

Conservationists concerned as oldest gorilla group faces breakdown

CATASTROPHIC: The death of Kanyonyi, leader of the oldest gorilla group in Bwindi Impenetrable Park is likely to have disastrous consequences for the group.

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A sombre mood has engulfed the different conservation groups across the country after the death of leader of the oldest gorilla group in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BIMP).

Kanyonyi who had been the leader of Mubare mountain gorilla family died on Friday last week after a brutal fight with a lone wild silverback, only identified as Malaya. Born on November 1, 1996 to Ruhondeza and Kachomoni, he passed on at the age of 21 years. During the same fight, one of his offspring was also brutally torn into pieces, dying instantly.

Prior to the brutal fight, the leader of Mubare group had fallen off a tree while harvesting fruits and injured one of his forelegs, making him weak.

Mountain gorillas are among the world's most endangered species. Globally, there are only about 800 of them left in the Greater Virunga Massif, with Uganda accounting for more than half of the number.

Dr Gladys Kalema Zikusoka, the Chief Executive Officer of Conservation Through Public Health, the organisation that treated the wounded silverback says the death is unfortunate.

In her message, she says "Kanyonyi first fell off a tree, but while he was recovering after treatment, a lone silverback fought with him because he wanted to take over his group. Kanyonyi in his weakened state was not able to put up a good fight, and sustained many injuries, which though they were healing, left him weaker than usual. When I last visited Kanyonyi he was eating quite well, but still limping and walking slowly, with one adult female gorilla, Karungyi and his baby keeping close by his side."

She says fighting amongst free-ranging gorillas is considered part of their normal behaviour patterns and enables natural group succession. She says the death of the silverback came as a result of injuries he sustained during the fight with Malaya. "Conservation through Public Health participated in the post mortem, which confirmed the major cause of his death to be an infection in the hip joint after the fall. I have known Kanyonyi since he was born 21 years ago", she says.

Much-loved patriarch
Rekindling a fond memory of the fallen Kanyonyi, Dr Kalema says he was a playful young silverback who liked interacting with human visitors. Over the past five years, Kanyonyi has kept the Mubare gorilla group together and enabled it to grow through attracting many females. "When we started the Gorilla Con-



Tourists track gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. The death of Kanyonyi, leader of Mubare group spells trouble for the survival of the biggest habituated community of gorillas. NET PHOTO

servation Coffee social enterprise in 2015 to support farmers living around Bwindi, we decided to name our first coffee blend after Kanyonyi who symbolises the gorilla conservation efforts at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park since tourism began in 1993. May his legacy continue through stories, memories and the Kanyonyi coffee blend", she says.

Untimely departure
John Simplicious Gesa, the Public Relations Manager at the Uganda

800

NUMBER OF MOUNTAIN
GORILLAS LEFT IN THE
GREATER VIRUNGA AREA

Wildlife Authority says the death of Kanyonyi is a big blow to the Mubare family.

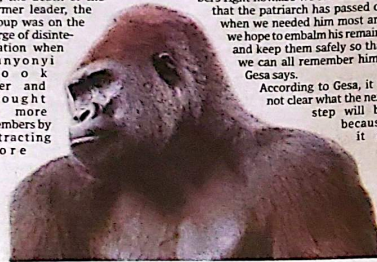
Gesa says the death has robbed the country of a formidable gorilla group that has been the backbone of tourism and gorilla tracking in the country. He said, following the death of the former leader, the group was on the verge of disintegration when Kanyonyi took over and brought in more members by attracting more

females. "At UWA, we are saddened because at the death of Ruhondeza, this group was on the edge of disintegration, but as a result of his courageous, steadfast and strong leadership, he managed to put this group back to the rank. The group had actually come back with very big numbers right now...so we are saddened that the patriarch has passed on when we needed him most and we hope to embalm his remains and keep them safely so that, we can all remember him," Gesa says.

According to Gesa, it is not clear what the next step will be because it is

LIFESPAN OF THE GORILLA

Female mountain gorillas give birth to a single baby after a gestation period (the time a mother carries the baby before giving birth) of nine months, just like humans. Even though gorillas are large animals, the newborn babies weigh in at just four pounds! They rely entirely on their mother. She carries them until they are four months old. Then, the babies are able to cling to her back, which they do until they stop nursing at two to three years old. At age three, mountain gorillas are independent, but not mature. This is their 'juvenile' stage, and it lasts until they are six or so. Females reach sexual maturity at about 10 years old, and males at 15 to 20 years old. This is the 'mature adult' stage. In the period between their juvenile and mature adult stage, they are young adults.



gorilla group faces breakdown

HOW GORILLAS BREED

The life cycle comes full circle once the mountain gorilla is sexually mature and can find a mate to have a baby of its own.

Mountain gorillas live in groups of up to 30 individuals, led by a single dominant male. He is known as the silverback, because male gorillas grow gray hair on their backs as they age. The rest of the group is made up of females and their young, and occasionally one or two young adult males.

The silverback has total access to the females of the group and is the only one that mates with them, and he mates with several

of them. When males reach adulthood, they typically leave to form their own group or to challenge a silverback in order to take over an established group.

Though the male is dominant, it is the female that decides when to mate. When she is ready, she will approach the male. After having a baby, females will not mate again for several years and usually have only one baby every four years at most. Gorilla mating is not seasonal, and can happen any time of year.

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are day and night trying to monitor the movements, health and try to see if they will still remain in clusters or disintegrate", he said.

Revenue Source

Since its habitation, the Mubare group has been the biggest generator of revenue in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, bringing in revenue of about \$20m. Gesa said disintegration of the group would mean losing all this money and more because habituating a gorilla takes a long process.

Bwindi Game Park has a total of 15 gorilla groups. Each group has eight permits per day and all groups are visited daily, the park gets \$72,000, translating into about \$13 million annually.

"So we just hope and pray that the group can stay together and somehow come out of this shocking and

unexpected death of Kanyonyi", he says.

About Mubare Group

Mubare was the first gorilla group to be habituated for tourism in BIMP beginning in 1991, and following a two-year habituation period the group was officially opened for tourism in 1993 with 12 group members. The group leader at the time of habitation was Ruhondeza who also fathered Kanyonyi.

In August 1994, Ruhondeza staged one of his major battles in which he recruited six new family members believed to be remnants of the then Katondogere gorilla family which disintegrated into the DR Congo later in early 1998. Some of Ruhondeza's unique characters included practice of infanticide of his own male offspring.

By the time of Kanyonyi's birth, about five male baby gorillas born in the Mubare group had been murdered by Ruhondeza.

Kanyonyi is born

Ruhondeza was almost 24 years old when he sired Kanyonyi and he demystified the former belief in his infanticide character by allowing Kanyonyi and his male siblings including, Muyambi, to live up to maturity. By 2011, Ruhondeza could no longer manage to stage major battles - as he had further advanced in age

and some of his group members had to disperse while others succumbed to natural death, reducing the group size to only three members. Ruhondeza died on June 25, 2012, when he was 39 years old.

Kanyonyi's Tenure

The death of Ruhondeza marked the onset of an era for an enthusiastic young man, ready to demonstrate that he too can lead a youthful age of just 16 years. Among the few remaining family members were one of Kanyonyi's sisters (Malaka/Angel) and his only brother (Muyambi/Helper).

Beginning October 2012, Kanyonyi, in the company of his younger brother Muyambi embarked on a mission to restore the lost glory of their father's family through recruitment of new members; and by November 2013 Kanyonyi had recruited three members from the wild into his family thereby increasing the family size to six.

Kanyonyi continued to pursue more members and by January 2014 he had five more members, two from Habi-nyanja and three from Rushegura bringing the numbers to eleven members. During his short tenure, Kanyonyi sired eight infants from eight different females in his group but only four are still alive as the other four died in infancy.

QUICK FACTS ON THE MOUNTAIN GORILLA

Common Name: Mountain Gorilla
Scientific Name: Gorilla beringei beringei
Type: Mammals
Diet: Omnivores
Group Name: Troop, band
Average life span in The Wild: 35 years
Size: Standing height, 4 to 6 ft
Weight: 300 to 485 lbs (136-220kgs)
Size relative to a 6-ft man:

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MAP SHOWING MUBARE IN BWINDI IMPENETRABLE

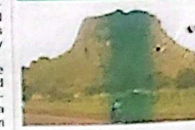


If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...



LAKE NABUSIRUNGU: Located in Masaka Town, the lake has a sand beach at its shores. It is popular for annual swimming competitions, motor rallying events, fishing, camping, and beautiful cottages. While there, you can also enjoy recreational activities like beach volleyball and beach football. It is an excellent place for family outings.

BRIGHT KITIKIMBA, MOTORIST



TORORO ROCK: One does not require experience to climb Tororo Rock. The hike gives one a chance to have a healthy sweat. From the top of the rock, you will enjoy an amazing view of Mountain Elgon, Tororo town, Lake Victoria and highlands stretching as far as the eye can see.

RACHEAL NALUGO, TEACHER



OMUKAMA OF TORO'S PALACE: Apart from providing social cohesion for the tribe as the symbol of their identity and pride, the palace fulfills an educational role. It educates and promotes the community, the young and the old and visiting dignitaries in the knowledge, values, language, history, literature, traditions, governance, administration, a civil conduct.

EDWIN NKALUBO, LAWYER



SEMPAYA HOT SPRINGS: These and female hot springs are located in the escarpments of Semliki River Va in Bwindi-bugyo town. They are considered to be a habitat for a variety of wildlife wetland birds, and supply salty mineral water to many animals. While there, you can cook simple food, boil eggs and drink tea from the hot steaming spring.

SARAH NAKIGOTZI, SOCIAL WORKER
Compiled by Godfrey Lugajju

The coffee produced through Bwindi Gorilla Conservation is named after Kanyonyi. COURTESY PHOTO