

Keep our mountain gorillas disease-free

Zoonotic diseases among mountain gorillas are deadly. They can wipe up to 50 percent of a population. While mountain gorillas are faced with several threats including diseases, habitat loss and encroachment, poaching, infrastructure development in the protected areas and climate change, the threat of disease remains the deadliest of them all, says Dr Benard Ssebide, country head Veterinarian, Gorilla Doctors, Uganda.

Mountain gorillas share a closely matched DNA (98.4 percent) with humans. This makes them susceptible to a wide range of human diseases including respiratory diseases (like flu), Corona viruses, Scabies, Measles, Tuberculosis, Anthrax and Ebola. Unfortunately, mountain gorillas have not yet developed the necessary immunities, meaning first time exposure to an illness or virus that is relatively severe to humans can devastate an entire population.

Some apes, especially gorillas and chimpanzees have suc-

Besides the limited immunity, mountain gorillas live in small groups that may never recover from a sudden decline in numbers caused by disease.

Explaining why it would take many years to recover a mountain gorilla population, Dr Ssebide says the annual population growth rate for mountain gorillas is about four percent with an inter-birth interval of four years among females and about 50 percent infant mortality rate. Plus, the population demographics do not support a fast-growing population.

Apparently, the threat of disease has increased due to the increased interaction (direct and indirect) between people and mountain gorillas. Respiratory illnesses being the most severe and major cause of deaths among mountain gorillas followed by gastro-intestinal parasites.

Studies reveal that during the Covid-19 pandemic there was a great decline in the number of respiratory diseases reported following the suspension of tourism and months after probably because of the continued use of masks and maintaining safe distance between mountain gorillas and humans, (Kirsten Gilardi, Prosper Uwingeli, 10 February 2022, Nature | Vol 602).

While other threats can and are being regulated, the threat of disease is unpredictable and can be challenging to manage.

As much as the mountain gorilla population is steadily growing, it is very fragile, mountain gorillas remain a conservation-dependent species whose long-term protection and survival depends on our actions.

Range state governments and park managers should reinforce strict adherence to the IUCN best practice guidelines for great ape tourism, tourists and all those visiting mountain gorillas need to strictly observe the same during visits.

Rangers, guides and the surrounding communities should be sensitised and made to understand the threat of disease and the mitigations required to protect mountain gorillas from disease.

Rangers should also be empowered to conduct consistent disease surveillance and timely reporting of diseases. This can allow for timely intervention by the veterinary teams and save the iconic species because a stitch in time saves nine!

Lastly, park managers and other conservationists should adopt a one health approach to ensure effective conservation and protection of the endangered mountain gorillas.

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Alice Mbayahi
Tourism

cumbed to respiratory diseases which quickly spread from group to group/individual to individual as they interact.

In the early 2000s for example, the Ebola Virus Disease wiped about a third of the lowland gorilla population in West Africa (Magdalena Bermejo, José Domingo Rodríguez-Tejedor, Germán Illera, Alex Barroso, Carles Vilà and Peter D. Walsh, December 8, 2006) while in 1996 mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park suffered an outbreak of scabies leading to the death of an infant gorilla.

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