



## The money from the visitors who come to see gorillas

# Gorillas give dollars to Kanungu, Kisoro residents



The Mountain Gorilla has great appeal to humans

Buhoma, a tiny township in Kanungu district, southwestern Uganda, owes its solvency to mountain gorillas. This is also the oldest gateway into Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, which is built on the back of mountain gorilla tourism in southwestern Uganda.

**Gerald Tenywa** explored the towns built with “gorilla dollars” and now writes.

**A**mos Twebaze, a resident of Buhoma, could not hide his smile as he gets his latest payment in US dollars. He then uses his left hand to pull out smaller dollar bills from his pocket to give change to his clients.

“I make clean money from accompanying tourists to Bwindi as a porter,” says Twebaze, adding that his earnings from gorilla tourism have helped him to set up a bar and a restaurant in Buhoma.

He also knows that when tourists come to Buhoma, they need services, such as guiding on their way to track the mountain gorillas in the hilly terrain of Bwindi. After the wild encounters with the apes, the visitors will need food, accommodation, transport and also souvenirs, Twebaze observes.

This has attracted booming businesses in the entertainment industry, traditional dancers, handicraft makers, transporters and agriculturalists, who provide food to the hotels, as well as accommodation facilities, according to Twebaze.

“There are opportunities for many people who are engaged in services that benefit tourists directly and indirectly,” he says.

In addition, there is a village walk where visitors have a chance to view cultural activities, such as local brewing or wineries, smelting, artefacts, herbal medicine and local dancers.

As a result, the money from visitors who come to see mountain gorillas, as well as from the village walking expedition, trickles down to the locals. This helps to improve their lives and livelihood, says Twebaze.

In return, the communities are expected to undertake developments without hurting the mountain gorillas and their habitat, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

However, this was not the case three decades ago, when Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, located in southwestern Uganda, were being plundered through illegal activities, such as gold mining and timber harvesting. The plunderers left Bwindi in tatters.

As the illegal activities scaled up, the population of mountain gorillas declined.

“We need to put communities at the heart of conservation,” says John Makombo, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) director for community conservation, adding that the escalating pressures on land, poverty and human-wildlife conflicts, were taking place outside the park.

As communities respond to the pressures, according to Makombo, the habitats and, consequently, wildlife, suffer. This means that wildlife agencies and their partners, including communities, have to seek alternative ways of improving lives and livelihoods.

In short, Makombo says, the investment, for instance of \$1 inside the protected area, should be matched by \$10 outside the park. This is what has improved the fortunes of the mountain gorillas and the communities around Bwindi and Mgahinga.

As Uganda celebrates the 30th birthday of gorilla tourism, it is important to look at the past and then the future. How is gorilla tourism contributing to development and conservation goals? What is working, what is not working



**Gorillas have a great appeal to humans and this has helped Gorilla tourism, which has been selling like hot cakes for decades.**

and what can be done better?

### ECO-TOURISM DEFINED

Gorilla tourism is a form of eco-tourism. Others include chimpanzee tourism, as well as bird watching.

Eco-tourism refers to “responsible travel that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people,” according to the Toronto School of Management.

### HOW GORILLA TOURISM WAS BORN

Bwindi’s gorilla tourism was birthed in 1993, after John Dubois, a US Peace Corp Volunteer, led a team to habituate

the first gorillas.

The term habituation refers to a process of getting primates or mountain gorillas to get used to human beings without losing their wild character.

Gorilla tourism helped to bring business to one of the remotest parts of the world. This has led to sustainable development, which is promising further growth for the communities.

“We have organised groups of communities that have started businesses that benefit the wider community,” says Richard Magezi, a resident, pointing out that there are also people who have started their own businesses, such as hotels and lodges.

Magezi, who was born in Buhoma, is one of the local hoteliers. His previous responsibilities included being the chairperson of the community of Buhoma and also working at Bwindi Hospital.

“As a community, we started with a low budget camp, but we have built a high-end lodge, schools are coming up and the community also has a piped water system under the rural water services. We also have a Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation (SACCO),” says Magezi.

The eco-tourism development at Bwindi has blossomed as a result of partnerships between the communities, government agencies, such as UWA, NGOs, as well as development partners.

The communities have also set up a number of community-based

organisations and the private sector.

On top of the self-help initiatives started as private businesses and organised communities, 20% of the fees collected from entrance fees are shared with the communities. This has helped to improve livelihood and development initiatives in the communities. The entrance fee for Bwindi and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park is \$40 (sh150,000).

“There are over 3,000 communities that benefit directly, but there are people who benefit indirectly,” says Nelson Guma, the chief warden for Bwindi.

“The contribution of gorilla tourism to the local community has been immense. The funds are channelled into creating access to markets to support to the communities.”

Between 2005 and 2022, the communities around Bwindi received sh38 trillion for communities, according to George Owoyegire, the acting principal wildlife conservation officer in the Ministry of Tourism, wildlife, and Antiquities.

UWA also shares \$10 (sh37,000) for every permit with Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust. This is invested money in endowment funds, which help to fund development initiatives far beyond the boundaries of Bwindi and Mgahinga, according to Stephen Masaba, the director of tourism at UWA.

### NKURINGO IN BUHOMA'S FOOTSTEPS

Other than Buhoma, eco-tourism or gorilla tourism has also reached the southern part of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. This is where mountain gorillas used to stray into people’s farmlands and have become game changers in the lives of the residents in 23 villages in Nkuringo.

While residents of Buhoma have established a “dollar village” or “dollar town”, their counterparts in Nkuringo, Kisoro established a luxury hotel in 2008. This is known as Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge, which was set up by a tripartite partnership – Nkuringo community, Africa Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and Wild Places safari company.

The luxury lodge charges up to \$831 (sh3.2m) for a night. The proceeds from the hotel are shared with the local communities and this has helped different enterprises to get off the ground. This has empowered the communities at Nkuringo, in return for sharing their land with mountain gorillas that kept straying from Bwindi into a strip of land belonging to private owners.

The money from Clouds Mountain Gorilla Lodge goes to community enterprises, such as education, roads, water supplies, agricultural and health initiatives. This is channelled through the 30,000-member community group, led by Nkuringo Conservation Development Foundation, according to AWF.

“If you do not invest in the communities, then you are not investing in conservation. The communities are the stewards of the environment,” says Yvonne Ayesiga, AWF’s communications assistant.

### GORILLA TOURISM EXPANDING

Apart from Mukono parish, which has now become Buhoma Town Council