. They have thicker fur, and more of it, compared to other great apes. The fur helps them to survive in a habitat where temperatures often drop below freezing. But as humans have moved more and more into the gorillas' territory, the gorillas have been pushed farther up into the mountains for longer periods, forcing them to endure dangerous and sometimes deadly conditions.

What might have been a bleak outlook for the subspecies just a couple of decades ago has brightened in recent years due to conservation efforts. Despite ongoing civil conflict, poaching and an encroaching human population, both populations of mountain gorillas have increased in numbers

Wildlife and Climate Change

To increase chances of conservation success, we must understand traits that make an individual species especially resilient or vulnerable to changes in climate. Different species will be affected in different ways; sometimes negatively, but not always.

WHY THEY MATTER



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RECOVERY IN PROGRESS

Despite years of civil unrest in the region where mountain gorillas live, conservation efforts have found success. The gorilla population increased from 620 animals in 1989 to around 786 today



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Park ranger clearing away wire snare animal traps. These are usually set to catch smaller forest mammals such as duikers and rodents, but also unintentionally trap gorillas from time to time.

WAR

The war in Rwanda in the early 1990s and years of civil unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo have sent waves of refugees into the region around the Virunga Mountains parks that are home to more than half the mountain gorilla population, leading to poaching and destruction of gorilla habitat. And parts of the park inhabited by gorillas have been taken over by rebels, making survey and conservation work difficult and dangerous. Since 1996, 140 Virunga rangers have been killed in the line of duty.

HABITAT LOSS

As humans have moved into areas near mountain gorillas, they have cleared land for agriculture and livestock. Even land within protected areas is not safe from clearing—in 2004, for example, illegal settlers cleared 3,700 acres of gorilla forest in Virunga National Park.

DISEASE

Gorillas that come into contact with humans can be vulnerable to human diseases, which gorillas experience in more severe forms. Mountain gorillas can even die from the common cold. However, studies have found that mountain gorillas that are regularly habituated with researchers and tourists have survived better than unvisited gorillas; they benefit from the greater protection available in those areas and from regular monitoring. Increased survival is also largely due to better veterinary care of sick and injured gorillas.

CHARCOAL MAKING

Inside gorilla habitat in Virunga National Park, people harvest charcoal for use as a fuel source in cooking and heating. This charcoal production—an illegal, multi-million-dollar industry—has destroyed gorilla habitat.

POACHING

There is little to no direct targeting of mountain gorillas for bushmeat or pet trade, but they can be caught and harmed by snares set for other animals.

WHAT WWF IS DOING



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Park guards patrolling the boundary of Virunga National Park.

CONSERVING A HISTORIC PARK

Virunga National Park, established in 1925, is Africa's first national park and home to more than half of the world's mountain gorilla population. When refugees and displaced people encroached upon park land to flee a war zone, WWF and the United Nations purchased emergency fuel wood supplies so that the people were less likely to look to the park as a fuel source. And as the park recovers from civil unrest, WWF has

worked to reforest areas and fund antipoaching patrols. WWF has also collaborated with the local people to raise environmental awareness and improve the management of natural resources outside the park.

SUPPORTING THE PEOPLE

It is no exaggeration to say that the Virunga Landscape is known as much for its famed mountain gorillas as it is for a long and bloody conflict that has taken a toll on millions of people. The challenge inspires people to save an irreplaceable natural treasure like the gorilla when they face hunger, desperation and even death.

So, who better to encourage people to protect and nurture Virunga than one of their own? WWF teamed up with the much-loved Congolese musician Samba Mapangala and his Orchestra Virunga to work on a conservation tool—one that drives home a positive message in an upbeat tune and uplifting tone.

The song *Les Gorilles des Montagnes* focuses on why mountain gorillas and their habitat in the Virunga landscape are important, emphasizing that they are the foundation of ecotourism, which will improve local livelihoods. It pays special tribute to the rangers and other conservationists of Virunga who dedicate their lives to protecting gorillas.

The song was recorded in Swahili—the most commonly spoken language of the Virunga landscape—and debuted in September 2009. It was distributed as a free resource in the Congo Basin where the message has taken root as it spilled out of local radio stations, in homes, at schools and on the streets.

CURBING THE BUSHMEAT TRADE

The trade of gorillas and other threatened species as bushmeat is a problem throughout the Congo Basin. While recognizing the need for affordable protein for the growing human population, WWF works to eliminate hunting in protected areas.

SAVING FORESTS

WWF works with governments throughout the Congo Basin, timber companies and international lending institutions to encourage dialogue and promote the use of positive environmental practices in the logging industry. WWF also promotes the adoption of Forest Stewardship Council certification.

