



FPS
Mountain Gorilla
Project:
Progress Report 2
A.H. Harcourt

The success of the FPS Mountain Gorilla Appeal is now assured thanks to many generous donors. FPS now holds £32,168, and the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), £13,000.

Perhaps the happiest news we have to report is that there have been no more deliberate gorilla killings since mid-1978. The Appeal and the publicity it has given have, as far as we can tell, stopped the trade in gorilla heads. Nevertheless, poachers still operate in the Virunga Volcanoes, and in May this year Lee, an infant in one of the gorilla groups under study, died a lingering, painful death with a wire snare embedded in her wrist in a trap intended for antelope. And there are hundreds of such traps in the Virungas.

Two projects have now got off the ground, after months of negotiations with the Rwandan authorities. By the time this is published Bill Weber will have arrived in Rwanda to begin — with Amy Vedder of the University of Wisconsin, who will arrive in January — the Conservation Education and Gorilla Habituation Projects. Both already have two years' experience of teaching in Zaire. Moreover, Bill Weber in this last year ran a pilot project in Rwanda in which he toured the country giving talks on gorillas and conservation to around 4000 students. The Ministry of Education was well pleased with the programme and now wants to incorporate his present conservation education programme into its modified and updated school curriculum. Bill Weber and Amy Vedder also have extensive first-hand experience of the gorillas in Rwanda, Bill having conducted a census of the whole Rwandan population, while Amy was doing an 18-month study of the gorillas' feeding ecology.

With ever-increasing demands for land for an expanding human population, no national park is going to be safe unless the local people can see that they themselves will benefit from it and will therefore want it to survive. The aim of the Conservation Education Project is to educate the Rwandan people, many of whom do not even know of the existence of the gorillas and the Parc National des Volcans, to an understanding of ecology, conservation and the value to their country of wildlife, both plant and animal. The Project will involve touring as

much of Rwanda as possible in a specially equipped Renault van, showing films and giving talk and slide shows to secondary schools, villages and communes. A Rwandan counterpart will participate so that he can carry on and expand the programme when Bill Weber and Amy Vedder leave.

The more foreign exchange a national park can earn, the greater its chances of survival, and the ability to attract tourists is obviously a main financial asset. Gorillas are the prime attraction of the Parc National des Volcans, if not of Rwanda, and the tourists must be able to see them. At present many leave disappointed, and the Gorilla Habituation Project has been devised with the aim of habituating at least one, and preferably two, gorilla groups to the presence of tourists at a reasonable distance of about 30 metres. There will be no attempt to constrain the gorillas in any way. This habituation project is part of a general programme to encourage tourism in Rwanda, in which Belgian and French Aid are also participating (see *Oryx*, November 1978).

Three major projects still remain to be started: training and equipping of Park Rangers, the formation of a long-term Park Management Plan, and the construction of buildings and other material additions to the park. For these it is vital to have an experienced Project Manager on the spot who can devote all his time to them, to advise on what exactly is needed and to work with the Office of National Parks and Tourism (ORTPN) in the formulation and direction of the training and management programmes. The African Wildlife Leadership Foundation (AWLF) has taken on the administrative responsibility of these projects, and in February 1979 the Vice-President of AWLF, Robinson McIlvaine, arranged with the Vice-President of Rwanda and with the Director of ORTPN, M. Benda Lema, for Rwanda to employ an expatriate Project Manager to formulate and manage a two-year training, equipping and building programme. The man chosen for the job is Jean Pierre von der Becke, former Conservateur of the Parc de Virunga, the Zaire section of the Virunga Volcanoes; he expected to start work in September. With his experience, not only of park management but also of the Virungas, it would clearly have been difficult to find a better person for the job. As soon as he and ORTPN have produced precise details of what is needed, FPS and PTES funding of equipment and WWF funding of building can begin.

By the end of 1979 FPS, in co-operation with PTES, will probably have reached the target of £50,000 for the Mountain Gorilla Project. The similar amounts of money raised by AWLF (in conjunction with other American conservation organisations) and by WWF mean that there are probably now enough funds to finance all that is necessary to implement proper protection and management of the Parc des Volcans and its gorillas in Rwanda.

However, as I wrote at the end of the last report, the Parc National des Volcans comprises less than one-third of the gorillas' total range in the Virunga Volcanoes. Saving the gorilla in Rwanda is, therefore, just a start to saving the whole Virunga gorilla population. As we have always stressed, Zaire and Uganda, the other two countries that share custodianship of the Virungas, are just as much to blame for the decline of the gorilla population in the Virungas as is Rwanda.

If the generosity of donors continues as it has up to now, we can extend the Project beyond the confines of Rwanda and our goal of £50,000, and help to ensure protection of the whole Virunga conservation area and the whole Virunga mountain gorilla population.