

Community Collaboration to Protect National Parks: Building Capacity for Ecotourism in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

U.S. FOREST SERVICE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

SUCCESS STORY | JUNE 2018



Gloria Bitomwa leads U.S. Forest Service trails expert Matthew Woodson down the Mount Kahuzi trail. Improving hiking trails will help diversify the park's offerings and attract more tourist revenue | Photo courtesy of Olivia Freeman, U.S. Forest Service International Programs

“We are optimistic that one day Kahuzi-Biega National Park will be known as the best destination in the eastern part of Africa”.

CONTACT

Richard Paton

Central Africa Program Coordinator
richardpaton@fs.fed.us

Olivia Freeman

DRC Country Coordinator &
Central Africa Field Program Manager
olivia.freeman@fs-ip.us

usfscentralfrafrica.org

There are few places left on Earth where one can see the Eastern Lowland Gorilla, the largest of the four gorilla subspecies, in its natural habitat. With less than 4,000 individuals left in the wild, these gorillas are considered extremely endangered and are only found in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kahuzi-Biega National Park, a UNESCO world heritage site located just west of Lake Kivu, is home to one of the last remaining populations.

For Gloria Mwenge Bitomwa, the tourism officer at Kahuzi-Biega working for the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), getting more tourists to come visit these extraordinary animals, and making sure they enjoy their experience, is a never-ending challenge. Despite limited resources, Gloria is passionate about helping staff at the park improve visitor experience and increase revenue so that the park can continue its mission of conserving and protecting the park's unique flora and fauna.

The U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society and supported by USAID's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment, has partnered with Kahuzi-Biega National Park to build the management skills of park staff and expand ecotourism offerings through trainings in forest guiding, trail building and maintenance, birdwatching, and communications outreach via social media and web design. This partnership has also provided ecoguards with boots, flashlights, rain gear, and backpacks to help them patrol for poachers, as well as allowed park staff to visit and learn from other parks in the region.

For Gloria, involving and benefiting local communities in tourism and conservation activities was a key lesson learned from a visit she made to Nyungwe National Park in neighboring Rwanda. While Kahuzi-Biega may be designated as a protected area, there are still communities living in and around the park who depend on the forest and its resources. “On the arrival day in Nyungwe, women from the community were performing a cultural dance; this was interesting to see that they understood that tourism is a source of sustainable revenue. They have a reason to contribute to the protection and conservation of the protected area.” The opportunity during the Nyungwe exchange for Gloria and other staff members to view surrounding communities as collaborators and beneficiaries led Kahuzi-Biega to sign contracts with surrounding communities to help maintain and create new trails, providing local employment.

To Gloria, the future of Kahuzi-Biega National Park looks bright. “We are optimistic”, she says “that one day Kahuzi-Biega will be known as the best destination in the eastern part of Africa”. For now, the continued support of national and international partners for capacity-building initiatives like these is an important step in ensuring that this unique part of Africa can once again be celebrated as a world-renowned tourist destination, and that parks like Kahuzi-Biega are able to achieve their conservation goals as well as financial independence in the near future.

USAID's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment has worked since 1995 to help protect and preserve forests and biodiversity within the region. Building capacity of national park staff to promote ecotourism not only improves visitor experience and creates economic opportunities for neighboring communities, but also puts the park on track for long-term financial stability. As an implementing partner, the U.S. Forest Service is committed to working with national parks in the region to support conservation efforts and community-based sustainable economic development.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

