

## Status of Rwanda's Mountain Gorillas

Mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) live only in the Virunga Volcanoes, which straddle the borders of Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. Almost two thirds of this area is in DRC, but more than one third of the gorilla population lives in Rwanda. At the end of the year 2000, by combining our knowledge with that collected by the protected area authorities and collated by the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), we ascertained that during the last eleven years there has been a 10% increase to 359 mountain gorillas in the 400km<sup>2</sup> Virunga massif as a whole. Most of that increase has occurred in the study area of the Karisoke Research Centre, operated by the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International ([www.gorillafund.org](http://www.gorillafund.org) <<http://www.gorillafund.org/>> ). This small increase is encouraging, given that the region has suffered ten years of instability, and is testimony to the efforts of the trackers, guards and guides who have risked their lives in order to protect the gorillas.

Until the recent insurgencies, the most serious threats to mountain gorillas were the possibilities of disease transmission from humans and from habitat encroachment. For decades, the Virunga Volcanoes region has been subject to high pressure because of the rate of human population growth, to a density of up to 400 people/km<sup>2</sup> cultivating the fertile volcanic soil. This has forced the gorillas to limit their range to a small portion of these mountains, near the peaks of the volcanoes.

We are often asked whether mountain gorillas are still hunted and if poaching remains a problem in the Volcanoes National Park. Although not deliberately targeted, gorillas can fall victim to traps set for antelope. If caught, the gorillas' strength enables them to break free, but during the struggle a wire may cut into a hand or foot; if these cuts become infected, the animal may die. To protect the gorillas and other fauna in the park, DFGFI and the Rwandan National Parks Office (ORTPN) operate daily anti-poaching patrols to destroy snares. Karisoke staff collect and burn about 1000 antelope snares each year.

The Volcanoes National Park was closed for most of 1997 and 1998. Once able to visit again, I was amazed to find the gorilla population intact. How did they escape becoming trapped and maimed during a time when monitoring and anti-poaching activities were impossible, rendering them particularly vulnerable? It seems that several silverbacks (adult male gorillas) have acquired the ability to recognise and destroy snares, using knowledge gained through experience. In the past, the gorillas' home ranges were riddled with snares, thus they were likely to have come into contact with them regularly and have learned the hard way how dangerous they can be.

We have seen three silverbacks manifest behaviour around snares which indicates that they recognise the threat posed, their reactions varying from avoidance to making threatening vocalisations towards other gorillas to keep away (pig-grunting), even to the point of biting individuals who approach a snare. Usually those threatened were "immatures" - infants and juveniles who could have had little or no experience of snares.

On one occasion the individual bitten was our research assistant, who was trying to remove a snare. As she moved away with the wire in her hand, the silverback appeared, charged and bit into her thigh. It could easily be assumed that Shinda associated the human with the snare and

reacted to the danger by attacking her. But take into account the time that these gorillas have spent in the company of researchers - almost every day of their lives - and that the gorillas distinguish easily between human individuals. We believe that the gorilla was actually dissuading the researcher from coming into contact with the dangerous object and that his punishing bite may have been intended as a lesson.

The development of "snare awareness" may explain why apparently no gorillas were trapped while unprotected. That they seem to have avoided these snares is an affirmation of their intelligence and ability to learn.

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