

The goal of IGCP is to ensure the conservation of the regional afro-montane forest habitats of the mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo



Face to face



Interview with: Anecto Kayitare, Programme Officer, Rwanda

How long have you been interested in conservation?

Before I joined IGCP, conservation had never been my *main* interest. What really interested me was socio-economic development. That is my background. However, it soon became obvious to me that conservation and development, especially in a country like Rwanda, go hand in hand. People here depend on natural resources for survival.

Why do you think it's important to conserve the mountain gorilla?

As I see it, there are three reasons. First and foremost, mountain gorillas are fantastic animals. From a moral and aesthetic point of view, it is simply wrong to kill, eat or trade such a magnificent creature, particularly one so closely related to humans. Secondly, they represent the one and only chance for Rwanda. They have scientific, political, economic and humanitarian value. As long as they survive, everyone benefits. They attract tourists and other visitors, who bring in vital income for the parks and the local communities. Their presence helps to protect their forest habitat and the other wildlife that depends on it. This forest is equally important for the local people, providing natural resources, generating most of the country's rainfall and preventing soil erosion. If the gorillas disappeared, the main incentive for preserving the forest would disappear too. That would be the start of a downward spiral from which Rwanda might not recover. Thirdly, we owe it to future generations in Rwanda and throughout the world to ensure that mountain gorillas and their habitat survive.

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What is the hardest part of your job?

It's not easy talking to someone about the long-term benefits of conservation when they have nothing to eat and can't afford to buy an exercise book for their children. The human pressure on the park is enormous. Also, the conflict in the region, which is outside our control, creates a constant feeling of insecurity. Operating in such an atmosphere makes it even more difficult to alleviate poverty, improve education, and encourage the sustainable use of resources.

What are your biggest frustrations in your job?

I don't get frustrated very easily, but we can't always do as much as we want to help people. Life is not easy here and there are so many other problems not directly related to conservation that need tackling. The main constraint is lack of funds. Without more money, there is always a limit to what can be achieved.

What aspect of your work gives you the greatest satisfaction?

Above all else, I enjoy a challenge. Trying to convince people of the importance of conservation involves tackling a broad range of problems related to education, politics and the law. Changing people's attitudes is very rewarding.

Can you give an example?

Recently, buffalo have been leaving the forest and destroying crops. One minister wanted to tackle the problem by killing the buffalo. By pointing out that this would undermine conservation efforts and reinforce prejudices by sending out the wrong message, I was able to persuade the government to revise its thinking on the issue. Instead, we are solving the problem by building a wall around part of the park to keep the buffalo away from the villagers' crops. That kind of thing gives you a great sense of achievement.

How has working for IGCP affected you personally?

I don't see my family as often as I would like! When you believe strongly in something, it is easy to find yourself working at weekends. Fortunately, my wife and children are very understanding. They know how important this work is to me.

What keeps you motivated?

Firstly, there is never a dull moment in this job. Secondly, there is a wonderful team spirit in IGCP and a collective sense of loyalty. Nobody wants to let anyone else down. If someone is having a tough time, or needs something urgently, we all help out. In that sense, it feels like a family.

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What are your long-term aspirations for yourself and IGCP?

I would like IGCP to succeed in promoting a more global view of conservation for the region. Once we have demonstrated that species and habitat conservation is inseparable from socio-economic development, and persuaded the three range states to adopt a common, collaborative approach, we can find solutions that transcend national boundaries. This is the way to tackle not only conservation, but also issues such as education, poverty and health. From a personal point of view, I would like to gain some additional qualifications and broaden my education so that I can contribute by helping IGCP to fulfil this broader remit.