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MEET THE WOMAN BEHIND UGANDA'S GORILLA CONSERVATION COFFEE

AS A WILDLIFE VETERINARIAN, Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka is not only looking out for the well-being of nearly 460 mountain gorillas—just under half of the remaining estimated 1,063 in the world—living in Uganda’s Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. She also recognizes the needs of the park’s neighbors—coffee growers who weren’t getting fair market pricing for their crops—and how this issue would affect both sides.

“When gorilla tourism began, a lot of the communities started to benefit greatly from living next to the gorillas,” says Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka, in that it also helped to support conservation efforts.

Gorilla tourism started being offered in Uganda in 1993, and Bwindi was created as a national park in 1991. While the introduction of gorilla trekking in Bwindi provided new employment opportunities to those living in the local community, Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka also noted that coffee farmers might not have been able to take on these new jobs.

It was a suggestion from her husband, Lawrence Zikusoka, that created what’s now Gorilla Conservation Coffee (GCCoffee), a social enterprise that is part of Conservation Through Public Health, a nonprofit established by Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka that promotes a peaceful coexistence between humans, gorillas, and livestock in and around protected areas in Africa. GCCoffee’s purpose is not only to help to save gorillas but also to give smallholder farmers an opportunity to bring their coffee to markets that extend outside of Uganda.

Conservation Through Public Health started under the name Gorilla Kawa in 2007, inspired by a coffee company called Kifara Kawa (Rhino Kawa). However, Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka soon learned that the brand’s coffee was not being sourced directly from locations in Uganda where gorillas are found; rather, the beans were coming from Mount Elgon in eastern Uganda.

So the enterprise’s name was changed, and sourcing was conducted through coffee farmers based around Bwindi.

Founded and incorporated in 2015, and making its first commercial sale in December 2016, GCCoffee has gone on to win awards, including SAG-SEED 2017. It was ranked among the top 30 coffees in the world, with a cupping score of 92 points in *Coffee Review* in 2018.

These changes impacted not only the producers who were now finding a higher-paying market for their coffees, but also the near-extinct gorillas. Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka recalls individuals entering Bwindi to illegally hunt for animal meat and collect firewood. Their reasoning: They were meeting their basic needs to survive.

Estimating that over 5,000 coffee farmers are situated near and around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka notes that GCCoffee is currently interacting with 500 farmers. So far, GCCoffee is directly purchasing coffee from 150.

“The farms are close to the forest and others have them far away,” Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka says. “We’re working with farmers in sub-counties bordering the park, and everybody within that sub-county can impact the park in one way or another, because the people who poach aren’t always the people right next to the forest.”



Dr. Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, pictured at top, established Gorilla Conservation Coffee in Uganda to help close to 460 mountain gorillas in the country’s Bwindi Impenetrable National Park stay safe and healthy.

In lower photo, Dr. Gladys examines coffee cherries with Gorilla Conservation Coffee lead farmers Vincent and Sam Karibwende.

In turn, GCCoffee mandates that these farmers are not encroaching on Bwindi’s land for any harmful reason. They’re even being taught sustainable agricultural practices that enable them to have a greater yield from their farms.

“It’s done with a very strong conservation ethic,” Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka says, “where this is all about conservation, finding a way for you to coexist with the wildlife, giving a good price for [your] goods, [and] increasing your access to markets.”

Out of that total of 500 participating farmers, 120 of them are women. Many have to overcome obstacles, such as gender inequality and prejudice, and being at greater risk of poverty than their male counterparts. To assist these women, GCCoffee is involved with Planet Women, and various GCCoffee staff are members of the Uganda chapter of the International Women’s Coffee Alliance.

“You really need to empower women; they’re a very, very important part of the equation,” says Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka.

Protecting Bwindi’s habitat is also a crucial component. GCCoffee belongs to the Conservation International’s Sustainable Coffee Challenge, which aims to make coffee the world’s first fully sustainable

agricultural product. For example, the GCCoffee farmers are being trained in agroforestry, and educated in growing practices ranging from spacing out plantings of coffee trees to growing them alongside compatible crops for food security.

Joel Muwonge, a GCCoffee quality assurance officer, works with the farmers, teaching them about the importance of soil and water conservation. In addition, GCCoffee connects producers with “model farmers,” a group sourced from within the producer group who serve as mentors to their counterparts and encourage them to adopt sustainable farming methods. “One thing we noticed is that the farmers are only convinced to do something if they see that their fellow farmer is benefiting from doing the same thing,” Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka says. “We’re supporting them so that they can coexist with the gorillas and benefit more from gorilla conservation.”

Visitors to Uganda can also learn more through the coffee safaris and gorilla treks GCCoffee has begun offering. At CTPH Gorilla Conservation Camp, located on the outskirts of Bwindi, guests can book coffee-farm-related safaris where they are taken to meet the producers.

GCCoffee is sold at lodges within Bwindi and Queen Elizabeth, Lake Mburo, and Murchison Falls National Parks, as well as at certain shops and businesses in the cities of Entebbe and Kampala. But GCCoffee wants another group of customers to partake in a taste of this agricultural tourism: Ugandans themselves. In promoting GCCoffee and fostering a local coffee culture, a new café opened in April 2021. It’s about 10 minutes from Entebbe International Airport and located on Plot 13 Portal Road. The move to a new and bigger venue was to offer a food menu alongside beverage orders.

Along with an outdoor space and signage with GCC’s tagline, “Saving Gorillas One Sip At A Time,” the former cottage that’s been converted into a café has an interior that is adorned with coffee bags and a mural depicting Bwindi’s forestry.

The café is managed by head barista Barbara Akirimat, who trains other baristas and manages the quality control of incoming beans from GCCoffee participating farms. She also oversees the roasting and packaging of this single-origin, medium-roasted 100% Arabica coffee at National Union of Coffee Agribusinesses and Farm Enterprises.

Currently, GCCoffee has one single-origin coffee release called Kanyonyi. This coffee gets its name from the now deceased lead silverback gorilla of Mubare Gorilla Group, the first group habituated for gorilla tourism in Bwindi. (This is a practice in which gorillas are slowly introduced to humans observing them.)

Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka met Kanyonyi when he was a baby. He encountered her when she was working as the first veterinarian for the Uganda Wildlife Authority; she had operated on his sister in the forest.

Upon reaching adulthood, Kanyonyi succeeded his father in leading their group, but had a bad fall and a resulting infection that he never fully recovered from. He passed away in December 2017. Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka shared a tribute to Kanyonyi on Facebook and other social media platforms.

“[His death] shows how much conservation has come forward,” she says, “because when he died, the communities were also very, very upset about it.”

The Kanyonyi coffee brand was developed in 2016, the year before he died. Along with implementing his name, an illustrated image of Kanyonyi appears on its packaging.

Even amid the current global pandemic, GCCoffee continues to pay its coffee farmers 50 cents per kilo above the market price and gives advance payments to some of them. What’s also helping is the availability of the coffee to be purchased and shipped via e-commerce outside of Uganda. Along with distributors in Uganda, Kenya, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, GCCoffee also has a U.S. source: John Probert, founder and CEO of Pangols, an e-commerce site that sources and sells sustainable products and wildlife-themed apparel, partnered with Gorilla Conservation Coffee in 2018 to become a distributor.

Prior to starting Pangols, John was a program associate at the World Wildlife Fund, but he wanted to continue having a career relating to wildlife conservation. Having started his e-commerce site, John was introduced to Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka through his former WWF supervisor, Andrea Santy, and met up with the veterinarian in Washington, D.C., while she was in town for a National Geographic Society event.

Along with having to learn about air cargo logistics and meeting regulatory requirements, getting into e-commerce was quite an undertaking for John. “I’ve never done anything like this before, so every step of the way it’s been a learning experience,” he says.

GCCoffee has provided a strong revenue alternative with Uganda tourism shuttering due to the pandemic and its subsequent effects. In June 2020, a silverback mountain gorilla named Rafiki, who was the head of the Nkuringo Gorilla Group, was murdered inside Bwindi. His killer admitted to entering the park to illegally hunt small game and claimed to have stabbed Rafiki in self-defense. He pled guilty and was sent to prison.

“It’s a lesson from the pandemic: You should always have more than one revenue stream,” says Dr. Kalema-Zikusoka. “We really need to have a way to support communities which are not just tourism related. There has to be other ways to make sure that they keep going when these travelers are not there, and the pandemic showed this very clearly.”

For more information about Gorilla Conservation Coffee, visit gorillaconservationcoffee.org.

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