Gorilla Journal

Helping People. Saving Gorillas.

Fall 2025



In this issue

Building resilient communities Page 2

Elderly gorilla gives birth Page 4

Village Vitality Project transforms lives Page 6

Community-based conservation helps people and gorillas thrive together.

Community collaboration is a cornerstone of conservation

By Tara Stoinski, Ph.D.
President & CEO/Chief Scientific Officer

At the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, we are best known for our unwavering commitment to saving gorillas. But anyone who has followed our work in the forests of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo knows that conservation does not – and cannot – happen in isolation. If gorillas are to thrive, the communities that share their ecosystems must also thrive. That's why, for decades, the Fossey Fund has invested in building resilient, sustainable communities as a core part of our mission.

Gorillas live in important forests that require careful protection and management. And if we want to protect them in a sustainable and equitable way for the long term, we must work hand-in-hand with the people and communities living there, who often face significant challenges, including food insecurity, limited livelihood options, and lack of access to clean water, education and healthcare. When basic needs go unmet, not only do people struggle but it increases their reliance on forest resources, putting wildlife and ecosystems at risk.

Community-managed forests in Congo

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, our work in the Nkuba Conservation Area (NCA) is a powerful example of what community-led conservation can achieve. The NCA is a partnership between the Fossey Fund and local communities that we have helped to secure legal recognition of their traditional land rights and to adopt land management plans to protect gorilla habitats. The NCA has now been designated a Key Biodiversity Area, recognizing its global importance and the effectiveness of community-driven conservation, protecting more than 600,000 acres of primary forest that is home to countless species, including the critically endangered Grauer's gorillas.

In Nkuba we also focus on building resilience through education, food security and income-generating projects. Programs like beekeeping, fish farming, literacy initiatives and skills training all help reduce reliance on forest resources while improving the lives of people. Indeed, the NCA has become a model for how to work with communities to do conservation and sustainable development in the region. And I am proud to note that our country director in Congo – Urbain Ngobobo – is completing his Ph.D. research on this very topic, evaluating different conservation models to examine how well community-based efforts can work.



Food security is a key link to sustainable conservation.

Scaling up in Rwandan villages

In Rwanda, where we protect gorillas in a traditional national park setting, one of the most exciting new advancements in our community engagement work began last year, when we launched a new village-based model of support. Previously, our programs were focused on individual households. Now, by working to address sustainable livelihood development with entire villages near Volcanoes National Park, we can reach thousands more people and create a shared sense of purpose and empowerment around conservation.

Our Village Vitality Project even fosters increased collaboration across our own organization. While our community teams work directly with the villages, our field researchers are tracking the impact on the forest, monitoring trends in illegal activity such as snares and we are already seeing a positive impact of the program on decreasing forest usage. (See story on page 6)

Rooted in connection

The challenges facing wildlife and wild places are complex, but the solutions are rooted in connection – between people, communities, ecosystems and organizations like ours, all working toward a common goal. At the Fossey Fund, we know that when communities are our partners, conservation is strengthened. Saving gorillas isn't just about protecting a species. It's about nurturing the web of life that sustains us all.

Ultimately, conservation must be a shared journey. Together, we can ensure that both people and gorillas not only survive, but thrive.

When basic needs go unmet, not only do people struggle but it increases their reliance on forest resources, putting wildlife and ecosystems at risk.



School nature clubs we support grow food for their schools and communities, while also learning about conservation.

Our full-circle approach to gorilla conservation

Protecting Gorillas

We are on the frontlines of conservation, with teams on the ground every single day ensuring the survival of gorillas.

Conducting Critical Science

We use cutting-edge science to develop effective conservation strategies.

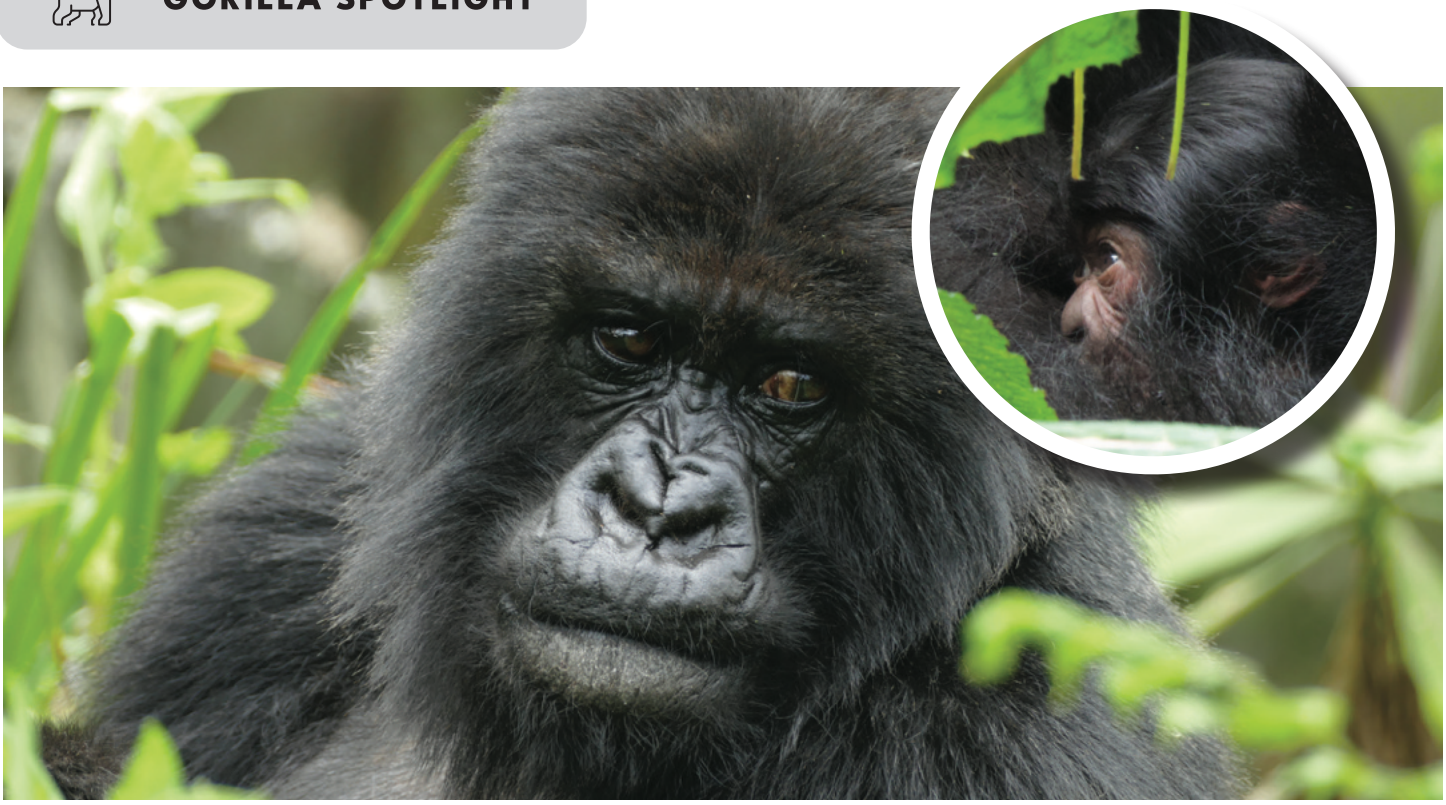


Creating Conservationists

We educate and empower future conservation leaders globally, providing opportunities to enhance skills.

Building Resilient Communities

We address basic needs of communities by focusing on education, livelihoods and food/water security.



Nzeli is one of only a few mountain gorillas known to have given birth after the age of 35.

Elderly mountain gorilla Nzeli gives birth

By Veronica Vecellio
Gorilla Program Senior Advisor

On the morning of June 19 in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, our field team recorded something extraordinary: an infant born to elderly mountain gorilla Nzeli, who is nearly 40 years old. Due to her advanced age, this event is cause for both celebration and scientific reflection. Few female gorillas give birth at such an advanced age, and even fewer are able to raise their infants successfully.

This birth offers hope and highlights the resilience of one individual. But while it is a wonderful event, we also recognize the challenges involved. For the infant to survive and thrive, Nzeli must stay healthy and care for her infant for at least three more years. This would set a new record for the oldest female mountain gorilla to successfully raise an infant.

One of the most important conditions for an infant to thrive, especially during the first three years of life, is the intense care provided by the mother, making Nzeli's advanced age and progress especially important to monitor.

Nzeli's story: A life of resilience and change

Nzeli has had a complex and dynamic life. Over the years, she has been part of 11 different gorilla groups. These changes required her to adapt repeatedly, building new relationships and re-establishing her social status each time. Her five surviving offspring are spread across several different groups.

Nzeli now lives in Mutobo's group, which she joined a year ago and where she quickly became well-integrated, as the oldest and most-respected adult female.

Thanks to our long-term research, we know that mountain gorillas can live into their early 40s, with the oldest-known female reaching age 43 and the oldest male 38. However, these estimates are based on a limited number of individuals whose lives have been followed from birth to old age, so our knowledge will continue to improve with future generations.

Why this birth matters

Only three other female mountain gorillas have been documented successfully giving birth and raising infants after the age of 35. Among them, Gutangara currently holds the record as the oldest mother, giving birth at age 38. Nzeli may now set a new milestone in gorilla reproductive history.

Understanding reproduction is essential to predicting and monitoring population trends. We have conducted many studies on this topic and the biology and ecology of reproduction continues to be a very active area of research for us.

For example, one recent scientific paper, titled "*Cascading effects of social dynamics on the reproduction, survival, and population growth of mountain gorillas*," examined how the increasing density of the population affects group dynamics and reproduction. We found that as the number of gorillas and social groups increases, the frequency of intergroup interactions and female transfers also rises. These social changes can delay reproduction, as females typically do not reproduce immediately after joining a new group, which in turn can slow population growth.

Another study, "*Female age and reproductive stage influence copulation patterns in mountain gorillas' variable mating system*," analyzed mating behavior and showed that while females can reproduce throughout their lives, their mating activity tends to decrease with age. This suggests that age plays a role in fertility patterns among mountain gorillas, although we do not see the equivalent of human menopause, likely because of their much shorter lifespans.

Celebrating growth amid challenges

Despite these complexities, the mountain gorilla population has experienced encouraging reproductive success in recent decades. In Rwanda alone, an average of about 20 infants are born each year. And on September 5, we will join the Rwandan government, local communities, and conservation partners to celebrate the Kwita Izina gorilla-naming ceremony, where all the infants born over the last two years will receive their official names. To date, more than 40 births have been recorded for this period.

Each newborn gorilla represents hope and progress. Mountain gorillas remain the only great ape species in the world whose numbers are increasing. This success is the result of decades of coordinated conservation work. At the Fossey Fund, we are proud to be on the front line of this achievement and remain committed to expanding our efforts to protect other vulnerable gorilla populations, such as the Grauer's gorilla, whose numbers are in decline.



Nzeli's infant will need close care for at least three more years in order to thrive.

Population growth of the Virunga mountain gorillas*

1960	1981	2003	2010	2016
~450	~254	~380	~480	~604

**The last official Virunga gorilla census was conducted in 2016.*

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A symbolic adoption supports on-the-ground protection for gorillas—helping them thrive while honoring someone you care about.

gorillafund.org/adopt



Hope takes root: lives transformed through Village Vitality Project



In Rubaka village, Olive decided to plant potatoes on her land and received a Village Vitality loan to purchase seeds and fertilizer.

What happens when a community is given not just support, but the power to choose its own path forward? In the communities near Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, the answer is taking shape in powerful, tangible ways. In one village, a woman transforms barren soil into a potato field. In another, a group of neighbors pool their savings to start a lending circle. Nearby, a new calf is born, promising milk, income and future opportunities. These are not just stories of progress – they are signs of a deeper shift toward community resilience.

Unfortunately, many people who live near the park face poverty and food insecurity. Some find they must turn to the forest for survival – gathering resources such as water and firewood, or setting snares for game animals for food, which can unintentionally harm critically endangered gorillas.

That's why the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund launched the Village Vitality Project, a bold initiative that puts power directly into the hands of local people. Through this community-led program, villages identify their most urgent needs whether access to livestock, loan programs, or clean water – and design tailored projects to meet them.

The result? A growing network of communities that are more self-reliant, better nourished, and increasingly invested in protecting the nearby forests.

Community and conservation together

"The well-being of gorillas is deeply connected to the well-being of the local communities that share their habitat. That's why, for over two decades, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund has focused on supporting resilient and sustainable community development as a fundamental part of our mission," says Dr. Tara Stoinski, president and CEO/chief scientific officer.

The Village Vitality Project is built on a simple but powerful belief: that the best solutions come from the people themselves. Every participating village develops its own plan, creating local ownership, sustainability and pride in the process. Each village then receives a $10,000 seed grant to implement their project. Villages continue to meet at least once a month to scale and/or design new projects to meet their shared goals. This grassroots approach not only improves the lives of individual families and builds social cohesion – it strengthens entire communities as allies in conservation.

We are proud to report that this project is already making a powerful impact in its first full year of implementation, reaching more than 7,500 households across 25 villages adjacent to Volcanoes National Park. This comes after a year of study by our staff and partners, meetings with communities and local governments, training of community representatives, and other technical work. The program is designed to eventually reach 75 villages and impact approximately 80,000 people. Villages are selected not only for their proximity to the park, but also for the degree to which they depend on its natural resources – especially in areas where illegal snares pose risks to wildlife. As the program expands, the Fossey Fund is also tracking conservation impact, such as reductions in snares and other threats to the forest ecosystem.

"The Village Vitality Project provides a mechanism to channel large volumes of resources directly to communities," says Hilary Hilsabeck, our senior program manager of community engagement in Rwanda. "This is more cost effective, creates more community buy-in and gives the most vulnerable groups, including women, access to critical resources," she says.

"This approach also gives decision-making power and agency directly to the people," Hilsabeck adds. "They know what they need and want and we are supporting them to reach their goals. By enabling households to diversify income sources, these initiatives reduce pressure on protected natural resources and foster economic resilience, thus improving human wildlife coexistence between gorillas and people."



Marie used her Village Vitality loan to purchase a cow, giving her a source of milk, manure and future income through breeding.

Livestock, loans and more

One of the most popular projects among participating communities has been livestock rearing. Villagers receive animals that can be bred and passed along to other households, creating a cycle of opportunity. Offspring can be sold to pay for food, health care or education, and the animals also provide manure to fertilize crops and milk for family nutrition.

Loan programs are another favored choice, especially in communities without access to formal banks. These micro-loans allow residents to invest in farming tools, buy seeds or fertilizer, and even launch small businesses. Technical support – such as from veterinarians, agronomists or financial advisors – is available to help villages succeed.

Villages choose

In Rubaka village, the community chose to use their funds to launch a loan program. Participants could apply for a small grant, which some then matched with their own savings to pursue income-generating projects.

Olive Uwingeneye decided to plant potatoes, since she already had a plot of land and some savings, but lacked capital to purchase seeds and fertilizer. Her Village Vitality Project loan helped her access those necessities. This spring she harvested 1,500 kilograms of potatoes and is now able to sell them, enabling her to pay back her loan and earn a profit as well, which she will reinvest in more seeds and fertilizer for the upcoming planting season this fall.

Also in Rubaka, Marie Nyiragaruka used her Village Vitality Project loan to purchase a cow, giving her access to manure, milk and a source of future income through breeding.

In Rwinzovu village, the community selected sheep rearing. The sheep provide both manure and offspring, supporting both agriculture and income generation. "With this support, I can contribute to the lessening of the use of the park's natural resources," says Rwinzovu village member Vedaste. "It allows me to set an example and also advocate for this in the village," he says.

In the village of Kabaya, community members chose to raise pigs. "I am thrilled to have received a pig in this program," says Kabaya village resident Benitha. "I do subsistence cultivation and it was challenging to access organic manure for my crops. Now I see the hope of having flourishing crops."

Benitha says that as the number of pig farmers increases through the program, villagers also plan to use some of their earnings to build water collection sites and filtering equipment, which will reduce the need to enter the park to access clean water.

A brighter future

"The Village Vitality Project is proving that conservation and community well-being go hand in hand," says Dr. Tara Stoinski.

"By empowering local people with the tools and resources to build stronger, more sustainable livelihoods, we are not only improving lives – we are also protecting the forests and wildlife that depend on them. This program is a powerful testament to the necessary connection and collaboration of conservation with community."

Growing food, protecting gorillas

The Fossey Fund supports school projects like vegetable gardens and mushroom farming to boost nutrition and develop sustainable livelihood resources, reducing reliance on the forests where mountain gorillas live.



Students help feed 850 classmates with harvested mushrooms!

Celebrating a legacy, protecting the future

Sept. 24 is World Gorilla Day, a global celebration of gorillas and a call to action to ensure their future in the wild.

Launched in 2017 to honor the 50th anniversary of Dian Fossey's groundbreaking work, the day unites people around the world to stand up for gorillas and the forests they depend on.

Nearly 60 years ago, Dian Fossey pitched two tents in Rwanda's Virunga mountains, establishing her Karisoke Research Center and beginning her pioneering study of mountain gorillas, an act that changed the future of the species. At the time, the mountain population was crashing, primarily as a result of poaching, and she feared they could disappear entirely by the year 2000.

Fast forward to today – thanks to the work she began and that has continued for close to six decades, mountain gorillas are now the only great ape population whose numbers are increasing, a rare but fragile conservation success with only 1,000 remaining in the wild.

Dian Fossey's legacy now extends well beyond mountain gorilla conservation. The organization she founded is also saving the critically endangered Grauer's gorillas, creating new protected areas in the crucial forests of the Congo Basin, providing essential training opportunities for the next generation of conservationists and working alongside local communities to build resiliency and decrease dependence on forest resources. The impact of this work is far reaching – it touches on 13 of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for a more prosperous and peaceful planet and is moving us toward protecting 30% of the planet by 2030.



In 1967, Dian Fossey started her work out of two tents in the forest.

This is the difference that we can make when we work together and so on World Gorilla Day, we ask that you join the movement to protect gorillas and their forests.

Our work is far from finished



The Threat	The Solution
We are dealing with a rising snare crisis and have removed more snares from gorilla habitat this year than in any of the past 20 years. These snares are not set for gorillas, but they are indiscriminate. For young, curious gorillas, one wrong step can cause severe injury or even death.	That is why we must be in the forest 365 days a year, ensuring the safety of the gorillas and other wildlife. World Gorilla Day is **your opportunity** to help us protect the gorillas and keep them safe.

Save gorillas on World Gorilla Day!
gorillafund.org/wgd25



SEPT. 24

Join the movement to protect gorillas and their forests!

Learn and share
Visit our website or YouTube to learn more about gorillas and share what you discover using #WorldGorillaDay.

Recycle electronics
Cellphones and other devices contain minerals mined in gorilla habitats. Recycling helps reduce demand.

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Make a donation
Support global or local conservation by fundraising and raising awareness in your community.

Adopt a gorilla
Symbolically adopt a gorilla to directly support our field-based protection efforts.
gorillafund.org/adopt





Elias Nizeyimana works with primary and secondary schools in Rwanda, including nature clubs that grow fruits and vegetables for the schools and communities.

Connecting young people to conservation

The Fossey Fund is committed to conservation education for young people who live near Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, home to the mountain gorillas we protect everyday. Our conservation education programs reach approximately 7,000 students at 42 nearby primary and secondary schools. At the helm of these efforts is our conservation education coordinator in Rwanda, Elias Nizeyimana.

Elias brings a wealth of experience to his role at the Fossey Fund: he studied biology, zoology and conservation at the University of Rwanda and earned his bachelor's degree in 2019. He joined the Fossey Fund the same year as a professional intern. After rising through the ranks as a conservation education assistant in our community engagement program, he is now helping to lead this vital work as our conservation education coordinator.

Helping young people become future leaders

Elias has a big passion for conservation and for helping young people realize their potential. "In my job, I like to interact with students and discuss conservation dreams, hoping the future will be better," he says.

Elias works to help students understand their own place and role on our planet. For instance, at the end of a recent student visit to our Ellen Campus, Elias asked the children an important question: "Who will you be in the future?"

He was pleased to hear that the kids said they hoped to become doctors, teachers, researchers, gorilla trackers and more. One student in particular even proclaimed, "With the beauty of the campus I have seen here, my dream is to become the future leader of a big conservation organization in Rwanda."

Conservation education helps communities

In his work, Elias coordinates nature and environmental clubs at local schools, which help students design and lead various projects, such as developing tree nurseries, vegetable gardens and animal husbandry programs. As students learn about conservation education, they are also able to provide necessary fruits and vegetables for school lunches as well as their communities. These clubs also help students learn vital agriculture skills to help feed their families and start businesses in the future. Nature clubs are beneficial for schools, the community and the environment, says Elias.

At many of our school and community events, nutritional resources, such as avocado trees, are given to students and other local participants. These have a direct impact on supporting community nutrition, says Elias, with over 100,000 fruit trees distributed in the past seven years. "A survey we did on the impact of avocado trees distributed by clubs found community members harvest fruits, eat them and sell surplus to obtain other necessities," he says.

At the same time, other environmental education programs Elias stewards focus on educating children about conservation, providing awareness and information they then share with their families and communities.

Looking ahead

Elias has some big hopes for the future of our education programs in local communities. "Through educational projects, I hope to triple the number of students and adults impacted in the coming years, improving communities' livelihoods, which will further reduce threats to gorillas."

In addition, Elias says he wants to continue measuring the impact of our education activities and adopt new innovations and ideas wherever possible, to help everyone work together for a sustainable planet.

"I am proud to be part of helping to make the planet safer and sustaining the existence of biodiversity."

Our award-winning Ellen DeGeneres Campus in Rwanda has garnered another accolade, as it is now a **2025 Travelers' Choice Awards** winner from Tripadvisor!

CHEST BEATS

Check out some of the latest accomplishments by our team!

- **We are giving a warm welcome to Dr. Ronnie Bailey-Steinitz, our new postdoctoral scientist at the Fossey Fund!** Dr. Bailey-Steinitz is a wildlife biologist and data scientist and will be contributing to a study on the effects of early life adversity on aging and survival in mountain gorillas. She'll also be working on new enhancements for the hormone lab at our Ellen Campus, where we use non-invasively collected samples from gorillas to study many aspects of their physiology.

- **We welcomed six new data technicians to our field teams this past summer!** These bright, young assistants are now helping us study additional gorilla groups in Rwanda.

- **Congratulations to Vainqueur Bulambo, our database program assistant in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.** Vainqueur was awarded a scholarship to pursue his Ph.D. at the University of Stirling in the United Kingdom. He'll be studying how machine learning and AI can improve understanding of biodiversity in the forests of the Congo Basin.

- **Congratulations to Jeannette Manirafasha, our community development assistant.** Jeannette has been awarded a scholarship from the Mastercard Foundation to pursue her master's degree at the University of Edinburgh beginning this fall.

- **Congratulations to Dr. Deogratias Tuyisingize, Samedi Jean Pierre Mucyo and Dr. Yntze van der Hoek.** These three Fossey Fund team members participated in a recently published study on the impact of human activities on mammal communities across 12 countries in Africa. This research involved a large, multinational collaboration of over 40 scientists and received funding from the Volkswagen Foundation and Re:wild. The Fossey Fund's support also included funds given in memory of Cynthia Dawn Verson.

Thank you to our Partners for their extraordinary support in 2025

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Gorilla Journal is a publication of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.®
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