

Rwanda names 24 baby mountain gorillas in annual tradition

September 5 2015, by Christopher Torchia



In this photo taken Friday, Sept. 4, 2015, a baby mountain gorilla clings to the back of its mother as she forages for food, on Mount Bisoke volcano in Volcanoes National Park, northern Rwanda. Rwanda has named 24 baby mountain gorillas in an annual naming ceremony that reflects the African country's efforts to protect the endangered animals, which attract large numbers of foreign tourists to the volcano-studded forests where they live. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

Youths wearing gorilla costumes and rubber boots grunted and scampered in front of Rwanda's president on Saturday during the

ceremonial naming of 24 baby mountain gorillas in the African country, where the critically endangered animals live in volcano-studded forests that are visited by increasing numbers of foreign tourists.

The young gorillas, whose families are closely monitored by trackers and researchers, were in their wild habitat and not at the naming event in Kinigi, a village near the entrance to Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park. But thousands of people, including students, soldiers, villagers and diplomats, gathered there to celebrate the threatened population of mountain gorillas, whose image adorns numerous sculptures in Rwanda as well as a national currency banknote.

Against the backdrop of cloud-covered volcanic peaks, people waved little blue, green and yellow national flags and presidential bodyguards scanned the open-air venue as President Paul Kagame spoke from a dais, delighting conservationists who see small, landlocked Rwanda as a model for other African countries struggling to preserve their wildlife in the face of increased poaching and human encroachment on animal habitats.

"It's really a showcase, the way they're working, because you have buy-in from the highest political level," said Allan Carlson, a Swedish conservationist who was in a group, including a Rwandan police official and a wildlife expert from Yale University in the United States, that announced the baby gorilla names. Dressed in white shirts and green robes, and carrying beaded sticks, they trailed the actors in gorilla suits across a wooden walkway strewn with straw and decorated with flowers.

The names bestowed on the gorillas included the words for "Wish," "Power," "Courage," "Conviviality" and "Ornament" in the Rwandan language.



Youths dressed in gorilla costumes to represent the newly-named gorillas, entertain the crowd by mimicking the animals' behaviour, at a baby gorilla naming ceremony in Kinigi, northern Rwanda Saturday, Sept. 5, 2015. Rwanda has named two dozen baby mountain gorillas in an annual naming ceremony that reflects the African country's efforts to protect the endangered animals, which attract large numbers of foreign tourists to the volcano-studded forests where they live. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

The Rwandan government hopes the naming ceremony, which began in 2005 and is based on a similar tradition among Rwandans, will highlight the importance of protecting mountain gorillas as well as promote the tourism industry, which brought in more than \$300 million last year and is the country's top foreign currency earner. Researchers also refer to the names to identify gorillas and their families while conducting studies in the wild.

The key is to convince Rwandan communities that they will benefit from supporting conservation, senior tourism official Yamina Karitanyi said

in an interview with The Associated Press. Five percent of revenues from Rwanda's national parks are invested in schools and other community projects, she said.

"It's a joint effort. We work with them every day," Karitanyi said. She acknowledged that juggling the needs of people and wildlife is difficult, saying: "We have got to work to come up with the right mechanism to ensure that protection is there for all."

Kagame thanked the crowd for their involvement in protecting the mountain gorillas, and also said people should take advantage of security in Rwanda to work hard. Led by Kagame since 2000, Rwanda has had strong economic growth in recent years, brightening the prospects of a country that was devastated by genocide in 1994.



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The fortunes of Rwanda's mountain gorillas are also improving, though the situation is delicate. They live in the Virunga Massif, which spans Volcanoes National Park as well as parks in neighboring Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. More mountain gorillas live in a separate area of Uganda.

The number of mountain gorillas, defined as a gorilla subspecies, dropped dramatically in the last century because of poaching, disease and human encroachment. The total population of [mountain gorillas](#) is currently an estimated 900. However, the population in the Virunga Massif is growing at a rate of about 4 percent a year, said Dr. Mike Cranfield, co-director of Gorilla Doctors, a group that provides medical care to the apes.



Rwanda's President Paul Kagame waves to the crowd before speaking at a baby gorilla naming ceremony in Kinigi, northern Rwanda, Saturday, Sept. 5, 2015. Rwanda has named two dozen baby mountain gorillas in an annual naming ceremony that reflects the African country's efforts to protect the endangered animals, which attract large numbers of foreign tourists to the volcano-studded forests where they live. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

"You couldn't ask for anything more than what's happening right now," Cranfield said. Still, he said the density of the human population in the area is high and expressed concern about the vulnerability of gorillas to diseases from tourists who trek into the forest to see them.

"It's a delicate balance," he said.



Residents from the local community attend a baby gorilla naming ceremony in Kinigi, northern Rwanda Saturday, Sept. 5, 2015. Rwanda has named two dozen baby mountain gorillas in an annual naming ceremony that reflects the African country's efforts to protect the endangered animals, which attract large numbers of foreign tourists to the volcano-studded forests where they live. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



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One of the "namers" tasked with giving a new baby gorilla a name wears a gown at a ceremony in Kinigi, northern Rwanda Saturday, Sept. 5, 2015. Rwanda has named two dozen baby mountain gorillas in an annual naming ceremony that reflects the African country's efforts to protect the endangered animals, which attract large numbers of foreign tourists to the volcano-studded forests where they live. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)



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A young Rwandan boy leads his goat by a rope across a field near to Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, Friday, Sept. 4, 2015. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

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