

GORILLA TOURISM, PAST AND FUTURE

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It is fifty years since the concept of gorilla tourism was conceived in Uganda, but it wasn't until the 1970s in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC and the early 1980s in Rwanda that successful methods were developed. Since then, despite civil war, genocide and refugee crises in the Great Lakes region, mountain gorilla tourism has flourished and numbers are slowly rising in both mountain gorilla populations as a result of better protection linked to tourism. Traditional threats of poaching and habitat loss have been contained, and nearby communities benefit from revenue sharing. Gorillas are now the centre-piece of the tourist industry in Rwanda and Uganda, and tourism is one of the biggest earners of foreign exchange in both countries.

Despite the economic advantages of ape tourism, however, it carries with it a variety of risks (e.g. disease, stress and habitat degradation) and limitations (tourist numbers are limited, it depends on long-haul tourism with associated carbon emissions, habituated apes are more vulnerable to poaching unless protection can be guaranteed). There are ten gorilla range states, and many of the others would like to emulate the success of Rwanda's and Uganda's gorilla tourism. Can the lessons learned with Eastern Gorillas be adapted to the different circumstances found in Western Gorilla range states, where hunting for the illegal Bushmeat trade makes habituation difficult and potentially deadly for the gorillas? And can gorilla tourism continue to make a significant contribution to conservation in a future likely to be dominated by climate change and reduced carbon living?

Keywords: gorilla tourism, habituation, Bushmeat, climate change.