

UGANDA: MOUNTAIN GORILLAS GET INFECTIONS FROM TOURISTS



Mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) situation is a critical one. The species only lives in East Africa and over 40% of the 1,059 mountain gorillas left in the world are in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. The park has become a popular attraction thanks to the gorillas.

Since these great apes are particularly susceptible to human infectious diseases, such as respiratory infections that are responsible for 20% of sudden deaths in these mammals, **Ugandan authorities have restricted human-gorilla interaction to protect their health.** No more than 8 tourists can visit primate groups of mountain gorillas that are already accustomed to human interaction for an hour a day.

Strict Rules

The rules are strict in this regard: people must keep a distance of seven meters (or more) from the gorillas at all times. This is the minimum safe distance to avoid any risk of transmission of any disease. However, over the years, several studies have documented that not all tourist groups respect the seven-meter rule.

In a new study published in the *Frontiers in Public Health* journal, a team from the University of Ohio shows that 98% of tourists violate the rule of staying seven meters away from the gorillas, according to a survey on 53 trips made during high season in the African park.

The data gathered at two-minute intervals during gorilla watching show that 70% took place at a distance of less than or equal to seven meters. "Although I had already heard that tourists were getting too close to gorillas, I was surprised by the extent of the problem," says Annalisa Weber, now at Emory University in the United States and co-author of the study.

"We found that the seven-meter rule was violated in visits to all of the gorilla groups. And in 14% of the observations, human-gorilla spacing was three meters or less," warns the researcher. This occurred despite the recommendations of the rangers who, in 96% of the cases, stressed the need to stay seven meters away.

Face Masks

Researchers surveyed 243 tourists to explore measures in order to improve adherence to the park's rules. 73% of the tourists responded that they would be willing to use precautionary measures to protect gorilla health, like wearing protective face masks during the encounters.

This practice, which is already applied in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is considered the best option according to scientists working in primate conservation.

"Action is needed to limit disease risks caused by tourists viewing mountain gorillas," said Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, CEO of Conservation Through Public Health and co-author of the study.

In cases where obtaining masks is a complicated or expensive solution, researchers urge

tourists to maintain a safe distance from gorillas.

“As tourism increases and gorillas become increasingly habituated to human presence, new strategies will be needed for endangered great ape populations to thrive into the future,” says Dr. Nancy Stevens, Professor at the University of Ohio and author of the study.

“Fortunately, we have talked to many park officials who are ready to take action to protect gorilla health,” observes Stevens.

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