

Saving the Mountain Gorillas of Uganda by Delivering Primary Healthcare to Rural People: Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka and Conservation Through Public Health

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Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in southwestern Uganda protects a region of Afromontane forest which is home for nearly half of the world's population of highly endangered mountain gorillas. In 1996 Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka, the first woman veterinarian recruited by Uganda Wildlife Authority, studied an unprecedented outbreak of the scabies among the park's gorillas. She concluded that this was a case of zoonotic disease transmission from burgeoning human communities nearby. Bwindi was anything but an impenetrable ecosystem; in fact people, livestock and wildlife were interacting biologically as never before. Zoonotic diseases such as scabies, brucellosis and tuberculosis undermined the potential for eco-tourism and sustainable development at Bwindi and other Ugandan national parks. Partly inspired by the example of Dian Fossey, Kalema-Zikusoka founded Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH), a community-based NGO, in 2002. CTPH strives to deliver primary healthcare and health education to improve hygiene by simple methods, including boiling milk (for TB and brucellosis) and washing clothes (for scabies). CTPH volunteers monitor diseases that can pass from humans to gorillas, potentially threatening the rare species' survival. CTPH volunteers also promote family planning methods that make it easier for rural communities to provide for their children—and reduce the pressure on the mountain forests and their wildlife.