

Veterinary Legacy

If you enjoyed James Herriot's tales, you will cherish these stories about veterinarians and their passion for serving animals and people in an ever-changing veterinary profession.

316,725

Tuesday, September 27, 2011

A Veterinary Student's Summer Experience with Mountain Gorillas in Africa

Guest Blog by Matt Marinkovich, Cornell Class of 2014
Posted September 27, 2011

I sometimes tell veterinary students that the most important course they will take in their first year is not at their college, but what they decide to do during the summer. Especially in today's competitive job environment, students have an invaluable opportunity to experience the real world and learn from people whose life stories may open up new prospects for career opportunities. Matt Marinkovich spent summer 2011 pursuing his career goal in conservation medicine in Africa. This is his story.

Donald F. Smith

With a desire to see what role veterinary medicine plays in modern-day conservation, I traveled to East Africa and spent seven weeks with the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project (MGVP). For 25 years, this program has sought to protect the world's remaining 750 mountain gorillas that live in Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Mountain gorillas are currently the only great ape with increasing population numbers, and their success is owed in large part to the work of the MGVP. Veterinarians with the MGVP understand that sustainable conservation will only be effective if they work closely with people in the communities that surround the gorilla habitat. Monitoring disease outbreaks, caring for orphan gorillas, and removing poachers' snares require the support of the indigenous populations because the efforts of the MGVP do not end at the boundaries of the national parks where the apes live. By adopting a "One Health" approach, they have also launched programs that address human health and livestock herds as

well as protection for the great apes.

I learned many lessons this summer, but one stands out: *conservation is about communities*. Conservation in the developing world has often failed in

Pages

- [Home](#)
- [Interviews with Veterinarians](#)

Donald F. Smith D.V.M.



Author

Donald F. Smith

Donald F. Smith, Professor of Surgery and Dean Emeritus at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.
dfs6@cornell.edu.
www.vet.cornell.edu/legacy;

[View my complete profile](#)

Popular Posts

[Letters of Recommendation for Veterinary Students](#)

By Donald F. Smith, Cornell University Posted April 19th, 2011. This blog addresses recommendation letters, both for students preparing the...



Dr. Koji Yasuda: Connecting Veterinary Medicine in Japan and America

Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) Posted May 30, 2011 CAREERS FOR VETERINARIANS Series When Koji Yasuda received his DVM from Cornel...

the past because it did not incorporate members of the local community in efforts that can only be sustainable by their commitment and long term practices. The people in the local communities surrounding the national parks now realize that the only mountain gorillas alive today are in their own backyard. They recognize that their national parks have a resource that is unique in the world and they now stand with the MGVP to counter poaching, and to support the disease surveillance and treatment work of the veterinary staff.



During the summer, I witnessed the bravery of the conservationists and rangers working in Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Over 140 rangers have lost their lives since 1996, protecting the broad biodiversity and pristine habitats of Virungas. When one Congolese conservationist was asked how he is able to work in these conflict-ridden areas, he replied simply, *"When I am in rebel territory, I am a rebel, and when I am on government lands, I stand with them."* Being around these men and women, who are nothing short of heroes, was humbling and a true inspiration.

In early June, I attended the "Gorillas Across Africa" inaugural conference in Uganda that brought together 40 researchers, conservationists, and veterinarians who work to protect the various gorilla species and subspecies throughout Africa. I was struck by the incredible diversity of nations represented. These passionate conservationists from all over Africa came together for the collective purpose of protecting vital gorilla habitats in their countries and beyond.



Some of attendees at the "Gorillas Across Africa" conference in Uganda. Matt Marinkovich is second from left in back row. (Photo @ Martha Robbins)

Though there were representatives from many of the large international conservation organizations like the Wildlife Conservation Society, Max Planck Institute, and San Diego Zoological Society, 75% of the attendees were Africans. This testifies to the critical role that indigenous communities play in effective conservation. The phrase "capacity building" is popular in conservation literature, and the idea encourages organizations to develop skills within the local communities so that the work can be handed over to

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: African-American Veterinarians at Cornell 1910-1920

Posted February 8, 2014 in honor of Black History Month Readers are encouraged to see original story at www.veritasdvmblog.com Guest ...



Vivien Thomas and Canine Surgery

by Donald F. Smith, Cornell University August 25, 2012 When I

lecture on the topic of One Health, I sometimes tell the story of the first...



A Dual DVM/MD Program is Established in Montreal, Canada

By Donald F. Smith, Cornell

University Posted April 4, 2014

See also <https://www.veritasdvmblog.com/2014/04/a-dual-dvm-md-program-established-in-montreal/>

Subscribe To Veterinary Legacy

 Posts

 Comments

Posts By Topic

- [Women in Veterinary Medicine](#) (27)
- [African American Veterinarians](#) (16)
- [Black History Month](#) (8)
- [Careers for Veterinarians](#) (8)
- [Water for Elephants](#) (6)
- [Tuskegee Airmen](#) (5)

Scheduled and Recent Events:

Scheduled:

ASSOCIATION OF THE AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL COLLEGES annual meeting (Washington, DC), March 5, 2016. Co-presenter, Julie Kumble

Louisiana State University, leadership workshop. Co-presenter Julie Kumble, April 1, 2016

Auburn University, leadership workshop, Co-presenter, Julie Kumble, Fall 2016

Lincoln Memorial University, leadership workshop, Co-presenter, Julie Kumble, November 2016

them when the time is right. It was amazing to see the theory of “capacity building” not only in action, but bearing incredible fruit in conservation across Africa. For example, of the 13 veterinarians in the MGVP, only one expatriate is on the ground full time – the other veterinarians are all African.

Dr. Jan Ramer is MGVP’s Regional Veterinary Manager and is ultimately in charge of the health of all mountain gorillas alive today. She works tirelessly with a group of highly skilled great ape veterinarians in each of the three countries where the mountain gorillas live, ensuring that this species has the optimal opportunity to flourish.



Matt Marinkovich examining an anesthetized gorilla.

The summer experience left me optimistic about the state of conservation for the mountain gorillas, and for African wildlife in general. Continuing challenges remain, but having witnessed the passionate work of sustainable organizations on the ground, especially MGVP, I am very hopeful for the future of conservation in the developing world.

The experience has helped to show me what it is like to be a veterinarian on the front lines of species conservation, and it has fueled my passion for the field of conservation medicine even more. My dream to pursue a career in this field is now reinforced by a realistic and practical understanding of the challenges in modern-day conservation. I hope someday to have the chance to work face-to-face with these incredible gorillas once again.

I acknowledge and extend my gratitude to the Expanding Horizons Program at the Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine for the generous financial grant that made this trip possible. (Photos above by author, except group picture provided by Martha Robbins). Matt Marinkovich.

Posted by Donald F. Smith at 5:47 AM



Labels: [Capacity Building](#), [Conservation Medicine](#), [Dr. Jan Ramer](#), [Expanding Horizons](#), [Matt Marinkovich](#), [Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project](#), [Summer Experiences for Veterinary Students](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Books and Selected Publications

- PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS. THE VISION AND IMPACT OF MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF THE AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AT THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY (1966-2016). Published by Donning Press 2016
- LEADERS OF THE PACK. Co-author Julie Kumble. Anticipated February 2017
- Changing the Face of Veterinary Medicine: Research and Clinical Developments at AAVMC Institutions, coauthored with Melena Hagstrom. J Vet Med Educ 2015 42(5) 441-458.
- Lessons of History. J Vet Med Educ 2013 40(1) 2-11.
- 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America: Part 4, US Veterinary Colleges in 2011 and the Distribution of their Graduates. J Vet Med Educ 2011 38 (4) 338-348. Co-authored with Melissa S. Fenn.
- 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America: Part 3, 1970-2000. J Vet Med Educ 2011 38 (3) 211-227.
- One Health: A 21st Century "Back to the Future". Clinician's Brief July 2011, Vol 9, No 7, 41-44.
- 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America: Part 2: 1940-1970. J Vet Med Educ 2011 38(1) 84-99.
- 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America. J Vet Med Educ 2010 37(4) 317-327

Search This Blog

Archive

▶ [2016](#) (6)

▶ [2015](#) (18)

▶ [2014](#) (38)

▶ [2013](#) (3)

▶ [2012](#) (27)

▼ [2011](#) (54)

▶ [December](#) (5)

▶ [November](#) (3)

▶ [October](#) (3)

▼ [September](#) (2)

A Veterinary Student's Summer Experience with Moun...

[Applying to Veterinary College: Your Essay or Pers...](#)

▶ [August](#) (1)

▶ [July](#) (4)

- ▶ [June](#) (1)
- ▶ [May](#) (6)
- ▶ [April](#) (5)
- ▶ [March](#) (3)
- ▶ [February](#) (8)
- ▶ [January](#) (13)
- ▶ [2010](#) (20)

 [Veterinary Legacy - Blogged](#)

Copyright Donald F. Smith D.V.M. 2010. Simple theme. Powered by [Blogger](#).