



NEWS

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Hope for the Virunga mountain gorillas

Census confirms increase in population of the critically endangered Virunga mountain gorillas

The analysis of a census conducted in March and April 2010 in the Virunga Massif by an international team of conservation groups and researchers, including Martha Robbins of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, confirms a 26.3 % increase in the population of mountain gorillas, *Gorilla beringei beringei*, in this area over the last seven years, with a 3.7 % annual growth rate. When the census was conducted, there were a total of 480 mountain gorillas, in 36 groups along with 14 solitary silverback males in the Virunga Massif. Of the 480 mountain gorillas, 352 (73%) are habituated (349 in groups and three solitary males) and 128 are unhabituated (117 in groups and 11 solitary males). The last census conducted in the Virunga Massif was in 2003, when the population was estimated at 380 individuals.

The Virunga Massif includes three contiguous national parks spanning the Virunga Volcanoes on the border of three countries: Parc National des Virunga in DRC, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda. The only other location where mountain gorillas exist is Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. Along with the 302 mountain gorillas censused in 2006 in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and four orphaned mountain gorillas in a sanctuary in DRC, the total known world population is 786 individuals.

“The increase in the number of gorillas is remarkable. Through intensive, coordinated efforts of the park services and conservation groups, the gorilla population has been able to grow over the past few decades despite many threats to their survival”, states primatologist Martha Robbins of the Department of Prima-



Image 1: Virunga mountain gorilla, silverback
(Credit: Martha M. Robbins, MPI-EVA)

tology at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig (Germany): “Mountain gorillas are a rare case of a critically endangered primate increasing in numbers, rather than declining. However, this will only continue through the sustained efforts and commitment of conservationists and scientists working together.”

Robbins adds: “From a scientific standpoint, this census is a wonderful example of how we can combine field work with laboratory work to answer questions relevant to conservationists as well as more pure research questions. Firstly, we used fecal samples collected from the night nests of the gorillas to create individual genotypes of the unhabituated gorillas. This enabled us to ensure that we weren't counting any groups or individual gorillas more than once and therefore provide a more precise estimate of the number of gorillas than would have been possible with only the field component of the study. Secondly, we'll use the results of the population-wide genetic analysis to address questions concerning the dispersal patterns of gorillas and the genetic diversity of this small, critically endangered population. In collaboration with the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin, we'll also conduct analysis of the fecal samples to understand the prevalence of pathogens. The census required a massive amount of effort, but provides us with some of the most indepth sampling of an entire population.”

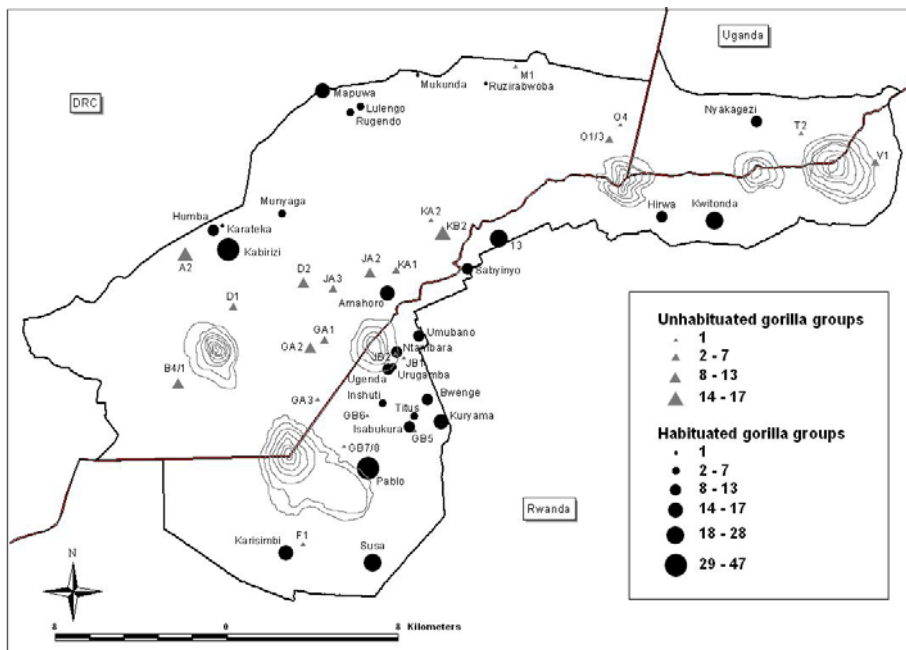


Image 2: Virunga mountain gorilla census groups (Credit: International Gorilla Conservation Programme)

Further details and results of the health screen, population structure, genetic composition, mountain gorilla distribution, population dynamics, and human disturbance will be available when the full report is complete in 2011.

The 2010 Virunga Massif mountain gorilla census was conducted by the protected area authorities in the D.R. Congo, Rwanda and Uganda: l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature, the Rwanda Development Board and the Uganda Wildlife Authority. The census was supported by the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (a coalition of the African Wildlife Foundation, World Wide Fund for Nature,

and Fauna & Flora International), the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund – International and the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project. The census was funded by WWF-Sweden, Fair Play Foundation, and the Netherlands Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS) through the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration.

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