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Gorilla Tourism - some costs and benefits

Conservationists in Rwanda mobilized in 1979 when plans were announced to clear a large area of the Volcanoes National Park for cattle grazing, since conversion of the forest habitat was considered the greatest threat to the mountain gorillas' survival. A means of making the gorillas "pay for themselves" and protecting the park was needed, so a tourism programme was planned and developed by researchers with experience gained from the Karisoke Research Centre. Gorilla tourism has since become a great success in terms of increased protection of the parks, close surveillance of additional gorilla groups and much needed revenue.

Even before tourism began, impacts on the gorillas' behaviour were feared. Stress provoked during the habituation process or through regular contact with unfamiliar humans could potentially result in immunosuppression or reduced reproductive success.

Fortunately, extrapolation from research on demographics carried out at the Karisoke Research Centre indicates that tourism has not been deleterious to the gorillas' overall health, behaviour and ecology. Any negative impacts seem to have been outweighed by the improved monitoring and protection.

Studies of captive gorillas also show they have a definite susceptibility to human diseases, but lack the same resistance as us. Certain human pathogens can affect gorillas - respiratory diseases (such as measles, herpes and pneumonia) and enteric ones (such as polio or salmonella).

An infectious illness could devastate the small gorilla population in the Virungas and tourism has increased the potential threat of germ transmission. While most international tourists have been inoculated against certain diseases, they may carry new viruses, such as strains of influenza.

Illnesses to which the gorillas have never previously been exposed are potentially the most dangerous. While this was recognised as a risk at the start of the tourism programme, the loss of habitat was considered a far greater threat to the gorillas at the time and the tourism programme was implemented with strict rules to minimise the risk.

Despite the dangers inherent in tourism, it provides a mechanism for ensuring that the parks and the gorillas are valued for many reasons, and has probably saved the gorillas in the Virunga Volcanoes from further habitat loss or degradation.

The high cost of a gorilla-viewing permit is often questioned. It is currently \$250 - and most visitors will tell you it was worth every cent.

There is an important reason for keeping the price high - it is a necessary means to try to control the high pressures put upon the gorillas and the park authorities. The gorillas are often at their limit in terms of the number of people who can visit them each day and at certain times of year it is hard to get a booking. An important means of coping with demand and to assure parks and governments of adequate revenue is to increase the cost of a visit. At \$250, gorilla viewing is affordable to many overseas visitors, who are not discouraged by the price. It should be remembered that the tourism programme was begun first and foremost as a means of conserving the gorillas.

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