



Mountain Gorilla Project: Progress Report 4

Conrad and Rosalind Aveling

Since the last report on the work of the Mountain Gorilla Project (*Oryx*, August 1980), all the three main programmes in Rwanda – conservation education, park protection and park development – have made substantial progress.

Education: Nature and Environment in Rwanda

Since last September the education van provided by ffPS and the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), and equipped by the WWF Education Unit, has been in full-time use. François Minani, from the Rwanda Bureau of Secondary Education, and Jim O'Keefe, a US Peace Corps Volunteer, visited 58 schools with slide/film presentations, and whenever the van was available, particularly in school holidays, we gave similar presentations in towns and villages around the Parc National des Volcans, in cooperation with the Park Conservator. As many as 2000 people would turn up to these, and we estimated about 35,000 were reached during this period. Nine schools have started Wildlife Clubs, and in one close to the national park we were able to join the students for some of their meetings, and spent a day with them examining degraded forest near the school. Presentations explaining the work have been given at various seminars, including a workshop for Rwanda science teachers and a conference for women delegates from Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire.

When Jim O'Keefe leaves in October, François Minani, who is currently on a four-month training period in Belgium, will continue as coordinator of the programme, and we may get a Belgian volunteer to work with him. It may also be possible to extend the work into primary schools. This year we have taken out several groups of primary-school children and teachers to see gorillas and climb volcanoes. When these children told their friends and relatives how well they had seen the gorillas they were not believed – by people who had lived all their lives near the Park!

Park Protection

Conservation education can only be expected to have a practical impact in the long term; for today's children to have anything left to conserve, it is vital that

park protection work continues, as events in the PNV during the last year have shown. Hundreds of wire snares have been destroyed in the park by patrols organised by Jean-Pierre von der Becke, of the African Wildlife Leadership Foundation (AWLF), and several poachers caught. A juvenile gorilla from a group being studied by Karisoke Research Centre died in 1979 after a snare wound became infected, and of 11 animals in one of the groups habituated for tourism two have only one hand and a third a deformed hand – the results of early encounters with snares. In October 1980 we had to dart with anaesthetic a trapped juvenile from the same group in order to get the wire noose off a very swollen arm. This May a juvenile from the other main 'tourism' group was able to remove a wire noose from her hand after the guide cut the trap wire, but her fingers were badly wounded and we darted her with long-acting penicillin to help her fight off infection.

In February the police chief, Mr Sebigege, who has been very active in enforcing the anti-poaching laws, received the AWLF's 'Man of the Year for Conservation' award. In April he was able to arrest a poacher trying to sell two gorilla skulls in Ruhengeri.

Park Development

The controlled tourism development in national parks has progressed extremely well. The Rwanda Office of Tourism and National Parks (ORTPN) have been enforcing the reservation system for gorilla visits more rigorously – despite the many tourists who try to get round the rules. Keeping the visitor groups small (maximum of six people per day per gorilla group) has resulted in excellent views of the gorillas, making it possible to increase once again the fees charged – now approximately £13 per person. For the first time the Park did not make a loss, and ORTPN was able to increase the salaries of guides and guards. Receipts so far in 1981 indicate that this year the Park could make a considerable profit – achieving the aim of the MGP to provide an economic argument for its protection. Leaflets giving details about the Park and its facilities (in French and English) have been distributed to travel agents, hotels and guest houses and a fold-out map, funded by the Lions Club of Kigali, has been produced. To encourage hikers and spread the tourist use of the Park, von der Becke erected a metal shelter on the saddle of the Karisimbi Volcano.

Other Activities

Aid has come from many quarters. The Belgian Technical Assistance Programme has allocated funds to build an office/information centre, houses for guards, and other buildings. The Round Table and Lions Club have helped, ffPS/PTES provided posters which have been widely distributed and some sold to tourists, and the Round Table Association of Kigali paid for a short conservation message in Kinyarwanda to be attached to posters in schools and public places. T-shirts, designed by British artist Chris Hodgson, have proved very popular in Rwanda, making a considerable profit. A poster setting out Rwanda's laws against trade in wildlife products was produced in collaboration with ORTPN, and is now displayed at all customs points and by most Rwandan hotels and travel agents. (Rwanda this year became a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, CITES).

Mark Condiotti (AWLF) and Conrad Aveling (ffPS/PTES) are taking part



The Conservator of the Parc des Volcans explains the pictures displayed on the side of the education van
C. & R. Aveling

in a census of the Virunga gorillas this year, to assess changes in the gorilla population since the last census by Bill Weber in 1978.

The Future

The MGP in Rwanda has made tremendous progress, but much that has been achieved could be wasted if the project were to stop now. All the organisations involved – fFPS, PTES, AWLF, WWF and ORTPN – have agreed to support this important work for a further two years, to consolidate achievements in Rwanda and, if possible, extend into Zaire/Uganda to include the rest of the conservation area in the Virungas. So once again we are appealing for donations. All costs – both field and administrative – are kept to the minimum, and donors can be sure that their gifts go directly to saving mountain gorillas and their habitat in the Virunga Volcanoes.



Audience at a slide show
J.P. von der Becke

Bison, Wolves and Seals in Poland

European bison in Poland numbered 561 in early 1981 and about 100 calves were born in the spring. These herds have been built up since 1927 from one bull and two cows. Of pure blood, they live free in four large reserves, notably the Bialowieska Forest where there are over 240, and several smaller ones; the scattering is to avoid a mass loss by disease, as happened in 1953, when 34 died of foot-and-mouth. The only food supplement is hay in severe winter weather. Poland also has 128 Bialowieska bison crossed with Caucasian bison living wild in the Carpathian mountains.

The number of wolves in Poland in March this year was believed to be 517, all in 10 districts in the south-east. The largest population (208) is in the Krosno district; three others number between 58 and 70. The increase is due to protection in the breeding season which was introduced some years ago in certain areas.

One reason suggested for the decrease in grey seals in the Baltic is that for the last 30-40 years winters have been short, and the thin ice has disappeared before their breeding season started. A Polish proposal to construct artificial islands for the seals has been shelved for lack of money.

Eskimos and the Walrus Quota

Dan Strickland of the Alaska Fish and Game Department lived and hunted for a time with a group of Eskimos and saw one of the side-effects of the hunting quota system. He writes in *Natural History*:

'In the clear light of an Arctic evening, I watched a drama that summed up the complexity and intricacy of implementing effective walrus management. Our crew had fired into a walrus pod. Most of the animals plunged into the sea, leaving behind three dead companions and a young, wounded bull, with tusks protruding a scant six inches, which struggled valiantly to reach the water. Normally, hunters quickly dispatch a wounded walrus, and I looked at our crew, expecting a rapid reaction to the bull left alive on the ice. But no one moved. As the Eskimos continued to watch the walrus intently, I realized that they were hoping the animal would reach the water. If it was not retrieved, the walrus would not be included in the village quota.

'I looked back to the young walrus and thought sadly what a strange ritual was being performed. Because limits had been imposed on the number of animals harvested, this walrus might have been wasted simply because his ivory was small. And the hunters, a people who have lived from the animals of the sea for centuries, have been placed in a situation where they permit this to happen.

'The walrus writhed a few more times. At last, one of the hunters raised his rifle and fired. The animal lay still. We moved in to butcher the carcasses, an embarrassed quietness pervading the air. It was an impressive example of well-intentioned regulations having unforeseen effects when actually applied.'

Pangolin Skins for Cowboy Boots

Trade in pangolin skins is increasing and may soon endanger the three Asian species involved: *Manis javanica*, *M. pendaactyla* and *M. crassicaudata*, all on Appendix II of CITES. According to TRAFFIC the USA imported 31,000 pangolin skins in 1980 compared with 15,000 in 1979 and none in 1977, mainly for making cowboy boots; the triangular scars left on the leather when the scales are removed are especially valued. Most of the skins were re-exported from Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan and Spain, none of whom were parties of CITES, but almost all of them originated in Indonesia and Malaysia. For 58 per cent the country of origin declared on the export documents was actually outside the range of the three species. (Appendix II species may be traded but only under government licence.)