

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

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

Editor's Note: The June 8th weekend edition of *The Wall Street Journal* carries a full-page story titled, **Tracking Mountain Gorillas in Uganda**. Author Robin Kawakami describes how she “braved safari ants and stinging nettles to track mountain gorillas in their native habitat in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in southwestern Uganda” where she and her co-visitors, accompanied by “men with machetes and AK-47s” tracked down and saw the members of one of the Rushegura clan.¹

Two years ago, veterinary student Matt Marinkovich spent his summer with the mountain gorillas as he pursued his career goal in conservation medicine. This is a reprinted story of his experiences published September 27, 2011 at www.veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com.²

Donald F. Smith

By Matt Marinkovich (Guest Author)

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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 local 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.



Silverback mountain gorilla from the Bwenge group.
(Photo by the author, 2011)



Juvenile Mountain gorilla from the Bwenge group.
(Photo by the author, 2011)

I learned many lessons this summer, but one stands out: *conservation is about communities*. Conservation in the developing world has often failed in 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 [2011], 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.

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 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.³ 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.



*Some of the attendees at the "Gorilla Across Africa" conference in Uganda, 2011.
The author is second from the left in the back row.*

(Photo by Martha Robbins, 2011)



Author examining an anesthetized gorilla.⁴

(Photo by the author, 2011)

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.

¹Kawakami, Robin. Tracking mountain gorillas in Uganda. The Wall Street Journal. June 7, 2013.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324866904578515373285774986.html>

² Marinkovich, Matt. A Veterinary Student's Summer Experience with Mountain Gorillas in Africa. *Veterinary Legacy*. September 27, 2011. <http://veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com/2011/09/veterinary-students-summer-experience.html>

³ Author's update: Dr. Jan Ramer is not the in-country clinician at the present time.

⁴ Genetically, humans and gorillas are so similar that when working with the gorillas, veterinarians and caregivers wear protective masks to ensure the safety of both species. While administering veterinary care to individuals may be important, it is even more important that human diseases are not introduced into a potentially susceptible gorilla population.

KEYWORDS:

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TOPICS:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Matt Marinkovich is a member of the Cornell University DVM Class of 2014.