

# tourism

CASH  
COW

**451 sq km**

**Gorilla concentration.** The Virunga Massif is an area encompassing the Mikeno Sector of Virunga National Park in the DRC, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda. It is one of only two places in the world where the critically endangered mountain gorilla species are found.

**MIGRATORY BEHAVIOUR**... The Nyakagezi family consists of three silverbacks, two adult females, two blackbacks and two juveniles and one infant. Also, a gorilla silverback migrated from DRC more than ten years ago and founded the Kwitonda gorilla family in Rwanda, which has about 28 members.

# Regional mountain gorilla number

**Massive.** A census conducted in the Virunga covering Rwanda and Congo gorilla parks as well as Mgahinga National Park in Uganda, puts the total figure of mountain gorillas at 1,004.

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It was all joy for conservationists from Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) when the results of a recently conducted census documented 604 mountain gorillas in the Virunga Mastiff.

The Virunga Mastiff is a 451 sq km area encompassing the Mikeno Sector of Virunga National Park in the DRC, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda. It is one of only two places in the world where the critically endangered mountain gorilla species are found. The other place is Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda, where, according to published figures in 2011, 400 mountain gorillas live.

The census, conducted from October to December 2015 and March to May 2016, did not extend to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. However, when the results are combined - 400 mountain gorillas in Bwindi and 604 mountain gorillas in the Virunga Mastiff - as of June 2016, an estimated 1,004 gorillas exist in the wild.

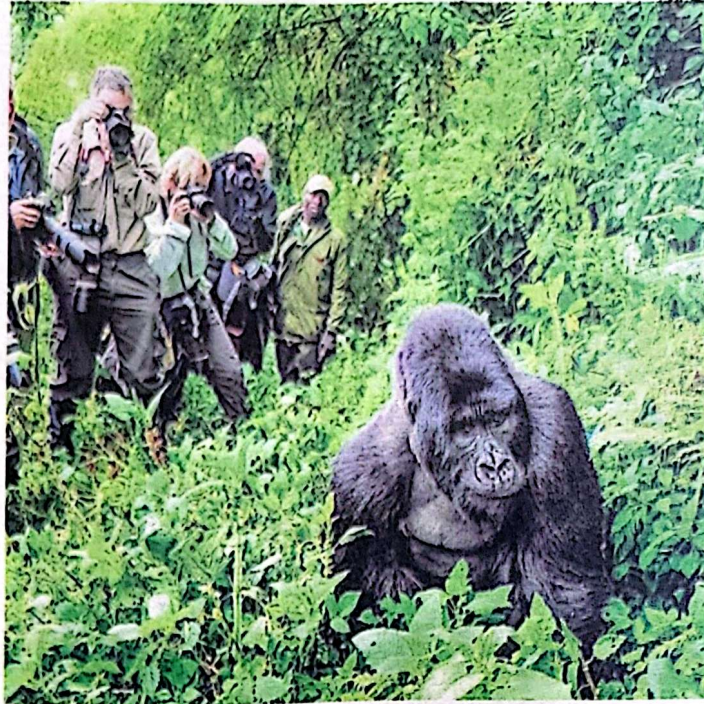
The results were unveiled on May 31, 2018 by the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC) at Lake Kivu, Serena Hotel in Gisenyi, Rubavu, Rwanda, at an event attended by conservationists and scientists.

The increase in mountain gorillas is attributed to the effectiveness of conservation policies, regulated tourism, veterinary interventions, intensive law enforcement, community conservation projects and the transboundary collaboration among government institutions and non-governmental actors.

### How survey was conducted

According to the results, 604 individual gorillas were found in 41 groups and as 14 solitary males. This is a sharp rise from a previous survey of the same area conducted in 2010 that showed an estimated 480 individual gorillas in 36 groups and as 14 solitary males.

Survey teams (consisting 80 people for each of the two phases of the census) walked predetermined reconnaissance trails ensuring a thorough sweep of the Mastiff. When fresh gorilla signs were detected, the teams followed the gorilla trail to locate three recent night nest sites. At each of these nest sites, the teams collected faecal samples from the nests,



which were analysed genetically to determine individual genotypes.

The survey teams were protected by rangers from the respective authorities in the three countries - Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) and Rwanda Development Board (RDB).

### Boost to conservation

The rise in numbers of mountain gorillas in the Greater Virunga Landscape (GVL) shows that conservation is the way to go if the region is to increase the benefits from tourism.

Sam Mwanda, the executive director of UWA, says Ugandans should be glad for the increase. "I have heard people say that the gorillas in Bwindi are migrating to Congo, but that is a myth. These wild animals have no idea where a boundary is. Besides, Sarambwe Nature Reserve in DRC which is opposite Bwindi is not conducive for the gorillas. So, Ugandans should not be worried."

He adds that as long as the three countries are merging their conservation efforts, the exact location of the gorillas does not matter. "What is important is that they are protected wherever they are. For instance, the Nyakagezi gorilla family in Mgahinga visited Rwanda in early 2011, stayed away for a year and then, returned."

The Nyakagezi family consists of three silverbacks, two adult females, two blackbacks, two juveniles and one infant. Also, a gorilla silverback migrated from DRC more than 10 years ago and founded the Kwitonda

gorilla family in Rwanda, which has about 28 members.

The relationship between the three countries is such that when a group moves from one country to another, through GVTC, the former host country can do tourism in the adopted country and share the revenue.

### Communities at the centre of conservation

It is important to recognise the role of the communities that live in close proximity to the national parks. They co-exist with the mountain gorillas, thus contributing to conservation efforts.

Eugene Mutangana, the head of conservation department in RDB, says, "Conservation efforts are nothing if they do not incorporate the input of the communities. Conservation should contribute to poverty reduction."

A population explosion has led to a wildlife-human conflict, where farmers encroach on the protected area and the animals eat their crops and animals. To sustain their livelihood, sometimes members of the community kill the wild animals.

"The protection authorities in the three countries need to work with such communities to create awareness about the benefits of wildlife," Mutangana advises, adding, "If they see the benefits, they have reason to protect this wildlife. In Rwanda, the population explosion is a challenge and there is no promising because family planning is not our priority."

An increasing population living



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SAM MWANDHA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UWA

near the Greater Virunga landscape is a complication, especially when many people are still living below the poverty line. This has led to an increase in illegal activities in the national parks.

### Poaching on the rise

According to the survey statistics in 2016, 246 snares were found in the Virunga Mastiff, as compared to 218 in 2010. In the last 20 years, more than 176 game rangers have been killed in the DRC.

Joel Wengamulay, the head of communications and external relations of Virunga National Park, says the loss of his colleagues is a sign that the rangers are ready to face the challenges of conservation.

"We are paying a high price. These rangers are not just figures to me, they are colleagues and friends. I was with some of them a few hours before they were killed. The many snares are a small problem compared to the insecurity in DRC. To improve the security situation, we are now having regular joint operations with the (DRC) army," says Wengamulay.

For its part, Rwanda has undertaken a zero poaching strategy, is increasing patrol coverage in the national park, and is investing in training and equipping the rangers. The outdated law against poaching is also under review.

According to Mwanda, in Uganda, the wildlife populations are growing because the conservation efforts are in high gear. "Unfortunately, though, we cannot entirely put an end to poaching because it is a process that involves awareness, law enforcement, and improving the livelihoods of communities around the parks."

Of course, an increase in law enforcement is a big boost for conser-

Thriving. Tourists track gorillas at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SPEEDWAY SAFARIS.



### Mobile.

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