



# WELCOME TO THE ELLEN DEGENERES CAMPUS OF THE DIAN FOSSEY GORILLA FUND

## THE ELLEN CAMPUS STORY

For 55 years, the Fossey Fund has been working to help conserve wild gorilla populations and support the people who share gorillas' forest home. It all started with two tents that Dian Fossey erected in the forest in 1967. From there, the organization grew over the years, from one person to a staff of more than 300. Until recently, the Fossey Fund worked out of a rented space with only a single classroom and a kitchen converted into a laboratory, far from the gorilla habitat and surrounding communities. The organization needed a home that could support a growing team and workload. In 2017, as the Fossey Fund celebrated its 50th anniversary, leaders made a strategic decision to move forward on an ambitious, 20-year dream to create a purpose-built facility in Rwanda aimed at accelerating science and conservation work.

Within months of this decision, the Fossey Fund received a lead gift from global icon Ellen DeGeneres and her wife, Portia de Rossi. Since that time, thousands of donors, large and small, have supported the project and helped to create a state-of-the-art research and learning facility – the Fossey Fund's first permanent home in Rwanda. The Ellen DeGeneres Campus of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund opened its doors in February 2022.

The Ellen Campus is the vision of the award-winning [MASS Design Group](#) and has been named one of [Africa's 10 most anticipated architectural projects](#) and featured on [60 Minutes](#) and in [Architectural Digest](#).



We've created a space to engage the many stakeholders in conservation—students, scientists, tourists, conservation partners, community members—to advance our collective goal of saving gorillas and more broadly, the planet. It is our hope that people who visit the Ellen DeGeneres Campus will leave inspired to make a difference, just as Dian Fossey did.

- Dr. Tara Stoinski, president, CEO and chief scientist, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund



Dian Fossey has always been a hero of mine, and so it's been the honor of a lifetime to support this project. To see my name alongside hers on the walls of this beautiful campus, and to know I'm doing my part to protect endangered gorillas and continue Dian's legacy, is simply amazing.

- Ellen DeGeneres

## CAMPUS DESIGN

The Fossey Fund's motto is Helping People, Saving Gorillas because for gorillas to thrive, people must thrive as well. The \$15 million Ellen Campus embodies this mission through employing over 2,400 local community members in the construction process, using locally sourced materials and supplies, including green design elements such as rainwater harvesting, green roofs, and a constructed wetland for wastewater treatment, and reforesting former agricultural land with more than 250,000 native plants. Of the project total, construction represented a more than \$13.4 million investment in the Rwandan economy.

The multi-acre, eco-friendly facility adjacent to the Volcanoes National Park includes three main buildings – the Sandy and Harold Price Research Center, the Cindy Broder Conservation Gallery and the Rob and Melani Walton Education Center – as well as housing for visiting students and researchers. Support from numerous generous donors contributed to the project, including actor and conservationist Leonardo DiCaprio, who supported the creation of a 360-degree theater and computer lab.

The Cindy Broder Conservation Gallery is the most public facing building on the campus and contains an interactive, educational exhibit. Designed to tell the story of mountain gorilla research and conservation from Fossey's time to modern day, it includes original, never-before-displayed artifacts from Dian Fossey's almost two decades of living among the gorillas and stunning visual effects through a 360-degree immersive experience. It also includes augmented and virtual reality opportunities to learn more about the conservation success of mountain gorillas.

Science is at the core of the Fossey Fund's work. The Sandy and Harold Price Research Center is a state-of-the-art facility aimed at advancing research in areas like genetics, physiology and paleontology. The five-fold increase in lab space provides new opportunities to work with scientific collaborators and students and provide more training opportunities to young African conservationists.



The campus demonstrates how new infrastructure can catalyze conservation and species protection. When new buildings, landscapes, and institutions are conceived in the way that the Fossey Fund and Ellen DeGeneres have imagined – to have as much impact as possible – reciprocal opportunities are created. For this campus, that meant the prioritization of local labor, customized fabrication of furniture and fittings created by Rwandan artisans, and environmental stewardship planning that aligns with the goals of conservation and habitat protection. The campus will do more than inspire a generation of conservation activists in Rwanda, it will model new ways for global conservationists to bind ecosystems and communities in support of one another.

- Michael Murphy, founding principal and executive director of MASS Design Group

The Rob and Melani Walton Education Center provides expanded classroom space, a science library and computer lab – all aimed at enhancing teaching opportunities with local and international universities and enabling the Fossey Fund to host conferences, seminars and trainings.

But the educational opportunities extend beyond the classroom – indeed, the whole Ellen Campus serves as an educational tool. An extensive “living laboratory” on the former agricultural site includes more than 250,000 native plants dispersed across the campus and Cleveland Metropark Zoo Interpretive Trails, creating a regenerative landscape bringing biodiversity back to this former agricultural space and providing unique educational and research opportunities.

The Ellen Campus is also designed to support Rwanda’s ecotourism sector. Gorilla tourism, managed by the Rwandan government, plays a critical role in providing revenue for the park as well as supporting local communities through employment and revenue sharing. The campus’ exhibit, café, gift shop and other amenities provide an unique experience for local and international tourists alike. Within a few months of opening, the Ellen Campus has hosted more than 5,000 visitors, including almost 2,000 primary and secondary school students and teachers from nearby schools.

## LOCALLY SOURCED MATERIALS LIMIT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

### DESIGN INSPIRATION

The campus design takes inspiration from Dian Fossey’s original tent nestled in the forest at the Karisoke Research Center more than 50 years ago. From above, the building’s green roofs blend into the surrounding landscape context. The building footprints integrate seamlessly into the landscape topography, encouraging a natural flow from interior spaces to the exterior through a network of covered patios and connected paths, all taking advantage of the surrounding volcanoes. The main buildings contain different scales of interior and exterior gathering spaces, in response to the diversity of programs and inspired by the campfire gatherings at the original Karisoke Research Center.

The Ellen Campus utilizes locally sourced materials to embody the project’s mission to conserve and limit its impact on the environment, as well as to enable it to blend seamlessly into its natural surroundings. For example, regionally sourced pinewood adds warmth and texture to the exterior soffit and interior ceilings of the buildings. The student housing roofs use clay tiles, while native plant species are used on the main campus green roofs to enhance biodiversity, sequester carbon, and increase thermal and acoustic performance. The green roofs also provide research opportunities to study key ecological processes like pollination or reforestation.

## WOMEN AND THE ELLEN CAMPUS



From Dian Fossey and her contemporaries Jane Goodall and Birute Galdikas to the Ellen Campus today, women have played an outsized role in the study and protection of primates and their biodiverse habitats.

The Fossey Fund has been woman-led over its 55-year history, and the campus project brought together a strong partnership between female leaders at the Fossey Fund, The Ellen Fund, MASS Design Group, general contractor MASS. Build to focus on one of several impact goals of the project – equity.

Uniquely, women made up about a quarter of the project leadership and its workforce. Workers received training in trades that will continue to provide livelihoods for them and their families. Women on the construction crew also built relationships, pooled resources and strengthened their financial security. They formed a cooperative and contributed to a “rainy day fund” for any member to draw upon. Each female worker also left the project with personal savings.

Now complete, the Ellen Campus is used to recruit, educate and train the next generation of African conservationists, with a strong focus on women. It is a case study in how women in leadership roles can provide opportunities for other women, and should be used as a model in conservation going forward.

As an extension of the Volcanoes National Park, the landscape design showcases many of the microenvironments found in the park – including wetlands, meadows, and forests of bamboo, hagenia and mixed trees. As part of the project’s commitment to the regeneration of the land, crews propagated and planted hundreds of thousands of native plants representing 120 species as a reforestation research site that might inform also future park expansion.

The design also prioritizes water conservation by harvesting rainwater from building roofs for reuse including to flush toilets. Effluent wastewater is treated naturally in a constructed wetland, featuring a series of ponds that filter and clean the water as it soaks back into the ground. The system, the first and only of its kind in Rwanda, is gravity fed, reducing overall energy use.

The landscape, water systems, and sustainability methods serve as an educational model for students and visitors motivated by conservation, and as a research demonstration for reforestation efforts. Visitors can explore and experience first hand the work of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. The Gorilla Trail leads visitors through a day in the life of a mountain gorilla, the Biodiversity Trail provides research opportunities to monitor the evolution of different plants and the potential effects of climate change, and a final trail near the wetlands educates visitors about the naturalized wastewater treatment system.

## CAMPUS BY THE NUMBERS

**24%**  
FEMALE  
LEADERSHIP

**4,100 M2**  
BUILDING  
FOOTPRINT

**\$15 MILLION**  
TOTAL  
COST

**2400**  
CONSTRUCTION  
JOBS

**23%**  
FEMALE CONSTRUCTION  
WORKFORCE

**12**  
ACRES

**55 YEARS**  
ON-THE-GROUND  
GORILLA CONSERVATION

**99%**  
RWANDAN  
WORKERS

**250,000** NATIVE PLANTS  
FROM 120 SPECIES

**5,000+** VISITORS SO FAR, INCLUDING  
2,000 LOCAL STUDENTS

## ENGINEERING FOR TECTONIC ACTIVITY

The campus was built adjacent to the Virunga Mountains, a chain of volcanoes formed by the Great Rift Valley. The tectonic activity led to this area being among the most seismically hazardous in sub-Saharan Africa. The ground below the buildings formed through volcanic activity and contains large volcanic stones. MASS’s Rwanda-based engineering team developed a robust structural solution to respond to this context. The seismic forces were managed through engineered ductile reinforced concrete cores. The excavated volcanic stones, often considered a waste product, are used as material within the campus, reducing waste and the need for new quarried material.

Crushed volcanic stone is used as grout for the stone walls and gravel for the interpretive trails across the campus. Volcanic stone is also used in the exterior building cladding.

## CREATING LOCAL IMPACT

The Ellen Campus project promoted social, environmental, and economic impact through the construction process. Trainings conducted onsite included topics ranging from the importance of conservation to health and safety practices during a pandemic to establishing saving and loans programs. In partnership with the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the Integrated Polytechnic Regional College (IPRC) Musanze, MASS.Build, the general contractor, implemented a construction training program for Rwandans in the fields of masonry; carpentry; steel-fixing; health, safety, and environment; electrical; green roof installation; and plumbing. More than 500 individuals received certification as part of this initiative, providing them with employment skills useful long after the project completion.

All of the campus furniture was designed by MASS.Made and made in Rwanda by artisans and design cooperatives. Over 1,600 were produced – from tables, desks, chairs, stools, benches, shelves, credenzas, and beds – to accessories including pendant lights, rugs, pillows, handles, and hooks. The furniture upholds the same values as the buildings: to maximize high-quality local production that celebrates craft, leverages regional materials, reduces carbon footprint, and contributes to the local economy. MASS.Made also found the opportunity to embed design details that drew inspiration from the history and work of the Fossey Fund, including batik throw pillows that feature nose print patterns of seven gorillas featured in the exhibition.

## PROJECT TEAM

---

**CLIENT:** The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund

**ARCHITECT:** MASS Design Group

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:** TenxTen Studio and MASS Design Group

**CIVIL ENGINEERS:** MASS Design Group and Oak Consulting Group

**STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:** MASS Design Group

**M&P ENGINEERS:** MASS Design Group

**ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS:** BuroHappold Engineering

**ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING:** Transsolar

**CONSTRUCTION:** MASS.Build, MASS Design Group

**CONSTRUCTED WETLAND CONSULTANTS:** Sherwood Design Engineers, Jacques Nsengiyumva

**FURNITURE DESIGN & FABRICATION:** MASS.Made, MASS Design Group

**EXHIBIT & WAYFINDING DESIGN:** Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. MASS Design Group

**EXHIBIT FABRICATION:** Formula D Interactive

**IMMERSIVE THEATER, AUGMENTED REALITY AND VIRTUAL REALITY:** HabitatXR

**ICT & SECURITY:** Techno Engineering Company

**WAYFINDING & SIGNAGE:** MASS Design Group

**MEDIA:** MASS Design Group

## PARTNERS

---

**AZIZI LIFE**  
**CLEVELAND METROPARKS ZOO**  
**FALCON'S CREATIVE GROUP**  
**FOOD AND STUFF**  
**FORMULA D**

**HABITAT XR**  
**INTERNET OF ELEPHANTS**  
**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY**  
**FOOD AND STUFF**  
**COLUMBUS ZOO**

**BOB CAMPBELL PAPERS, SPECIAL AND AREA**  
**STUDIES COLLECTIONS, GEORGE A. SMATHERS**  
**LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA**





# MOUNTAIN GORILLAS: A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

Mountain gorillas are rebounding from the brink of extinction. They are one of the planet's few conservation success stories. But daily threats remain, including disease, human encroachment, climate change and poaching. That's why the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund is on the ground, in the forest, every single day, studying and protecting these magnificent creatures. The Fossey Fund also works to protect the critically endangered Grauer's gorillas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and strives to improve the human communities near the gorilla habitat through food and water security, education and livelihood initiatives.

## SUCCESS IS FRAGILE, AND DAILY THREATS REMAIN

The Fossey Fund works hand-in-hand with the governments of Rwanda and the DRC, and with other local partners, to find cross-border solutions to the problems that affect not just gorillas, but the fragile ecosystems in which they dwell.

Gorilla habitats the Fossey Fund protects include the Congo Basin, the second largest rainforest in the world and a carbon sink – a natural protection against climate change. Gorillas are gardeners of these forests, spreading seeds and letting in light. When we save gorillas, we help save our planet and ourselves.



The Ellen Campus represents a huge expansion of our teaching and laboratory spaces, enabling us to not just increase but transform our programs to study gorillas and their critical forest habitat and bring educational opportunities to early career African scientists and members of the local community.

- Felix Ndagijimana, director of Rwanda programs, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund



## THE FOSSEY FUND'S WORK

Mountain gorillas live in just three countries: Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. The Fossey Fund works with the mountain gorillas of Rwanda, where it practices “extreme conservation” – boots on the ground 365 days a year, monitoring individual gorilla families and working to help implement the Rwandan government’s priorities for the park. Tracker teams also conduct daily anti-poaching patrols to remove snares and watch for other illegal activities that could impact the gorillas.

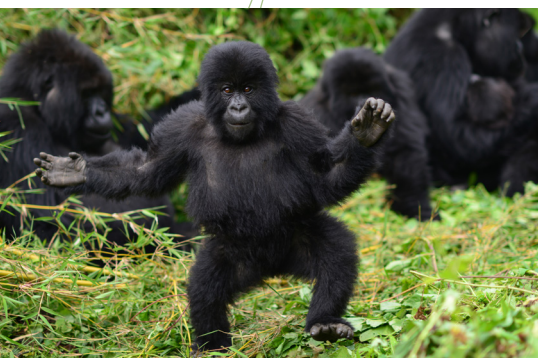
The Fossey Fund also works in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to protect critically endangered Grauer’s gorillas. About 70% of Grauer’s gorillas live outside of national parks and have no formal protection, so the Fossey Fund decided in 2001 to expand into the DRC – the only place these gorillas are found – to protect them as well. Working with local communities, the Fossey Fund established a community conservation area called the Nkuba Conservation Area (NCA). Community members near the NCA agree not to hunt endangered wildlife; in exchange for this agreement, the Fossey Fund provides employment and invests in the development of local communities.

The success of this project is demonstrated by its growth. Starting in 2011 with six families who owned 700 km<sup>2</sup> of land, the NCA now comprises 20 families across 2,379 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly three times the size of New York City. It acts as an important carbon sink, holding an estimated quarter billion tons of carbon as well.

## MOUNTAIN AND GRAUER’S GORILLAS TODAY

Just 30 years ago, there were only 240 mountain gorillas left in the Virunga mountains. By 2018, that number had increased to 600. Combined with the Bwindi population in Uganda, the total for the subspecies is just over 1,000. Because of this slow but consistent increase in both the Virunga and Bwindi populations, mountain gorillas have been upgraded from critically endangered to endangered, one small step further from extinction.

Grauer’s, however, are considered the most endangered of the four gorilla subspecies. While their total individual numbers are higher, the rate of loss is staggering. Their population has dropped from approximately 17,000 individuals in 1995 to about 6,800 today – a 60% decline. Scientists think they will be functionally extinct within one to two decades if this decline isn’t halted.



**BOOTS ON THE GROUND  
365 DAYS A YEAR**

## GORILLA FACTS

- **Humans share more than 98% of our DNA with gorillas** along with elements of our humanity – like us they care for their most vulnerable, grieve the loss of family members, form life-long relationships and are extremely intelligent.
- An **average gorilla family has 10 individuals**; the largest group ever recorded was Pablo's group, which grew to 65 individuals.
- Fossey Fund staff have seen **gorillas dismantling snares** (traps) that have been set for other animals.
- Gorillas are born weighing only 1.8 kg (4 lbs) but can grow to 180 kg (400 lbs), making them **the world's largest primate**.
- **Gorillas are vegetarians** and can eat up to 25 kg (55 lbs) of food a day.
- **Every evening, gorillas make a new nest** to sleep in.
- **Each gorilla has a unique nose print**, much like our fingerprints, that scientists can use to identify it.
- Gorilla **pregnancies last for 8.5 months** and females give birth roughly every four years.
- The **chest beat of an adult male** gorilla can be **heard from one kilometer away**.
- **Gorillas laugh** when they play.
- Gorillas have **opposable thumbs and big toes**, and they **walk on their knuckles**.
- There are **five types of great apes**: chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, orangutans and humans.
- Silverback is the term for an adult male gorilla, generally **males become silverbacks at the age of ~15 years**, although as in humans, development varies from individual to individual. While all gorilla males become silverbacks, only mountain gorilla groups regularly contain more than one silverback.



## ABOUT THE FOSSEY FUND

Founded in 1967, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund is the world's longest-running and largest organization dedicated entirely to gorilla conservation. The Fossey Fund has 300 staff in Rwanda and eastern DRC working to conserve the region's biodiversity using gorillas as an iconic, flagship species. The organization now protects almost 600,000 acres of some of the world's most biodiverse forests, which also contain an estimated quarter billion tons of carbon and are critical in the fight against climate change.

The Fossey Fund's motto is "Helping People, Saving Gorillas," and its four-pillared approach includes:

- Protecting individual gorillas and their families as well as more than 2400 km<sup>2</sup> of their biodiverse rich habitat, through daily, boots-on-the-ground protection;
- Conducting the cutting-edge science needed to develop effective conservation strategies;
- Training the next generation of conservationists in Africa and beyond;
- Addressing human needs related to food security, livelihoods and education for communities near the gorilla habitat.



## ABOUT THE ELLEN FUND

The Ellen Fund supports global conservation efforts for endangered species.

Founded in 2018 by Portia de Rossi as a gift for Ellen DeGeneres, its first project was to support a 12-acre science and education campus for the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, helping them save the wild mountain gorillas. In 2021, the *Endangered campaign* raised and awarded \$1 million to support the seven species and their communities that were featured in Ellen's first documentary, *Endangered*.

The Ellen Fund also supports people, uplifting women and conservationists of color, and inspiring the hope that anyone can make a difference. More about [The Ellen Fund](#).

## ABOUT MASS

A Model of Architecture for Society (MASS) Design Group was founded in 2008 as a non-profit organization with the mission to research, design, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity. MASS grew to include many colleagues and contributors who worked together to design and build the Butaro District Hospital in Rwanda, a project of Partners In Health and the Rwandan Ministry of Health. Since then, the organization has grown to a team of 250 architects, landscape architects, engineers, builders, furniture designers, writers, filmmakers, and researchers representing 20 countries across the globe. With headquarters in Boston and Kigali, Rwanda, MASS received the American Institute of Architecture's [2022 Architecture Firm Award](#) and the [2020 Wall Street Journal's Architecture Innovator Award](#).

# THE FOSSEY FUND'S FIRST PERMANENT HOME IN RWANDA



HI-RES PHOTOS AVAILABLE FOR MEDIA USE ONLY. PLEASE CONTACT [MMATHEWS@GORILLAFUND.ORG](mailto:MMATHEWS@GORILLAFUND.ORG)

---

### FIND OUT MORE

---

You can visit [gorillafund.org](http://gorillafund.org) for news, the latest research, photos and videos.

Or follow the Fossey Fund on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter [@savinggorillas](https://twitter.com/savinggorillas).

For media questions, contact Erika Archibald at [earchibald@gorillafund.org](mailto:earchibald@gorillafund.org).

For photography inquiries about additional photos for media use and rights, contact Iwan Baan ([studio@lwan.com](mailto:studio@lwan.com)).