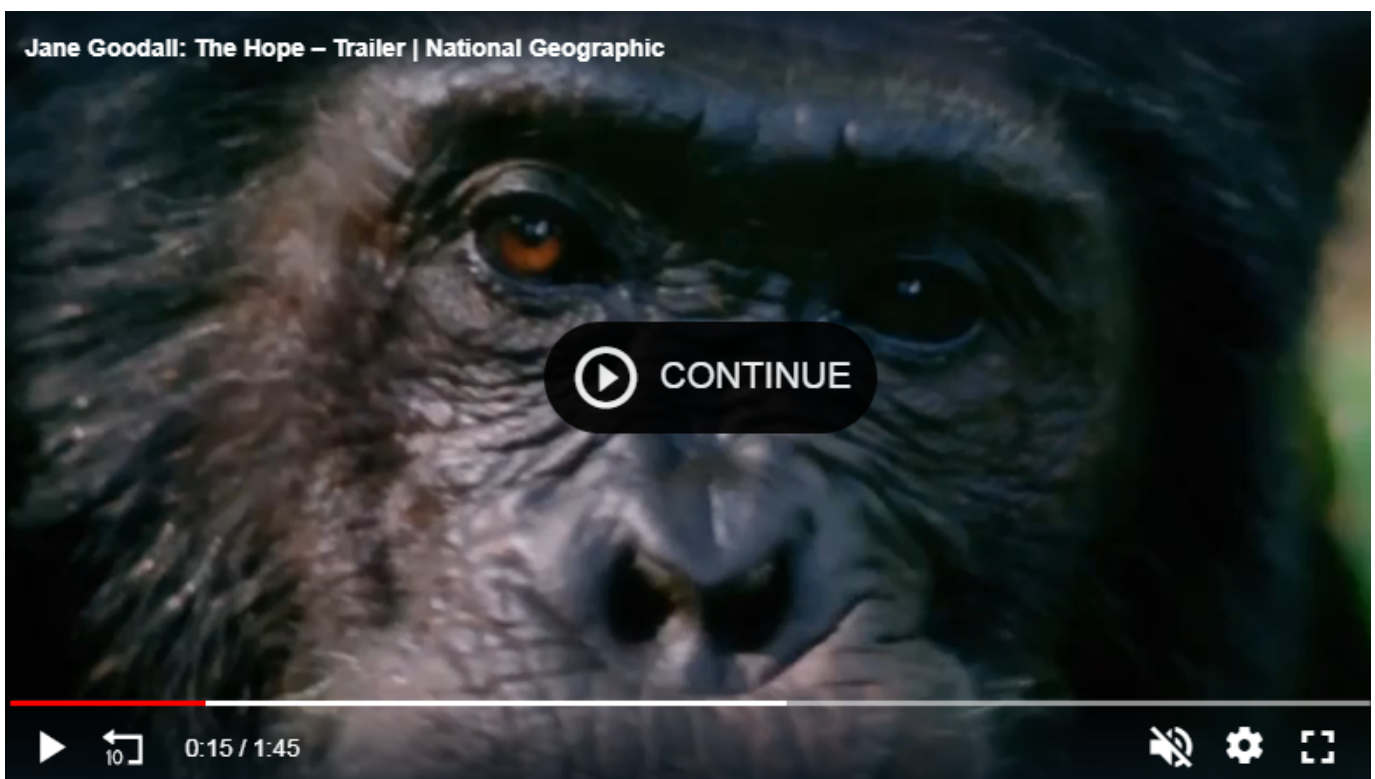


CULTURE

HOW CORONAVIRUS—AND LACK OF TOURISM—IMPACT EAST AFRICA'S GORILLAS AND COMMUNITIES

BY LANE NIESET ON 5/18/20 AT 9:24 AM EDT



Buhoma's Main Street resembles an abandoned old Western movie set. A block of false-front looking buildings, constructed from a hodgepodge of concrete, brick and metal, line the Ugandan village's block-long dirty thoroughfare that leads to

Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest, home to half of the world's population of mountain gorillas. Woodworkers sit on stoops outside shops whittling sculptures of the forest's famous residents, using pictures on postcards as models for their gorilla carvings.

From the porch of the Crayola yellow–stucco Bwindi Bar, I leaned back in my plastic patio chair clutching a cold Nile beer. I watched as women swathed in geometric-patterned skirts rode sidesaddle on the back of motorbikes, and soldiers cycled down the street on battered old Trek bicycles. Around 4 p.m., a dust-covered Star Link coach came to a grinding halt out front for its daily passenger pickup for the 12-hour trip to Uganda's capital city, Kampala.



There's around one gorilla for every 9 million people on the planet, Nieset says. Their susceptibility to airborne diseases is a challenge.

If Ernest Hemingway had visited Buhoma on one of his trips to East Africa, he would've certainly been a regular fixture at Bwindi Bar. First off, it's one of the safer bets in terms of food on the strip. The bartenders also make a pretty mean mango daiquiri. The café is one of nonprofit Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust's (VSPT) community projects in the area that gives local kids hospitality internship experience typically found in big cities.

Volcanoes Safaris launched in 1997 to help encourage gorilla tourism in Uganda and Rwanda and has since expanded to include four luxury eco-lodges near the great ape parks. For each booking, the safari company sets aside \$100 to support its nonprofit community programs, like Bwindi Bar. But when COVID-19 started spreading in March, Uganda and neighboring Rwanda halted tourism. Parks shut and lodges closed their doors and sent most of their staff home.

"Without clients, we can't fund programs," says founder Praveen Moman. "Gorilla and chimpanzee tourism bring much-needed revenue to the national parks, conservation organizations and local people. If that tourism stops, as it has done overnight with the coronavirus, all these elements are at risk."



In partnership with Volcanoes Safaris, Bwindi Bar provides a training institution for local disadvantaged youths living near the Bwindi National Park.

The \$194.2 billion tourism industry is one of the most important in Africa, but pressing the pause button on tourism is a key solution to prevent the pandemic from spreading. Less severe strains of coronavirus have been an issue in the past,

and diseases like Ebola and scabies—transmitted from neighboring communities—have infected and killed members of gorilla groups. But without the tourism from gorilla tracking permits, which cost up to \$700 in Uganda and \$1,500 in Rwanda (10 percent of which is funneled into local communities), another issue is providing tourism-dependent communities with another form of income to help reduce poaching and encroachment on the forest.



Bwindi Bar and café was started by Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust's (VSPT) which gives local kids hospitality internship experience typically found in big cities.

There's around one gorilla for every 9 million people on the planet, and a large challenge is disease outbreak, since they're most susceptible to respiratory and airborne diseases like tuberculosis. "Because we are so closely related to the mountain gorillas and chimpanzees—we share over 98 percent genetic material—and can easily make each other sick, it's easy for diseases to spread between us," explains Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, who was brought on as the Uganda Wildlife Authority's first full-time veterinarian in the late 1990s to act on any potential threats to the gorillas from a fatal flu—a pathogen similar to COVID-19.

With a team of only 320 rangers and veterinarians currently monitoring one of the country's greatest natural resources, how can Uganda—and East Africa as a whole—protect the potential spread of a pathogen like COVID-19, when, unlike us, gorillas can't sit in self-isolation and wait for symptoms to show?



The Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest is home to half of the world's population of mountain gorillas.

There were only 300 mountain gorillas when celebrated conservationist Dian Fossey launched the Karisoke Research Center in 1967 in two small tents in Rwanda's Virunga Mountains. Today, there are over 800, and, in 2018, mountain gorillas went from being on the list of critically endangered (the last step before extinction) to endangered. While this is a huge step forward, mountain gorillas may always be a conservation-dependent species.

"The biggest risk from tourism is disease risk, but tourism is such an important source of conservation dollars, not just for the gorillas but for so much of Africa," says Tara Stoinski, president, CEO and chief scientific officer of The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, the world's largest and longest-running organization dedicated to gorilla conservation.

Ninety percent of employees in the Uganda Wildlife Authority are from the community, and the park staff are still being paid while wildlife tourism is suspended. But what about the locals who make their living selling hand-painted gorilla carvings? Or workers at lodges? Or porters, who rely on tips earned from carrying knapsacks for tourists like myself on gorilla treks?



Since tourism isn't something everyone will benefit from, three years ago Kalema-Zikusoka launched Gorilla Conservation Coffee which helps to support local farmers struggling to earn fair prices for one of Uganda's most valuable crops—coffee.

KATIE REES

Not everyone can benefit from tourism, so three years ago Kalema-Zikusoka decided to launch Gorilla Conservation Coffee, a social initiative to support local farmers struggling to earn fair prices for one of Uganda's most valuable crops—coffee. "Uganda is a coffee-growing country, and tourists want to drink local coffee, so why not support these coffee farmers to create a global brand and offer premium prices on the conditions that communities don't poach?" explains the founder and CEO of Conservation Through Public Health, a grassroots nongovernmental organization that works to prevent disease transmission between humans and gorillas.

Cargo planes are still flying, so the organization can continue to support farmers during the pandemic, especially while coffee farmers are in the midst of harvesting. COVID-19 also provided an opportunity for Conservation Through Public Health to review guidelines for gorilla trekking and the park staff. Now visitors will have to use hand sanitizer and have their temperature taken with an infrared thermometer before trekking. Face masks are another new requirement, and trekkers will have to maintain a minimum safe distance of 23 feet from the gorillas. "It's much easier now for tourists to follow the rules than before, since they understand the value of social distancing and can relate, given what's happening in their own countries," says Kalema-Zikusoka, adding that over half of visitors were breaking the social distancing rule.



Ride 4 A Woman is an organization that empowers over 300 local women struggling with HIV or domestic violence and teaches various skills. Instead of laying off the women at Ride 4 A Woman when tourism started dwindling, the organization began making reusable cloth masks for the park rangers—and for trekkers when tourism resumes.

SAMANTHA SENDOR

With travel bans preventing tourism from resuming, local communities are in need of options outside of tourism to support projects in place. As a response to the global mask shortage, Kalema-Zikusoka turned to Bwindi-based Ride 4 A Woman, an organization that empowers over 300 local women struggling with HIV or domestic violence and teaches skills like sewing, weaving and bike mechanics (part of the funding is from bike rentals). Instead of laying off the women when tourism started dwindling, the organization shifted its efforts to crafting reusable cloth masks for the park rangers—and for trekkers when tourism resumes. It's also taken its gift shop (which sells handcrafted products like woven baskets) online and can ship to most spots around the world.

Travelers can support local villages throughout Uganda and Rwanda by donating to one of VSPT's 12 active projects, like One Sheep per Family, which gives one sheep to each of the 140 families around Virunga Lodge in Rwanda (\$400 buys 10 sheep, which provide manure for farming). People can also donate to anti-poaching and conservation efforts funded by the Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust or "adopt" an animal at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (also known as Entebbe Zoo), a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation facility. Adoptions range from \$20 donations for baboons to \$120 for chimpanzees. If your pockets are deeper, you can support conservation programs like animal rescues (\$1,200) or contribute to construction materials for the baby elephant habitat (\$6,000).

During my time in Buhoma, multiple people claimed that it's a town that talks to

gorillas. The primates are often spotted in gardens at the lodges or in the bamboo brush in the hillside surrounding Main Street. Local dancers at the park sing to trekkers, encouraging them to tell the gorillas they miss them.

"As someone who has lived here and was born in this area, the community is really changing for the better," says Alex Ngabirano over dinner one evening at Volcanoes Safaris' Bwindi Lodge just days before Uganda restricted travel from the U.S. "As someone from a developed country, you may see this area as poor, but when you see where it has come from, it's really a step ahead in terms of achievements."

Ngabirano is the founder and director of Bwindi Development Network and the manager at Conservation Through Public Health. When tourism began here in 1993, you couldn't find a permanent standing home, he says. There were no schools and the nearest hospital was 50 miles away on rough roads. Only one of the two gorilla groups living in the area was habituated for tourism. Now, there are 19 habituated groups out of the 36 living in the UNESCO-protected Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest, the only forest in the world where two great apes—gorillas and chimpanzees—share the same habitat.

"When there are a lot of tourists, it's harder to set snares in the forest," says Kalema-Zikusoka. "Tourism isn't going to start straight away, and it may take a

while to come back, so we have to think about this. There's still a high risk [of poaching], but these projects are helping to reduce it."

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From her base in Paris, journalist Lane Nieset covers travel, lifestyle, wine, and food for publications such as National Geographic Travel, T: The New York Times Style Magazine, Travel + Leisure, Vogue.com and Food & Wine.