***Case Study: Gorilla tourism in Africa***

The brutal 1994 campaign of genocide between the Tutsis and Hutus of Rwanda is a graphic reminder that conservation is very difficult to achieve without an understanding of the socioeconomic context in which it takes place. Cultural differences prevent us from truly understanding another culture: their motives, lifestyles and moral bases. Stanford (1999) writes that the people of Central Africa have long suffered from too many governments, geographical divisions, colonial powers and dictators, and physical displacement. This situation, he suggests, has set the stage for an inherently flammable region, with Western aid and tourists adding fuel to the blaze. The 1998 capture of eight tourists in the Congo (four never heard from again), and the 1999 kidnapping of 14 tourists at the ecotourism centre in Buhomoa, Uganda (eight tourists murdered), brings to light the political and economic realities of this region. But despite the war, the importance of gorillas to the regional economy is clear – although millions of people were killed or displaced over the period of genocide in Rwanda, only five gorillas were killed (Stanford 1999).

*The Economist* reported in May 2002, that for the first time since 1985 poachers are trafficking in Rwanda’s mountain gorillas, of which only about 600 remain. They note that two females were killed in order to capture their infants. An infant gorilla can fetch up to US$125,000 on the black market. The report acknowledges that the long-term benefits of gorilla tourism have always been substantial, with this form of tourism ranking as Rwanda’s third foreign currency earner. The political instability put an end to gorilla tourism in Rwanda and the Congo; in Uganda, it has begun to rebound only after some significant initiatives by the Ugandan government to control poaching, preserve habitat, give 20 per cent of tracking permits to adjacent farmers, and use other funds to support the conservation budget of the Ugandan Wildlife Authority. In all cases, tour operators have invested substantial sums of money in the region, but this will not be a profitable area unless the government actively enforces policies which instill confidence in tourists and operators alike.

The International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) was developed with the goal to ensure the survival of the mountain gorillas and their habitat. The mountain gorilla is found only in protected afro-montane forests in northwest Rwanda, southwest Uganda and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. In these regions there are two populations. One is in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda, and the other in the ecologically homogeneous region of three parks (Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, Volcano National Park in Rwanda and Virunga National Park in the Congo). The programme is an initiative between three organisations, including the African Wildlife Foundation, the World Wildlife Federation, and the various protected areas authorities of the three respective countries. IGCP helps to monitor and protect the gorillas, train staff and advise governments on policy and enforcement. They also help with habitat protection which, after poaching, is one of the biggest threats to the mountain gorilla in an area with tremendous population growth.

Gorilla tours cost about US$280 for the opportunity to visit a gorilla family for a period of one hour. Tourists who have a cold or other illness are not allowed to make the journey.

But despite precautions, primatologists argue that the health of the mountain gorillas is in danger because of the volume of tourists that they are exposed to. They note that tourists an expose the animals to human diseases, which may very quickly spread throughout a family (studies of gorilla faeces show that they have indeed picked up new parasites since the introduction of tourism), but it is not known to what extent wild populations are susceptible to diseases which have infected captive groups. The following from Tourism and Travel in Uganda are the rules and procedures that tourists must follow in their interactions with the gorillas:

A maximum number of six visitors may visit a group of habituated gorillas per day.

Voices are to be kept low. Do not leave rubbish in the park. Guides will inform tourists when to take pictures. Flash photography is not permitted. Always wash your hands before venturing out to the gorillas. Keep a minimum of 5 metres from the gorillas, to avoid exposure to diseases. Tourists must stay in a tight group whilst viewing gorillas.

Do not smoke, eat or drink while near the gorillas. If a gorilla charges, crouch down slowly and do not look the gorilla in the eyes. Running will increase the risk of harm.

Never attempt to touch a gorilla. If the gorillas become agitated, the one-hour tour may be cut short. After a visit with the gorillas, keep voices down until 200 metres from the family of gorillas. Unfortunately Butynski (1998) observes that many of these directives are often overlooked in the process of conducting a gorilla encotour. He reports that: The official number of tourists visiting gorillas has escalated from 6, to 8, with 10 being strongly considered, despite the cautions by scientific experts.

All gorilla programmes (tours) suffer from a lack of risk assessments, impact assessments and programme evaluations. Tourists and guides have been found frequently to bribe park staff to ignore the rules. The benefit to the guide is a larger gratuity at the end of the tour, and likely a kickback to park staff. Extended visits with gorillas have gone well beyond the one-hour limit. Sick tourists are included on tours and unauthorised visits to non-tourist gorilla groups have been allowed. Conservation has taken a back seat to political power-struggles and short-term financial gains.

Further, he notes that the absence of sound empirical data on gorilla tourism is the partial cause of so many ethical transgressions, and that information on the extent to which tourists affect gorilla behaviour, ecology, health and survival is essential. The sustainability of gorilla tourism is questioned because there is too much disparity between what needs to be done, and what the most important stakeholder groups (governments and NGOs) are willing or able to accomplish. This means putting conservation first over economic prosperity; conducting research; stronger regulations, which are enforced; and more money to support conservation. While tourism can be directly affected by war, conservation can be aided by it. A common conservation objective between nations – such as gorilla conservation – often forces these disparate parties to work together. Citing the director of the IGCP, Annette Lanjouw, Snell (2001) writes that peace is not a prerequisite for conservation. Lanjouw suggests that even though she works in a war-zone, conservation can contribute to regional stability.

Websites <http://www.fauna-flora.org/around_the_world/africa/gorilla.htm>

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/science/DailyNews/gorillas990305.html