

Yes, But Is It Good for the Gorillas?

I first visited the mountain gorillas in 2016. I flew for over 20 hours and drove for 4 days across Rwanda so that I and seven other “gorilla trekkers” could spend the allotted one hour with the 14-member *Hirwa* gorilla family in Volcanoes National Park. Soon after we reached them, while I was still trying to absorb the spectacularness of it all, two infants ran past me, each dragging an open hand across my shins, just as we might absentmindedly run our hands along the slats of a picket fence. A bit later an adolescent came up, tapped my left side three times with the back of his hand, and continued on.

A person rarely has this kind of contact with one gorilla, much less three. I had been ordained or, at the very least, chosen. In all, I was lightly touched by three of them, deeply touched by all of them and profoundly changed by the experience. It was among the most joyful events of my life.



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To the extent people know of the mountain gorillas, with whom we share approximately 98 percent of our DNA, it is due to the remarkable work of Dian Fosse, brought to us via the book and movie *Gorillas in the Mist*. Dr. Fosse saved the mountain gorillas from being poached into extinction. She believed that without immediate and decisive action, there would be nothing left to save. As recounted on the [Dian Fosse Gorilla Fund](#)

[International](#) site, she fought poachers through unorthodox means, which she referred to as “active conservation.” This included wearing masks to scare poachers, burning snares and, at times, taking on poachers directly, forcing confrontation.

The park wardens were ill-equipped and, as a last resort, Dr. Fosse bought them boots and uniforms, provided food and paid them additional wages to encourage them to more actively enforce anti-poaching laws. From this came the first anti-poaching patrols, whose job it was—and remains—to protect the gorillas.

After 18 years with the gorillas, Dr. Fosse was murdered in her cabin on December 27, 1985 by machete strikes to her face and head. She was 53 years old and the crime remains unsolved.

Mountain gorillas live in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They do not exist anywhere else on the planet. By 1981, poachers had reduced the number of mountain gorillas to an estimated low of 254. As of 2018’s count, there are more than 1,000. If not for Dr. Fosse, they would likely not exist at all. And she would be pleased to know that the “critically endangered” mountain gorillas were reclassified in 2018 as “endangered” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

We discovered the mountain gorillas on October 17, 1902. They had likely discovered us long before, but apparently saw no need to impose themselves. We, on the other hand, and specifically, Captain von Beringe of the German army, welcomed the mountain gorillas into our awareness by murdering two of them, which he sent to the Natural History Museum in Berlin to be “examined and documented,” a purpose that undoubtedly held little consolation for the slaughtered gorillas or their families.

The mountain gorillas are herbivores, unaggressive, if not shy, and have no need or use for anything we could possibly offer. It is no mean feat to find them, and the trackers who locate each gorilla family on the mountain as they move to a new location every day are staggeringly adept. Uganda's mountain gorillas live in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, which is aptly named; making one's way through it requires vast knowledge and experience, and a great facility with well-honed machetes.



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Each morning, the trackers find and relay each gorilla family's non-GPS-derived forest coordinates so the trekker guides know where to find them. I don't know how they are able to describe where each gorilla family has settled for the day, but they are.

Before heading out with our guides, we were taught some basic defensive mountain gorilla-watching maneuvers, which included avoiding direct eye contact and not running from them. (For the record, no clear instruction was provided on what it is we should do while we're not locking eyes and not fleeing from these massive beings.) We rehearsed a few gorilla vocalizations, and off we went.

We reached our assigned gorilla family after hiking for roughly an hour. Trekkers are permitted to spend no more than one hour with them. The limit is intended to manage the gorillas' expectations (and ours) and to keep their stress levels down. The hour was brief, but sensational. I liken the experience to having kids; people can tell you about it all they want but experiencing it yourself is the only way to truly take it in.

The countries in which they live take great pride in their mountain gorillas. Telling otherwise somber customs agents the purpose of your visit seems to put you in a different category; "ahhh, the gorillas, yes." They are ubiquitous in the countries' art, culture and commerce. They are revered.

The industry catering to gorilla trekkers generates considerable revenue for Rwanda, Uganda and DRC. In Rwanda, for example, permits are now \$1,500 per trek; some 64 permits are available each day and are sold out months in advance. A multitude of lodges exist for no reason other than to accommodate gorilla trekkers from all over the world. Related services include guides who lead each group, porters who carry one's belongings up the mountain—or the trekker themselves, by stretcher, should the need arise, and it does—rangers with AK-47's who accompany each group to scare off wayward animals, and carvers of the ornate walking sticks you are handed at the outset of the trek and can purchase upon your return.



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Gorilla tchotchkes are everywhere in each of the countries, much like touristy Statues of Liberty and Empire State Buildings are in ours.

Yes, but is it good for the gorillas? My own unbounded joy and personal epiphanies aside, I cannot help thinking that maybe we should be leaving them alone. They don't

seem at all put out by our visits and, if they were, could easily avoid the daily one-hour tourist grind by retreating into unreachable territory. Or they could glare and start to rise, which would surely cause some number of us to lock eyes, turn and flee, instructions be damned. Guides speculate that the gorillas perhaps even enjoy “showing off” for visitors, which seems unlikely to me, but at least we’re not forcing animals into showing off in the degrading and humiliating ways we seem to find enormously amusing.



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From a non-human animal’s perspective, there is no upside to teaching gorillas or any other wild animal to trust humans. No good ever comes of it, particularly for the animal. We habituate the mountain gorillas—a years-long process of getting them to feel comfortable with our presence—not because it’s good for them, but because it’s good for us. I’m mindful that the gorilla trekking industry provides the funding and awareness that is so critical to their survival. But they only need saving because we have conducted ourselves so appallingly, acting as if they were here for us, to capture, kill, stuff or eat. Our disrespect knows no bounds – we sever hands to make ashtrays. Yes, to make gorilla-hand ashtrays. As a friend recently put it

while discussing our society’s relationship to animals and why she no longer eats them— who do we think we are?

Gorilla trekking also reinforces the notion that animals are here for our entertainment. We invade, rattle and destroy their world for our own pleasure. Whether it’s riding or gawking at them in a circus or zoo, or making them into coats or ashtrays, or being there as props in a T.V. commercial, if it entertains us the impact on the animals is of no concern. We proceed as though they are ours to do with as we please, no matter the toll on them.

And the notion that animals are here for our use and enjoyment is deadly on an almost unimaginable level. We torture, kill and eat 9 billion animals annually in the US. Worldwide, it’s 60 billion. Each one condemned to live an utterly miserable life and even worse death. If we could somehow figure out how to exploit them in some other more beneficial (for us) manner, we wouldn’t be eating them.

The point is, animals are not here for us any more than we’re here for them. Any other perspective reinforces the deeply ingrained but tragic conviction that they are here for us. There are countless businesses that only exist because we grant ourselves license to degrade, abuse, kidnap and cage animals. We enjoy circus acts with all the awful consequences for their “stars;” swim with dolphins who have been separated from their pods as babies and stressed beyond measure; ride elephants also ripped from their mothers in their babyhood and trained using bull hooks and other torturous methods to make them submit to us; bet on which traumatized horse or dog is the fastest of them all; patronize SeaWorld attractions, where whales that would swim up to 140



Photo courtesy of by Jo-Anne McArthur/We Animals Media

miles per day in the wild are confined in veritable bathtubs for decades; take “big cat selfies” with cubs who are discarded when they are no longer cute or manageable enough to be drugged into a stupor and posed for a picture. And then there are zoos, institutions for which we should be deeply, deeply ashamed. None of it is good for the animals.

So what’s an aspiring trekker to do? Gorilla trekking is an anomaly because it is good for the gorillas. To wit, a boycott would bring awful consequences for the animals and those who depend on them for their subsistence. And if we impose on them for one hour a day we do at least leave them be for the other 23. On balance, trekking is good for them.

But you can’t say the same for most of the experiences we compel animals to suffer through.

Just who *do* we think we are?