

The best known subspecies of gorilla, the Virunga and Bwindi Mountain Gorillas, live in two small isolated mountain forest islands: the Virunga National Park in the triangle Rwanda/Uganda/DR Congo (440 km²) and the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park in Uganda (310 km²). Reports by Dian Fossey have allowed the world to follow the fate of these gentle giants. Poaching, common in the early 70s, was reduced drastically by conservation projects and public interest. However, more and more Mountain Gorillas have become victims of the continuing Civil War and hunting by discontented people of park adjacent communities.

Since the beginning of the 90s and particularly in the Virunga region, war has prevailed. Rebels, the army and refugees cross through the forest or hide in it. From 1995-2000, humans have injured or killed at least 47 of mountain gorillas (8% of the population). In some cases, gorillas were killed by frightened soldiers, and on other occasions poachers were responsible for the death of several individuals.

In addition, the demand for infants by foreigners is supposed to have led to the killing of at least two silverbacks. Exact numbers are still not known, since some regions continue to be inaccessible.



Juvenile playing with a wire snare.

If the dominant male of a mountain gorilla family is killed, the consequences for his dependant offspring are appalling: If the mother attaches herself to another male, her unweaned young under 3 yrs will be killed by him. The female comes into oestrus soon after and the new male can father his own offspring. These killings are therefore also an indirect consequence of the shooting of the original dominant male.



In the last decade, no hunting of mountain gorillas for their meat was reported. However, in 2001 at least one case got published in Rwanda and it can also be not excluded in the Congo area. Although in some areas gorilla meat has never been consumed, it is feared that this eating taboo will be lifted when there is a mixing of different ethnic groups.

Some tribes near the Virungas regard gorillas as bad spirits and are frightened of them. In former times they were killed for magic ritual.

The number of snares set by poachers in the vicinity of the research station at Karisoke in Rwanda increased 4-fold in the years 1992-93, along with a doubling of injuries and fatalities caused by snares.

Many communities adjacent to the park and the people who formerly profited from the forest are increasingly unhappy, since they are not considered and do not benefit from the profit that tourism creates. They feel restricted in their traditional rights. In the summer of 1999, people cultivating beehives in the Bwindi Forest created fires there.



Removing a snare from a female gorilla in the Virungas.

As their habitat becomes increasingly smaller and human activity in the forest increases, some gorillas (likewise buffalos or forest elephants) raid fields adjacent to the park - very much to the anger of the farmers, who threaten to shoot them. In 2001, in Bwindi Forest, for example, HuGo (Human-Gorilla-Conflict Force) was established, a mixed troop of rangers and farmers, who chase the gorillas back into the forest.