

THE ROLE OF RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN SAVING GREAT APES FROM ZOOONOTIC DISEASES IN AFRICA



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Date: 17th February 2022

Location: Zoom

Time: 11:00 EAT | 08:00 GMT | 10:00 CAT

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#FutureForGreatApes



Nairobi, 17 February 2022 - Last year International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) and Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH) with the support of African CSOs Biodiversity Alliance (ACBA) spearheaded the development of a policy brief on "Africa's Great Apes and COVID-19". Building on the actions of last year, the policy brief has been updated to include all Great Ape Tourism sites in Africa, new developments in great ape tourism and the management of COVID-19. Additionally, the policy brief has been redesigned and made more appealing to the reader, the webinar on 17th February 2022, titled **The Role of Responsible Tourism In Saving Great Apes From Zoonotic Diseases In Africa** will be in discussion of the redesigned policy brief. The recording the webinar can be found on our YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/5wSK-ZUMVUg>

The policy brief aimed at creating awareness about the challenges of great ape tourism in Africa especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also highlighted several recommendations to government leaders, private sector (including Tour Operators) and tourists on what should be done to address the existing great ape tourism challenges.

A couple of activities including development of graphic materials, a social media campaign and a webinar targeting tour operators and key conservationists in Africa was successfully conducted last year and this current webinar to discuss the policy brief and amplify as well as emphasize the need for great ape tourism best practices at all great ape tourism sites in Africa.

This webinar attracted over 84 participants and gave audience the highlights on what recommendations are there to save Great Ape and also created awareness on the challenges faced by Great Ape tourism in Africa. The webinar was moderated by Simangele Msweli who is the Senior Manager, Youth Leadership Program at AWF, the speakers in the webinar included Dr Johannes Refisch who is the coordinator for Great Apes Survival Partnership, Mr Praveen Moman the founder of Volcanoes Safaris, Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka the CEO of Conservation Through Public Health and Dr Emmanuelle Normand who is the director of Wildlife Chimpanzee Foundation.

Dr. Gladys kicked off the webinar by explaining what Great Apes are saying that “Great Apes are species that are very similar to humans or rather humans are Great Apes and in Africa we have 9 species of Great Apes, although most are endangered. The biggest threat to the non-human Great Apes would be habitat loss and diseases such as Covid-19. Humans are closely related to great apes hence high chances of making each other sick, we need to understand that COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases can spread from humans to great apes”. She added that CTPH successfully advocated to the Ministry of Health to prioritize vaccinating rangers and community members around Bwindi, to curb the spread of COVID-19 from people to the mountain gorillas. “We need to continue encouraging people to get vaccinated but also wear masks and follow guidelines when visiting great apes. The Policy Brief is there to enforce the guidelines on protecting great apes not only from COVID-19 but also from other diseases”

Dr Johannes indicated that “Vaccination and testing for COVID-19 is a recommendation for all people visiting great ape sites. We need to find ways to diversify the economy for communities living around Great Apes sites to reduce on high dependence on tourism”. Adding to that Dr Johannes spoke on tourism guidelines saying that it is important to have these guidelines as they help to responsibly minimize the risks associated with great apes and tourists.

“As tour operators we ensure that all tourists and visitors are informed of the guidelines before visiting the great apes and all guests are able to follow the guidelines of great ape viewing” says Mr Praveen Moman. He also highlighted about the research which was conducted on how tourists and communities felt about the protection of wildlife during COVID-19 pandemic and interesting results came out as people are happy to wear masks when they visited gorillas or chimpanzees. “We trained rangers, Gorillas Guardians and Village Health and Conservation Teams (VHCTs) in Bwindi on mitigation of COVID-19 amongst the people and from people to mountain gorillas. It is the responsibility of all key players in the tourism industry to make sure that the guidelines are followed” he said.

“Dr Emmanuelle from Wild Chimpanzee Foundation highlighted the different challenges faced by Great Apes, she mentioned that one of the great threats to chimpanzees in West Africa is habitat loss or no protected areas– there is a lot of deforestation to create land for cocoa plantations. “Law enforcement to protect this species needs to be put in place and it is all our responsibility to protect Great Apes. We have created protective areas for the chimpanzees to keep them safe. Law enforcement against poaching must happen to continue protecting chimpanzees. Eco-tourism needs to be seen as an important measure for conservation of great apes and it needs a lot of support from all stakeholders”. Adding to that Dr Emmanuelle said “awareness raising in the communities has been one way to curb the spread of COVID-19 from people to chimpanzees”.