

# Gorilla Tourism

Uganda uses tourism to recover from decades of violent conflict.

GREG RINGER

More than three years after the murder of eight foreign tourists, kidnapped while on tour of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in southwest Uganda, the country is finally, albeit slowly and rather tenuously, experiencing a rebound in international travelers. Whereas only recently, adventure tourism referred to the possibility of abduction and death for foreign tourists, the term once again suggests the possibilities offered by a country whose national parks and protected areas remain among the world's most significant, culturally and ecologically.

East Africa has endured decades of ethnic violence, institutional mismanagement and international neglect, poverty and disease. Yet, improved political stability and openness, and aggressive tourism campaigns have fueled a boom in tourism within the region. As a result, tourism and more specifically, culture- and nature-based ecotourism, is now one of the most important sectors in the regional economy, and governments throughout East Africa are busy (re)positioning themselves as international destinations.<sup>1</sup>

As the Uganda example shows, ecotourism development can play an important role in sustaining local people, places and identities during a period of dynamic change from a country in conflict to tourist destination. But as we shall see, this strategy is not without its own risks.

Geographically centered in the heart of equatorial Africa, Uganda has long benefitted from its lush natural and cultural richness. The country was among the first in the region to market itself as a leisure and safari destination, and tourism was the fastest growing sector in the Ugandan economy in the 1960s. However, the violence and turmoil that ensued the military coup by Idi Amin in January 1971 effectively destroyed the industry. Hotels in the national parks were ransacked and wildlife decimated by rebel soldiers who terrorized wardens, residents and tourists alike. Years of warfare followed before the widespread killings carried out by Amin and his successor, Milton Obote, ended in 1986 with the victory of guerrilla forces led by the current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni.<sup>2</sup>

Fully aware of the importance of tourism to the country's economy and anxious to restore Uganda's prominence as a wildlife destination, the Museveni government rebuilt the international airport at Entebbe and contracted with Italian and other European companies to rehabilitate and build new tourist hotels in national parks. By the late 1990s, nearly 160,000 tourists were arriving each year to visit the country's parks, wildlife/forest reserves, and newly established safari lodges and camps, and the US\$4.2

million they spent annually was a significant source of income in a country whose gross national income per capita is only US\$310.<sup>3</sup>

Following the March 1999 murders in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the number of visitors to Uganda dropped 95 percent before rebounding slightly in 2000, when 19,211 visitors toured the country's parks. Even the pre-attack numbers were only a fraction, however, of those who visit other wildlife destinations in south Africa, reflecting Uganda's diminished attraction as a tourist destination. The attacks, therefore, only added to the challenges of marketing a country where the "mega-charismatic" fauna – such as the lion, elephant, and Cape Buffalo – are few in numbers, having been hunted to near extinction in the civil wars waged by Amin and Obote, and where the country itself remains synonymous with ethnic genocide.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the government of Uganda is keen to address the challenges of rebuilding the country's tourism industry, and a number of initiatives have been undertaken with funds from the UN Development Programme, USAID, the World Bank, and the European Union. Under the premise that economic self-sufficiency is critical to social and ecological sustainability, these small-scale initiatives provide opportunities for Ugandans to participate more directly in tourism. By funding investments in conservation and community development activities, the collaborations enable Ugandans to strengthen their communities through environmentally oriented activities and developing ecotourism attractions.

## SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ECOTOURISM

Uganda's protected areas reflect the nation's biodiversity, encompassing freshwater lakes and rivers, savannah grasslands, wetlands and swamps, tropical forests, and snow-topped volcanic mountains. To manage and protect these natural areas, the Uganda National Parks Authority (later renamed the Uganda Wildlife Authority) was created in 1952 and given responsibility for managing the country's ten national parks, seven wildlife sanctuaries, ten wildlife reserves, and 13 community wildlife areas (see map).

In spite of the horrific slaughter of wildlife in the 1970s and 1980s, an extraordinary range of species remains within these environs (figure 1), including almost half of the bird species known on the African continent and over ten percent of those on record throughout the entire world! In addition to the more than 1000 species of birds from both east and west Africa recorded on the National Heritage Database, of which 873 are found in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park alone, visitors to Uganda's parks and sanctuar-

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ies are also apt to see tree-climbing lions, giraffes, hyenas, hippos and chimpanzees, as well as the *Sitatunga*, an endangered species of ungulate. The cultural contrasts are equally significant, reflecting the multiple ethnic traditions and lifestyles practiced by Uganda's population of 23.5 million people, from Bantu-speaking Bugandans whose kingdom, dominating much of central and southern Uganda, was restored by President Museveni when he took power, to the Nilotics and the Nilo-Hamitics of the north and east.<sup>5</sup>

Aware of the image problems associated with the country's troubled past, park and tourism officials

have taken steps at both the local and national levels to remind international visitors of the unique tourist opportunities offered by Uganda and the link between tourism and conservation of the country's renowned natural and cultural capital. Undertaken independently or in collaboration with international agencies, such actions include the development of environmental education and cultural immersion programs in the national parks; whitewater rafting on the Nile River; mountain climbing on the snow-covered peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains (more popularly known as the "Mountains of the Moon"); and the one niche where Uganda can compete successfully with neighboring countries: gorilla tourism.

Boosted by the continued fighting in the Congo and Rwanda, where gorilla treks remain ill-advised, Uganda has actively marketed the small population of mountain gorillas that inhabit Mgahinga Gorilla and Bwindi Impenetrable National Parks in the country's extreme southwest. Although there are only about 300 gorillas residing altogether in Uganda, this total represents almost half of the world's critically endangered population. As a result, nearly all of the approximately 800 tourists who visit the two parks each year are motivated solely by the chance for a rare encounter with a gorilla and their trekking fees provide 90 percent of the Uganda Wildlife Authority's entire budget.<sup>6</sup>

In the Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, tourists trek with Hutu and Tutsi rangers through a terrain of abandoned farmlands, secondary forests and old growth bamboo, only a few kilometers from Diane Fossey's former research station in Rwanda and the heavily armed Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers who now patrol there. Because of the poaching and other threats along the shared borders, armed Ugandan park rangers now assume responsibility for the gorillas when they migrate through Mgahinga enroute to the Congo's Parc National des Virunga and the Parc des Volcans in Rwanda.<sup>7</sup>

The Uganda Wildlife Authority is also directly assisting local families forcibly evicted from lands within Mgahinga Gorilla and nearby Bwindi Impenetrable National Parks in 1991 when access was restricted to better manage the gorillas and their endangered habitat. With the assistance of Peace Corps Volunteers, the Germany Animal Protection Society, and Care International, the agency decided to use interest earned from a US\$4 million Global Environmental Facility grant to fund community health and educational facilities, and to support enforcement and monitoring in the parks.

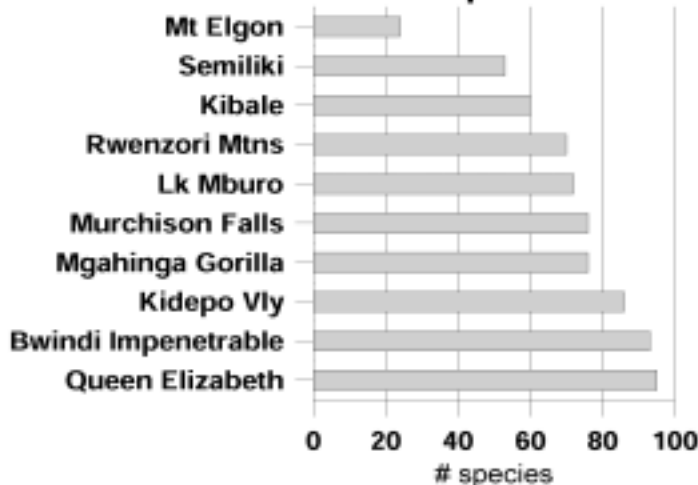
Through the project, which is still in the early stages, park staff provide environmental programs for local schools in neighbouring villages, and a community-owned campground and store operate immediately outside the gate to Mgahinga Gorilla National Park. As a result, local residents are increasingly supportive of the park's presence and efforts to protect the gorillas and other threatened species, such as the golden monkey and giant forest hog.

At the national level, the government organized the Uganda Community Tourism Association (UCOTA) in 1998 to support cultural tourism programs for visi-



Figure 1 2001 Wildlife Survey, Uganda National Parks

Recorded Wildlife Species



## Recipe for Ape Conservation

For many children in Cameroun, the taste of great ape is more familiar than the sight of one of these remarkable creatures.

University of Toronto bioethics professor Kerry Bowman, founder of the Canadian Great Ape Alliance and friend of Jane Goodall, is helping to acquaint Camerounian children with great apes in hopes of reversing this trend.

Working within the Cameroun school system, Bowman has developed conservation programs with a mandate to "show the children how fabulous biodiversity is in Africa" and to highlight the similarities between humans and apes. He explains that hundreds of children are now interested in great ape conservation.

One of the most significant threats to the great apes is the practice of bushmeat hunting. Once a means of providing basic sustenance, bush meat hunting has proliferated due to increased logging which provides access to previously unexplored areas.

Also contributing to the problem is a demand for bushmeat among the urban populations, leading to illegal meat being supplied to local markets. Endangered species, such as chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos suffer most profoundly from the intense hunting.

Bowman says ecotourism offers a possible economic alternative to bush meat hunting but it alone will not provide a solution to what he calls a "huge, huge problem."

He also recognizes that the educational programs he is pursuing in Cameroun will not solve the problem either, although he says "attitudes seem to be changing."

Science North's David Lickley is enthusiastic about passing on the message of conservation to the next generation. Lickley is senior producer of Jane Goodall's "Wild Chimpanzees", an IMAX film chronicling Jane Goodall's conservation work in Tanzania – a film he hopes will raise awareness of the plight of chimpanzees.

He believes the public, and children in particular, walk away from the film with a better understanding and appreciation of chimpanzees and a consequent desire to protect them. "The more awareness with kids, the better off we'll be," says Lickley.

The 40-minute film, co-produced by Science North, Sudbury, and the Science Museum of Minnesota, is an emotional story about a community of apes, with a focus on a few dominant individuals.

Lickley says one objective of the film was to transport viewers to Gombe, Tanzania, where the filming took place, without physically going there. Perhaps, he says, they will be enticed to visit the chimpanzees of Gombe after watching the film.

Chimpanzee tourism is a growing business. Lickley believes that when Tanzanian government officials see the economic benefits of this type of tourism they will be more inclined to preserve the wildlife and environment.

Education, in both Africa and abroad, has helped to improve prospects for the great apes to some extent, but both Bowman and Lickley acknowledge the challenges that remain.

"Trying to get change to happen in a place like [Africa] is tough," says Lickley.

Bowman recognizes that these conservation efforts need to be coupled with a focus on the welfare of African citizens: "if poverty is not dealt with, the environment will not survive." **A**

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tors and residents alike. The group is funded, in part, by the US-based North Carolina Zoological Park, which provides technical and human support to the Uganda Wildlife Authority, as well as several British and Ugandan foundations, the Uganda Tourist Board, and a number of local Ugandan groups. In a joint initiative with the Kabaka (or titular king) of the Ugandan region of Bugana, UCOTA is constructing a heritage trail in the capital of Kampala for local school children. The trail will highlight the history of Uganda's 26 different ethnic groups. Village workshops on community tourism have also been conducted in a number of protected area communities, and an information centre for tourists and UCOTA members is planned near the offices of the Uganda Wildlife Authority.<sup>8</sup>

These and other initiatives undertaken by the Ugandan Ministry of Tourism, Uganda Tourist Board, and the Uganda Wildlife Authority have created a practical framework for both sustainable communities and ecotourism in Uganda. With their financial and technical support, local residents and resource managers now co-operate to provide a range of experiences for the visitor, from adventure hikes and cultural encounters to the new chimpanzee habituation experience introduced in Kibale National Park in 2002, where teams of volunteer trackers help acustom chimps to the presence of tourists.

### CHALLENGES

As ecotourism increases in Uganda, associated problems are coming to the fore. Perhaps most critical are the pressures placed on local ecosystems by recreational development in areas long isolated or "protected" by war. In Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, for instance, gorilla deaths from infections have increased along the border as a result of more frequent trekking groups and human contact, while the trash abandoned by nature hikers in the Rwenzori Mountains now constitutes a serious health problem.<sup>9</sup>


In addition, there are increasing complaints among Ugandans regarding the trivialization of ethnic rituals for tourism, and the eviction of communities from lands historically theirs to create parks and other protected areas. Gender-related inequities remain cause for concern as well, particularly the rise in tourist-related prostitution and the transmission of HIV-AIDS. Furthermore, while women remain the primary producers of ecotourism handicrafts, the work is labour-intensive and women are often required to travel great distances each day to find materials used in their goods and in daily life.<sup>10</sup>

### POSSIBILITIES

Despite these drawbacks, ecotourism is generally supported by Ugandans and their government (as evidenced by high levels of community participation and the priority placed on funding tourism projects in the annual budget). Though intermittent fighting continues along the country's borders with Rwanda and the Congo, there is growing confidence over the security situation and even optimistic projections that Uganda, once famed as the "pearl of Africa," may experience a moderate increase (6.2 to 6.4 percent)

2nd callout  
Nearly all tourists who visit Mgahinga and Bwindi National Parks are motivated solely by the chance for a rare encounter with a gorilla.

in tourism receipts in 2002.<sup>11</sup>

Equally important, Uganda's innovative ecotourism program, emphasizing community revenue sharing and capacity building, environmental education, and sustainable use, is demonstrating that effective collaboration between protected areas and communities may benefit both wildlife and people, and in so doing, enable Ugandans to reconcile economics with ecology, visitor impact with sustainability, and pragmatism with vision. Though the challenges are considerable and in many cases, beyond the control of local people and organizations, the Uganda experience makes clear the potential for ecotourism, if sensitively developed, to make a positive and long-lasting contribution to community and nature conservation in Africa. 

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. Ringer, *An Assessment of Ecotourism and National Parks in Uganda* (Kampala: Uganda Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife & Antiquities, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> S. Mann, "Plans to Rebuild Tourism," *The EU Microprojects Scheme* (Brussels: ECSC-European Commission-EAEC, 1998), pp. 1-5; and A. Pleumarom, "The Political Economy of Tourism", *The Ecologist*, 24:4 (1994), pp. 142-43.

<sup>3</sup> *Uganda: A Country Study*, R.M. Byrnes, ed. (Washington, DC, Library of Congress, 1992), pp. 129-130; and Canadian International Development Agency, "Uganda: Facts at a Glance" (accessed May 31, 2002) <[www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/ebcountry.nst/VLUDocEn/Uganda-Factsataglance](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/ebcountry.nst/VLUDocEn/Uganda-Factsataglance)>.

<sup>4</sup> P. Briggs, *Guide to Uganda* (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press, Inc., 1994); and Uganda Bureau of Statistics, "Migration and Tourism Statistics" (accessed April 22, 2002) <[www.ubos.org/migration.html](http://www.ubos.org/migration.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> Biodiversity Support Program, *African Biodiversity: Foundation for the Future* (Beltsville, Maryland: World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and World Resources Institute, 1993); G. Ringer, "Sustainable Communities and Ecotourism: The Katonga Wetlands Conservation Project", *East Africa Wildlife Nature Watch*, 6:3 (1998), pp. 3-4; C. and T. Stuart, *Africa Vanishing Wildlife* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); N. Wheatley, *Where to See Birds in Uganda* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995); and J.G. Williams, N. Arlott, and R. Fennessy, *National Parks of East Africa* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1967).

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<sup>7</sup> D. Fossey, *Gorillas in The Mist* (New York: Penguin Publishers, 1973); and G. Schaller, *The Year of the Gorilla*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Uganda Community Tourism Association, "Community Tourism" (accessed April 17, 2002) <[www.visituganda.com/community/ucota.htm](http://www.visituganda.com/community/ucota.htm)>.

<sup>9</sup> Uganda Tourist Board, "A Word from the Marketing Manager" (accessed April 21, 2002) <[www.visituganda.com/utb/utb.htm](http://www.visituganda.com/utb/utb.htm)>; and World Bank, "World Development Indicators Database" (accessed April 21, 2002) <[devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPPProfile.asp?SelectedCountry=UGA&CCODE=UGA&CNAME=Uganda&PTYPE=CP](http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPPProfile.asp?SelectedCountry=UGA&CCODE=UGA&CNAME=Uganda&PTYPE=CP)>.

<sup>10</sup> "Country Report, Uganda" (accessed April 21, 2002) <[store.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=show\\_sample&product\\_id=50000205&country\\_id=UG](http://store.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=show_sample&product_id=50000205&country_id=UG)>; Global Environmental Facility, Uganda, *Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park Conservation Project Document* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1995); Government of Uganda, *Uganda Tourism Development: Tourism Rehabilitation and Development Planning for Uganda* (Kampala: GOU, 1999); and G. Ringer, *Destinations: Cultural Landscapes of Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> US Agency for International Development/Uganda, *Natural Resources and Tourism Management*, Project Concept Paper (Washington, DC: USAID, 1999); and World Tourism Organization, "Quality of

Tourism Development" (accessed April 21, 2002) <[www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org)>.

## Follow-up

**Uganda Wildlife Authority** [www.uwa.or.ug/](http://www.uwa.or.ug/)  
Maintained by the Uganda Wildlife Authority, this site has visitor information on National Parks and Wildlife Reserves, including booking gorilla permits, mountain climbing, wildlife viewing and a number of additional cultural and ecological activities in Uganda's protected areas.

**Visit Uganda** [www.visituganda.com](http://www.visituganda.com)  
The official international visitor website sponsored by the Uganda Tourism Board, Kampala.



