

Mountain Gorilla Population Increases Despite War

The number of mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has increased despite the war being waged in and around the area, according to the first count in 16 months.



The count showed that the number of gorillas in groups habituated to humans – considered most at risk in the local conflict – had increased to 81, compared to a count of 72 in 2007.

Park rangers were kicked out of the Mikeno sector of Virunga National Park, where six groups of habituated mountain gorillas live, in September 2007 by forces loyal to the ex-rebel leader Laurent Nkunda.

Fifteen months passed without any rangers being able to monitor the mountain gorillas but in December 2008 Virunga National Park director, Emmanuel de Merode successfully negotiated with the CNDP rebel group to allow park rangers access the Mikeno sector and resume monitoring of the area.

Institut Congolais de Conservation du Nature (ICCN), the government institution in charge of protected areas management in Virunga National Park has since been fully operational and ICCN rangers have just completed a census of the habituated mountain gorillas. To their surprise, they discovered that the populations of all of the groups have increased.



“This is a huge relief and a welcome surprise,” said Matthew Lewis, Program Officer for African Species at World Wildlife Fund (WWF). “Habituated mountain gorillas are at particular risk from humans because they aren’t afraid of them.”

While on a five day patrol during which they were looking for and counting mountain gorillas, two ICCN patrols removed more than 500 snares placed by poachers targeting small forest antelopes that can harm and maim gorillas.

“The humanitarian crisis in the region continues and our hearts go out to those residents caught in the middle,” Lewis said. “And despite this good news about the gorillas, we must remain vigilant as they are under constant threat.”

There is currently a cease fire between CNDP and the Congolese Army who have joined up with Rwandan forces to fight FDLR rebels; however, the rangers still have conflict and violence to contend with. On 8 January a ranger was killed during an attack by Mai Mai militia against an ICCN Patrol Post and another ranger was kidnapped.

“The true heroes in this story are the courageous ICCN rangers who worked tirelessly to gain access to the gorillas despite the ongoing violence,” said Dr. Richard Carroll, Director of WWF’s Congo Basin Program. “WWF will continue supporting ICCN and helping reduce the poaching, habitat encroachment and other threats to these magnificent creatures.”



ICCN has been able to keep its operations running during the conflict with financial and technical support from International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP), a joint initiative of AWF (African Wildlife Foundation), FFI (Flora and Fauna International), and WWF and other conservation partners on the ground.

Mountain gorillas are listed as critically endangered on IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species, about 720 survive in the wild, with more than 200 of them living in the Virunga National Park. Mountain gorillas are the main tourist attraction in the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda and the money earned by the tourism benefits local communities.

Threats to the Park

Although mountain gorillas are now extremely rare and listed as one of the most critically-endangered species, successful conservation work has helped to secure the remaining populations. Their populations actually increased during the years of political upheaval in the region (1994–2004), but

renewed military conflict in the park (October 2008) including the seizing of the park headquarters and expelling of park rangers, poaching, and rampant deforestation for illegal charcoal production once again cast doubt on their future. It is believed that both savanna and forest elephants and chimpanzees can still be found in Virunga, along with Okapi, giraffes, buffaloes and many endemic birds. Land invasions and intense poaching have challenged the park authorities to the limit, but most rangers have remained active. Since 1994, about 120 rangers have been killed in the line of duty protecting the park from illegal poaching and land acquisition. Amongst other military activity, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda or FDLR has been using the park as a safe location when they have come under sustained attack, such as Laurent Nkunda's offensives against them in April–May 2007. The park was occupied by Nkunda's forces on 26 October 2008, during the Battle of Goma. Wikipedia.org

Photo: Virunga National Park

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<http://www.worldwildlife.org>

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