

Endangered Ugandan gorillas join Facebook, MySpace

September 26 2009, By GODFREY OLUKYA , Associated Press Writer



In this Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2008 file photo a silverback mountain gorilla is seen in the Virunga National Park, near the Ugandan border in eastern Congo, Around 340 mountain gorillas _ nearly half of the 740 remaining worldwide _ live in Uganda's lush Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park. The rest live in the Virunga mountain range, which stretches from Uganda into Rwanda and the war-ravaged Congo. (AP Photo / Jerome Delay, File)

(AP) -- He's hairy, his table manners are atrocious, and he wants to be your friend on Facebook.

No, it's not the ex-boyfriend. It's Muhozi, an endangered Ugandan mountain gorilla, who's appearing online as part of a fundraising program the Ugandan Wildlife Authority launched Saturday to help save

the species.

Around 340 mountain gorillas - nearly half of the 740 remaining worldwide - live in Uganda's lush Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park and 40 more live in another Ugandan reserve. The rest live in the Virunga mountain range, which stretches from Uganda into Rwanda and the war-ravaged Congo.

Despite their size - a male silverback can reach over 7 feet (2.1 meters) and weigh 400 pounds (180 kilogram) - the gorillas are threatened by poachers who kill them for meat, farmers and charcoal-burners who encroach on their habitat, and the indiscriminate bullets of rebels on the run. They must be protected by rangers with automatic rifles.

The Wildlife Authority is hoping that fans will befriend a gorilla on Facebook or MySpace or follow it on Twitter in return for a minimum donation of \$1. The money will be used to hire extra rangers to protect the gorillas and safeguard their habitat.

In return, gorilla friends will receive regular updates about their chosen gorilla, have their gorilla's picture on their home page and receive gorilla trivia - like the fact that the name is derived from a Greek word, gorillai, meaning "hairy women."

Wildlife Authority spokeswoman Lilian Nsubuga said she hoped the program would give people who could not afford to travel to Uganda themselves the chance to feel closer to the animals.

About 10,500 tourists visit Uganda each year to see the gorillas. An entry permit for the park is \$500 per person. Last year Uganda earned \$600 million through tourism and more than 90 percent of the money was from gorilla tourism.

"Why visit Rome to see ruins or Egypt to see mere piles of stones called pyramids, yet you can go to Bwindi and see your next of kin?" asked Uganda's Minister of Tourism, Kahinda Otafiire, pointing out that gorillas share more than 95 percent of their DNA with humans.

Thomas Slater, the director of the gorilla Web site, said Internet users would be able to befriend any individual from one of seven groups habituated to human contacts.

"You will be able to learn more concerning the particular gorilla, its character, family and relationships," he said.

On the Net:

<http://www.friendagorilla.org>

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