

## **Rwanda: Stimulating Gorilla Tourism**

Tourism in Rwanda is focused on its natural heritage, the main draw being the well-known mountain gorillas of the Virunga Volcanoes that have had 30 years of widespread international attention as successive generations of conservationists seek to protect them from local or global extinction.

The civil war of the 1990s severely damaged the tourist infrastructure but the interest in seeing the great apes in the wild, together with other primates such as chimpanzees, Angolan colobus and blue monkeys, remains. Until 2004, tourism development around the great apes tended to be limited to brief two day visits from Uganda.

In the fragile post-war economy, sustainable ecotourism is critical to rebuilding communities and livelihoods in marginalised areas. To assist in this goal, strategic plans for Rwanda's two main national parks – Parc National des Volcanoes (PNV) and Nyungwe Forest Reserve (NFR), began implementation in May 2003.

The Business Linkages Challenge Fund (BLCF) is supporting the Gorilla Tourism Project, together with a range of public, private and NGO partners. The linkage partners are Office Rwandaise de Tourisme et Parc Nationaux (ORTPN), Volcanoes Safaris, Muhabura Hotel, Kinigi Guest House, Gorilla Connection (left partnership in 2004), Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, International Gorilla Conservation Programme (jointly sponsored by Fauna and Flora International, African Wildlife Foundation and World Wildlife Fund) and the Wildlife Conservation Society. As part of the linkage, each partner is committed to resourcing and carrying out a coordinated set of activities.

The lead partner and project manager is Volcanoes Safaris, which has been running gorilla safaris in Uganda since 1997 and in Rwanda since 2000. The company is unique in its sector-wide approach to improving tourism infrastructure. For example, rather than focusing solely on their own part of the business, they work in the belief that improving the entire sector will benefit all involved and, ultimately, the local communities as well.

In a just a few short years, the project has demonstrated how the private sector can cost-effectively and efficiently manage the use of donor funds to secure development gains.

Volcanoes Safaris has designed and built Virunga Lodge with eight bandas, a dining room, bar/reception area, verandas and gardens between Lakes Bulera and Ruhondo near Parc National des Volcans, as well as recruiting and training a mixture of Rwandanese and Ugandans staff to manage this high end ecolodge.

The linkage project has also enabled reception parking at PNV, five kilometres of sealed access road for local communities and the completion of

75 kilometres of stone buffalo wall to protect crops from buffalo damage while providing income to those farmers who supplied the stone and built the wall.

At the same time, building and refurbishment was being carried out, a tourism plan was developed for the two parks and 92 local men and women (69) were trained in handicrafts, including paper making, basket weaving, metal work, woodwork and horn and bone carving. All are being encouraged to tailor their products to the target tourist market. Business skills training has also been carried out, with 60 women and 18 men trained in trade agreements, price setting and records.

The improved tourism infrastructure and marketing techniques is already seeing increased high-end, low-impact visitors and additional permanent and casual staff being employed.

Mountain gorillas are a unique ecotourism product that is playing an important role in the country's revival. The linkage project has already enhanced competition, increased investment and the skills base, created a forum to bring together all stakeholders and given tangible benefits to local communities.