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Organic Farming to Help Communities Coexist with Mountain Gorillas, Rwanda



Rwanda is a global stronghold for the conservation of mountain gorillas. Rwanda's commitment to safeguarding the Volcanoes landscape not only supports the recovery of this critically important population of mountain gorillas but also demonstrates how conservation, ecotourism, and local community livelihoods can work together to protect biodiversity for future generations.

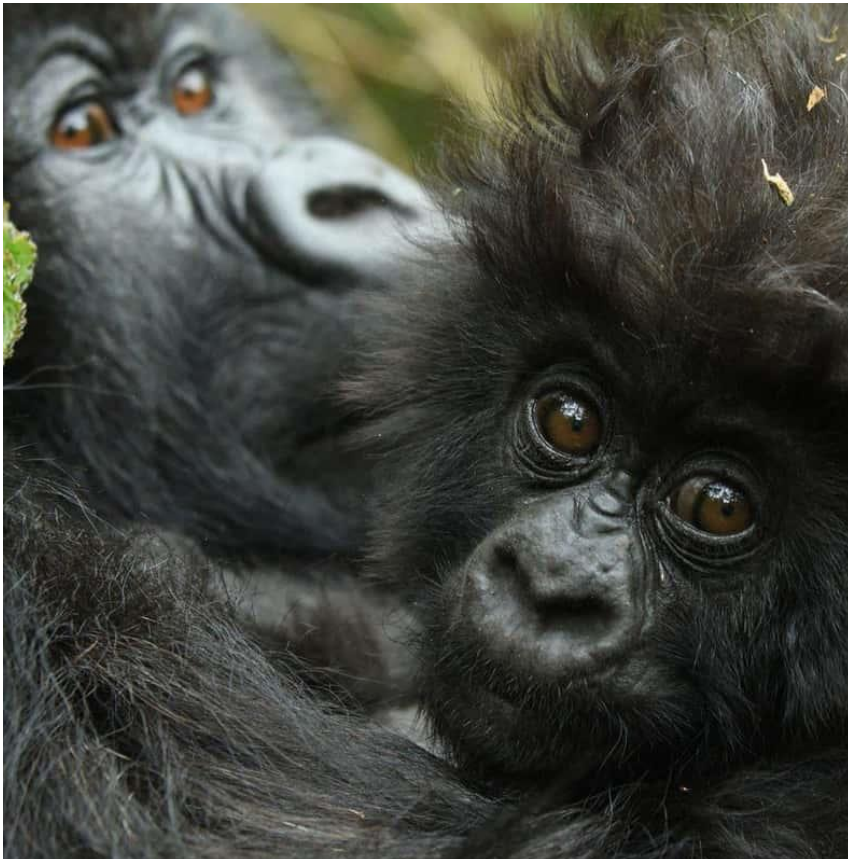
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Over the past four decades, the mountain gorilla population in the Virunga Massif—which includes Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park—has more than doubled, increasing from around 250 individuals in the



early 1980s to more than 600 today. This remarkable recovery is widely regarded as one of the world's greatest wildlife conservation success stories, driven by Rwanda's long-term investment in habitat



protection, anti-poaching efforts, scientific monitoring, sustainable tourism development, and community-based conservation.

In light of the increasing mountain gorilla population, Rwanda Development Board recently took the brave decision to restore some of the land taken from the Volcanoes National Park in the 1970s for agriculture, and restore it back to mountain gorilla habitat. This is being done with the full consent of local communities who have been farming this land for about 50 years. New homes and

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job training is being provided for local people who move out of this area, the great majority of whom are subsistence farmers (eating what they are able to grow), but clearly if there is less land for growing crops, there will be less food for people to eat unless yields per unit area of land can be increased. Unless this can be achieved there will inevitably be growing tensions and conflict between local communities and the mountain gorillas.

High Five Club Support: The High Five Club was approached by Ian Redmond OBE - one of the world's



leading great ape conservationists and a former colleague of Dian Fossey at Rwanda's Karisoke Research Center in Volcanoes National Park - to introduce us to Obed Niyitegeka, a gifted and passionate member of the local community living in the foothills of Volcanoes National Park. Ian is also a member of the High Five Club 😊

Obed, a recent graduate of Musanze College in Rwanda, was keen to demonstrate to his community the potential of new conservation farming methods and the use of organic fertilisers to restore soils and make each of their fields produce higher yields. To implement this initiative in his community Obed has partnered

with local community-based organisation **Muhisimbi, the Voice of Youth in Conservation** which was founded by another remarkable local man called Emmanuel Harerimana, a gorilla guide who grew up in a poaching community and now devotes his energies to helping his community and the mountain gorillas.



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The initiative Obed is pioneering aims to support communities displaced by the park restoration, helping them adjust to the reduction in land available for food production by increasing crop yields through organic farming methods, thereby improving their standard of living and cementing their positive attitude to gorilla conservation still further. There will also be ecological benefits from restoring lost forests, because streams that used to flow all year round now tend to dry up in the dry season; with forest restoration, it is likely that more rainwater will be stored in the forest to be slowly released in periods of low rainfall.

A critical component of this initiative was the construction of a seed store, built on the small plot of land the project had already purchased. The seed store provides a cool, dry storage facility to prevent the seed potatoes that the local communities grow from spoiling on harvest. The potatoes need to be harvested before the



dry (hot) season to avoid them being damaged when left in the fields, as previously, because of a lack of suitable storage facilities. Volcanic soil is not resistant to the dry season, and causes the soil to look like ash. Each year much of the community's crops had been lost in this way, hence reducing their crop yield still further.

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High Five Club joined hands with the project to provide the seed funding (no pun intended!) needed (£2,000) towards the construction of a secure and weatherproof Community Seed Store.



On completion of the seed store Obed told us *"We are becoming a seeds multiplier, to help the community get good seeds to help them grow enough food for their families and to sell some to get some money to help them in their daily life."*

"We can now safely store our harvest and prevent the heavy post-harvest losses we suffered last season. This storehouse will now protect farmers' crops,

increase food security, and directly improve livelihoods in our area".



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This is of course such very good news for both for the community and the mountain gorillas that reside in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park ☺ It means we are well on the

way to improving food security in the communities near Volcanoes National Park, thereby removing the need to enter the park to hunt or cut bamboo and trees.

For more information contact Dr Cheryl Mvula on Cheryl@highfiveclub.co.uk