

Poachers turn gamekeeper to guard Rwandan gorillas

September 17 2014, by Stephanie Aglietti



A mountain gorilla in a thicket at the Volcanoes National Park in northern Rwanda on September 3, 2014

For four decades Leonidas Barora was a renowned hunter, tracking animals in the lush forests of Rwanda. Now he only fires arrows to impress tourists, and to help protect the wildlife.

Hundreds of ex-[poachers](#) have been persuaded to put down their

weapons and support efforts to protect endangered [mountain gorillas](#) in the Volcanoes National Park, where thick jungle hills are shrouded in mist.

The Virunga mountain range, rising over 4,500 metres (14,800 feet) high along the remote borders of Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, is the last sanctuary in the world of man's giant cousin, which number now around just 800 individuals.

Made famous by the late US zoologist Dian Fossey—murdered in 1985 by suspected poachers—the park faces the same threats she wrote about over two decades ago in her book "Gorillas in the Mist".

Population growth and poverty push people to encroach increasingly deeper into the park to graze their cattle, cut bamboo for building or hunt for food.

For hunters like Barora, now aged 75, hunting had been the only way to earn a living.

"After killing the animals, I traded the meat in the village for beans or potatoes, I didn't make money," said Barora, after shooting off his deadly arrows at a target, to show visitors his old skills.

"I hunted buffalo, antelope and elephant... I never intentionally killed a gorilla because gorillas are like human beings, but I did accidentally kill them in traps I had set."

In the lush highlands of Rwanda's northwest, the "Iby'Iwacu" village—"our heritage" in Kinyarwanda—is a reconstruction of a traditional community, where Barora and other ex-poachers now work to guard the wildlife they once hunted.

Income from tourists provides an incentive to protect the gorillas.

Park rangers say the giant apes are not the main targets of poachers, but the gorillas are instead injured—or killed—in the traps they set for other animals for bush meat.

For Barora, his life changed in 2005 after meeting Edwin Sabuhoro, then one of the national park staff.

500 ex-poachers employed



Former gorilla poachers perform a dance for tourists on September 3, 2014 at Kinigi

Traumatized by rescuing a baby gorilla from a poacher, the young man

decided he must convince the hunters they had more to gain by protecting the park's wildlife than continuing the killing.

"The poachers were telling me: 'If you lived around the park, your children were hungry, and you know that in the park you could find to eat, what would you?'," Sabuhoro told AFP.

So Sabuhoro resigned, bought land at the foot of the mountains, and went to the poachers, pleading for them to join him.

"He told me: 'Go get the other poachers in the park and tell them I'll give them work, but in exchange you have to stop poaching'," recalled Barora.

Within six months, 500 poachers had come from the forests to join Sabuhoro at the cultural village, building small round huts with mud walls and thatched roof, around a replica of a chieftain's hall.

Now the tourists who visit the gorillas in the jungles stop on the way down the mountain to discover Rwandan culture, including songs and dances.

Men leap high into the air dressed in striking white headdresses to the beat of a drum in a traditional dance.

Women weave baskets, while a former poacher provides lessons in the medicinal lore of plants from the jungles.

Profits are ploughed back into the project, paying salaries of former poachers and their families, as well as a community fund, used to pay for the education of children from poor families, and help create agricultural or handicraft cooperatives.

"When I was a poacher I did not have a house, I was living like an

animal," said Barora. "Now I have a salary, a house, a wife and six children."

'Humbling'



A silverback mountain gorilla at the Volcanoes National Park in northern Rwanda on September 3, 2014

Other ex-poachers have become porters, carrying loads as tourists trek into the wild to see the gorillas, while some have even joined the anti-poaching units of the park.

Inspired by Sabuhoro's success, Rwanda's government now puts five percent of the annual revenue from park fees into projects supporting local communities, such as building schools and hospitals.

"People here now see the importance of protecting the park and the animals," said Felicien Ntezimana, a guide for tourists, who each pay 750 dollars (580 euros) for the privilege of spending an hour with the gorillas.

Its a hefty price tag, but tourists say it is worth the cost.

On this trip, after two hours of walking on steep paths through the thick forest, dramatic peaks smothered in swirling cloud above, the tour group came face-to-face with a family of 20 gorillas, including five of "silverback" adult males, peacefully chewing bamboo shoots.



Leonidas Barora (L), a former poacher, shoots at a target using a traditional bow and arrow during a show for tourists at Kinigi on September 3, 2014

One of the biggest [gorillas](#), caught in poacher's snare when young, had a stump where his hand should have been.

"It's a great experience, very humbling," said Australian tourist Kristin Warren.

Threats to the mountain gorilla -- including war, habitat destruction and disease -- were once thought to be so severe that the species could become extinct by the end of the 20th century.

But the population has increased significantly in the last 30 years, largely due to improved conservation efforts such as the project here.

"It is unique, the best example of eco-tourism," added Warren.

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Citation: Poachers turn gamekeeper to guard Rwandan gorillas (2014, September 17) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-poachers-gamekeeper-rwandan-gorillas.html>

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