

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“GORILLA FRIENDLY” TOURISM ECOLABEL CERTIFICATION



Feasibility Report & Stakeholder Consultation Summary

Prepared by: Julie Stein

Acknowledgments

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**International Gorilla
Conservation Programme**

About the International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP)

IGCP is a coalition programme of Fauna & Flora International and WWF with the mission to conserve the critically endangered mountain gorillas and their habitat through partnering with key stakeholders while significantly contributing to sustainable livelihood development. IGCP operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.



About the Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network (WFEN)

WFEN is a global network dedicated to the development and marketing of products, services and full value chains that conserve threatened wildlife while contributing to the economic vitality of rural communities. WFEN includes farmers, ranchers, conservationists, artisans, businesses, producers, harvesters and key decision makers whose mission is to protect wildlife in wild places, and on private lands in between, by certifying enterprises that assure people and nature not only coexist but thrive.

Disclaimer: The opinions and concepts expressed in this document are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinion of the sponsoring organizations.

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Cover Photos: “Guhonda,” the Silverback from the Sabyinyo Group, Volcanoes National Park and a young gorilla from that same group, women artisans and their crafts from the Virunga Artisans of Promotion Cooperative (COOPAV), Kinigi, Rwanda, a child living just outside the park edge and the ‘Buffalo Wall’ demarcating the boundary of Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda ©Julie Stein

Funded by: WWF-Sweden

Foreward

This effort began with a conversation in November of 2012 between the International Gorilla Conservation Programme and the Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network. The conversation has expanded over the past two years to include representatives from all of the major stakeholder groups involved in mountain gorilla tourism. We expect and hope that the conversation will continue to grow and will benefit from additional expertise and perspectives along the way. This is an initiative in which everyone, including and especially the focal stakeholder, mountain gorillas themselves, can benefit.

This report, a kind of situation analysis, represents a synthesis of the background trends, rationale, collaborative process, and stakeholder input to date, as well as the key challenges, opportunities and recommendations for next steps to advance these ideas. This is a living document and we expect the information contained here to reappear in a variety of formats and be utilized for various purposes in the months ahead. Mostly we hope it will serve as the foundation for more ideas, learning, and collaboration to preserve the iconic mountain gorilla, from whom we have much to learn, for the next generation and into the future. We truly believe in the power of consumers to change the world.

Nota Bene: While at the time of this work we were not able to include a roundtable or conduct stakeholder consultations within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this conspicuous absence is not by design but is rather dictated by the current conditions on the ground. Inclusion of DRC and a transboundary approach is implied throughout this document and our work there will take place at the first available opportunity.



Julie Stein
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Executive Summary

Mountain gorillas represent a culturally, ecologically and economically important resource to the three range countries where they occur, as well as holding significant value for tourists globally. Yet while tourism has provided an economic incentive to preserve mountain gorillas and their habitat to date, they remain critically endangered and are extremely vulnerable to disease transmission, armed conflict, poaching, illegal trade in live infants, and habitat degradation. In addition, tourists have high expectations about their ‘bucket list’ gorilla trekking experience due to a variety of circumstances ranging from social media depictions to the cost of travel. The incentive structure currently in place for all stakeholders in the mountain gorilla tourism industry, an industry which is based on providing exceptional customer service, rewards tour operators¹ who meet tourists’ expectations and demands. This proposed “Gorilla Friendly” tourism certification label would be designed to meet the needs of all key stakeholders by recalibrating the incentive structure, and helping to ‘reset’ tourist expectations through an educational program that empowers tourists (and Rangers and the tourism sector) to become more integrated *partners* in conservation. The initiative will build on an existing foundation of enabling policies and legislation and will incorporate related tourism opportunities to provide tangible benefits to all stakeholders including encouraging longer visitor stays, lower impact tourism, and by offering increased opportunities to support local communities all through authentic experiences that increasingly sophisticated tourists seek. Further the certification will create the incentives necessary to meet best practice guidelines through self-regulation, in place of or as a compliment to, government regulation, in order to assure that we preserve mountain gorillas for future generations. There are many ‘points of impact’ where a certification program could help to set realistic tourist expectations through multi-media and participatory education while simultaneously working to grow the tourism market share in the range countries and to reduce impact on mountain gorillas.

A Symptom of a Problem: An Opportunity Presented

In the experience of IGCP, gorilla conservation organizations are routinely contacted by both potential tourists and tour operators. Incoming tourists ask for recommendations on tour operators that do “the right thing,” and tour operators ask conservation organizations for endorsement through the use of the organization’s logo or links from or to websites, for example.

This signals that if there were an appropriate ecolabel grounded in established best practice and recognized in the marketplace, it would serve to reassure the responsible tourist as well as provide a credible way to recognize and endorse the responsible service provider.

The ecolabel presents an opportunity by not only rewarding those that already engage in best practice, but also by incentivizing continued improvement of standards and practice all though self-regulation which is often more efficient and effective than government regulation and enforcement. Sometimes a carrot works better than a stick.

¹ With ‘operators’ in this case including Park Rangers, drivers, guides, and the full mountain gorilla tourism value chain.

“Gorilla Friendly” tourism certification offers the possibility to distinguish companies that provide direct benefits to mountain gorillas, an umbrella species whose protection, by definition, also protects many other species of plants and animals, and who support the park edge communities as part of their business model. The potential benefits to the governments of the gorilla range states, the private sector, communities and the environment are detailed in this report. The vision for a “Gorilla Friendly” tourism certification is that it would provide the opportunity for continuous improvement of best practices creating change on the ground so that even existing excellent tour operations can be improved and recognized. In addition, this “Gorilla Friendly” certification will serve as a benchmark for best practices that non-certified operations can measure themselves against and ideally work towards to gain certification themselves, thus providing the possibility of improving standards for all tour and hospitality operations raising the bar and initiating an important conversation in the range states. “Gorilla Friendly” tourism certification will empower consumers to create change on the ground by putting in place incentives for the protection of one of the world’s most critically endangered species; providing increased economic opportunities for some of the least economically advantaged park edge communities; and contributing to the conservation of one of the most spectacular and bio-diverse landscapes in the world.

Based on the explorations detailed in this feasibility study, “Gorilla Friendly” tourism certification should:

- ✓ **Be guided by the principles of:**
 - Affordability
 - Equity
 - Sustainability
 - Creating a competitive advantage
 - Harmonization
 - Professionalism
- ✓ **Define and secure sustainable long-term funding mechanisms**
- ✓ **Be voluntary so that it encourages innovation and willing adherence to certification standards through self regulation**
- ✓ **The certification body will have an international reputation with global expertise and a network focused on wildlife, specifically endangered species and communities, with the credibility and capacity to market the brand**
- ✓ **Standards must include criteria that apply to all private sector and government participants that impact mountain gorillas**

- ✓ **The initiative must be transboundary and harmonized across range states (DRC to be included when possible)**
- ✓ **Standards must reflect best practices for mountain gorilla tourism**
- ✓ **Lodges and operators *outside* of mountain gorilla range or those who want to incorporate other aspects of sustainable tourism can adopt the established Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria and build on those**
- ✓ **Perspectives of all stakeholder groups need to be considered in decision making and representative governance structures**
- ✓ **Must include both small and large private sector companies equally**
- ✓ **Ensure monitoring and evaluation protocols in place**
- ✓ **Ensure nondiscrimination, fairness and objectivity**
- ✓ **Avoid conflicts of interest**
- ✓ **Ensure neutrality and transparency**

Stakeholders for “Gorilla Friendly” Certification

