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Is the Human Cost of Saving Gorillas Too High?

Forest dwellers known as Pygmies were evicted when their homes became national parks a generation ago. Now they're fighting back.

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Scott Kellermann remembers the moment he realized he'd been going about things all wrong. He and several men and women from the community he was working with sat on the ground outside mud-brick huts recently constructed in their village, Kitariro, in southwestern Uganda. Kellermann, a physician and an Episcopalian missionary, had first come to Uganda in 2000 to medically survey the group, who had been evicted from their forest home and were living in conditions of extreme poverty in villages at the edge of two national parks. Finding children with swollen bellies and rail-thin adults, he and his wife, Carol, soon decided to move to Uganda and dedicate themselves full-time to their aid.

About a year later, he met with officials from the Ugandan government to discuss the possibility of allowing this community, known as the Batwa and sometimes as Pygmies, to live within park boundaries, as they had for centuries before their eviction. Now he was delivering the



news of this meeting to the Batwa elders.

“We’re trying to get you guys back in the forest,” Kellermann told them. He expected to be met with expressions of gratitude and waves of joy. Instead, the village leaders told him life in the forest had been difficult, and they now preferred to live on its edge. “How can you speak for us?” they said. “We don’t want to go back to living in the forest.”

It was a dramatic surprise to Kellermann, and it led him to rethink his approach. “We used to consider ourselves the voice of the voiceless,” he says now. “But that kept them in kind of a voiceless position.”

“I learned that it is important to ascertain what the Batwa truly wanted before attempting to be their advocate,” said Kellermann, now 69.

“Most people who commit to helping, we work for a couple months, years, maybe even decades, but the Batwa will be there forever. They’re the ones that have to be involved in the solution.”

Kellermann’s epiphany is one that many large, international donor groups have also experienced over the past couple of decades. Organizations and individuals are realizing that the old development model is itself developing. Less and less are people from wealthy countries coming to poor ones, assessing local problems on their own, and telling residents how the visitors will fix things. That approach, which began in Africa’s colonial era, is being replaced by a strategy of involving local people in determining the issues and designing solutions. Nowhere, it seems, can this be better applied than in the case of the Batwa.



The mountain gorilla population grew from 254 in 1981 to 880 since the latest count in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. (Photo: Wendee Nicole)

In Karehe, a Batwa village in southwestern Uganda, young children play in the rust-colored dirt. Two girls giggle and smile; their younger brother, wearing only a shirt, clings to a metal bowl, the remnants of its meager contents on his lips and fingers.

Much of the time, these children are left alone while their parents sell cheap crafts to tourists by the river. They wear the same filthy clothes, day after day.

Many Batwa children in Karehe have protruding bellies and sunken eyes, indicators of severe malnutrition, poor sanitation in their communities, and a lack of medical care. Kids and adults alike practice open defecation in their yards or

gardens, though some have a pit latrine. Most Batwa children drop out of primary school, further ensuring a precarious future for their people; only three of the few thousand Batwa living in Uganda have earned college degrees, according to the United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda.

The plight of the Batwa has been eclipsed by what many call one of wildlife's greatest success stories—the mountain gorilla. Yet their conditions have been inexorably linked ever since the Ugandan government established two national parks in Batwa homelands, forcing people from their forest home. Now they live in villages on the park's borders.

Found only in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the great apes have returned from the brink of extinction thanks to intense efforts by conservation groups and government wildlife authorities. Mountain gorilla numbers rebounded from a low of 254 in 1981 to an estimated 880 in the latest population survey, conducted in 2012. Media heralded the victory but largely failed to mention the deeply suffering communities. The indigenous who were removed from their ancestral homeland have become “conservation refugees.”

For centuries, the Twa people, who comprise about 1 percent of the population in Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, lived in the region's deep, biologically rich forests,

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sustainably harvesting plants and animals for food, shelter, and medicine. In the 1930s, the British Colonial Administration created forest reserves in the areas that were home to the Batwa (which is the plural form of Twa) and urged them to abandon their hunter-gatherer ways and join modern society. Nevertheless the Batwa continued to hunt and harvest to sustain their livelihoods in the forest well past Uganda's 1962 independence.

By the 1990s, logging and other commercial activities were providing steady work for locals in the far southwestern corner of the country, but as the population grew, the poorest of the region's people needed to chop trees for cooking fuel and warmth. This all placed pressure on gorilla habitat, so in 1991 the government created two national parks, Bwindi Impenetrable and Mgahinga Gorilla, to protect the apes and bring tourism to the region. Human habitation within park boundaries was forbidden, and the Batwa were forced out of the forests at gunpoint. Because they had built no permanent structures and did not tend crops, it was deemed that the Batwa suffered no loss for which they ought to be compensated.

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The Batwa had survived as itinerant hunter-gatherers in the forest for ages but were uneducated in the modern sense and struggled to adapt to village life. “For the West the changes have been incremental, but for the Batwa it [was] a huge and difficult leap,” said

Kellermann. “They’ve gone from hunter-gatherers to the IT age. Their survival is now predicated on how well they can transition.”

According to the Batwa creation story, the creator gave some people height, others prosperous land, but when he got to the Batwa, there were no more such gifts, so he gave them the rainforest. When they were evicted, they have said, they felt God had rejected them.

Evicting indigenous for the sake of conservation is unique to neither the Batwa nor Africa but has occurred on every continent except Antarctica, a phenomenon documented by investigative journalist Mark Dowie in his 2009 book *Conservation Refugees*. Dowie calls it “a good guy versus good guy story.”

“There have been huge displacements as a consequence of conservation,” said Cornell University sociologist Charles Geisler, who coined the term “conservation refugees” in a 2002 [article](#) in *Foreign Policy*. One of the earliest instances involved European Americans, beginning in the mid-19th century, repeatedly pushing native Ahwahnechee out of what would become Yosemite National Park.

(Later efforts were backed by Sierra Club founder John Muir.) Countries in Africa and elsewhere followed the American model, Geisler wrote. He calculated conservation evictions of at least 14 million people in Africa alone, beginning with the founding of Kruger National Park in South Africa in 1926. Governments justified these decisions mainly to protect natural resources, according to a [2006 review](#) of conservation evictions.

In Uganda, the government and some conservation groups believed the evictions were essential to save gorillas. One factor in the decision to remove the Batwa, said Richard Kapere, senior planning and environment impact assessment officer for the Uganda Wildlife Authority, was that they “are human beings who needed to live normal life other than bush life [and] to access services such as education.” But as the UWA’s 2014–2024 Bwindi Management Plan recounts, evictions were necessary because “forest resources were being over-exploited as a result of other people outside the park using the Batwa...to get resources.” This may have included poaching bushmeat for Congolese, who also sold mountain gorilla hands and body parts on the black market, Kapere said.

“Unfortunately, conservation groups identified the Batwa as being among the highest threats to protected areas when actually that’s not the case,” said Christopher Kidd, project officer of the Forest Peoples Programme, a U.K.-based charity that helped UOBDU get set up and continues to support and advise it. Forest dwellers and former forest dwellers, Kidd said, “can be incredibly important to the future conservation of protected areas,” and recent research indicates that

poaching within Bwindi is committed by more well-off segments of Ugandan society than the Batwa.

That would come as no surprise to political economist Elinor Ostrom, who was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics. Her research showed that when indigenous or local populations manage an ecosystem's resources for their own benefit, both the people and the ecosystems prosper. In contrast, removing indigenous people from their homelands, or stripping harvest rights from locals, is not only unnecessary but counterproductive. When local people are democratically empowered and benefit from a commonly used resource, they conserve the ecosystem because doing so sustains their livelihood. Removing people from the forest or taking away people's former rights to use forest products wreaks havoc not just on people but also on the environment, as people often go rogue, harvesting more wood, hunting more wild animals. Ostrom, who died in 2012, found that removals destroy trust and locals' feeling of and responsibility for the ecosystems that sustained them.

A recent [study](#) by the London-based policy and research organization International Institute for Environment and Development and three Ugandan NGOs suggests that even after evicting the Batwa and removing long-held rights of locals to use the forest for their own livelihood (as opposed to commercially) poaching of small game has continued. Although hard before-and-after data on poaching and forest harvesting is unavailable, the study posits that expelling the Batwa without compensation or suitable efforts to develop or provide

services for their communities, and barring them and other locals from the accessing the forest ever since, has caused resentment motivating illegal activities.

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CHRISTOPHER KIDD, PROJECT OFFICER, FOREST PEOPLES PROGRAMME

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Dowie wrote that “eviction inevitably force[s] adults into intractable [poverty](#), alcoholism, and prostitution, leaving their children with malnutrition, disease, and death.” He called hunting bans, as were imposed on indigenous hunter-gatherers in Uganda and in the DRC, “a short step to genocide.”

Even decades later, said Julia Baker, research adviser to the IIED study, “people still feel injustice over the national park.” Locals raid the forest for products such as honey and firewood. Meanwhile—and fueling the resentment—wildlife including gorillas, monkeys, and elephants invade the fields of people living adjacent to the park; an 80-year-old woman was recently jailed for killing a gorilla that invaded her garden. Families receive no compensation for the damage, and many keep kids out of school to chase animals from the fields. Baker said that another

factor was that mining jobs and timber activity were lost when the preserves were established; few Batwa are employed in the park. Locals also feel that money from tourists' park fees, which is supposed to be set aside for the surrounding community, is "going very far from the park," Baker said. As a result, "they see little problem with compensating themselves," by poaching bush pig and a small antelope called duiker. This has had repercussions for the species the park was primarily founded to protect, according to [research](#) by the Mountain Gorilla Vet Program and others: Snares locals set for other animals often kill or injure gorillas.

When Kellermann surveyed the Batwa population around Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in 2000, he found nearly 40 percent of children were dying before age five, with adults living, on average, to 28. Other Ugandans averaged a life expectancy of 48. Nearly 18 percent of Batwa infants died within a month of birth.

Kellermann and his wife, Carol, were almost instantly motivated to help the Batwa. Within the year, they had sold their house and his medical practice in California and moved to Uganda. Carol would focus on education; Scott hoped to improve health and reduce mortality among young children and birthing mothers in particular, to offer spiritual guidance and education, and to help the conservation [refugees](#) of Uganda improve their station.

Scott began by tending to urgent medical needs, tying IV lines to the branches of a huge ficus tree and treating kids in its shade. Soon he

started a mobile clinic, going from village to village, and by 2003, he had founded the Bwindi Community Hospital.

The Kellermanns helped the Batwa organize and establish the Batwa Development Program in 2008. It focuses on education, health care, land and food security, and self-determination for the Batwa. An executive council of Batwa oversees the BDP, although the program remains under the auspices of the Anglican Church, a source of consternation for some locals.

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BDP staff and Batwa leaders struggle to manage the tension between the need for Western education to survive in a modern world and make the programs work effectively, and the executive council's desire to preserve Batwa culture and tradition.

Kellermann recalled villagers saying to him, “We want to teach our kids stories, legends, songs, and dance, and they have to be done in the forest.”

So the Kellermans purchased about 150 acres of forest contiguous to Bwindi to create a cultural center. The property, which they plan to

hand over to BDP, has become center stage for the [Batwa Experience](#), a cultural tourism and educational program established in 2009 that earns money for the Batwa who run it by teaching travelers (as well as Batwa children) about traditional forest culture. It requires a steep hike up a mountain, past women carrying baskets on their heads, before reaching the verdant mountaintop forest. The Batwa show visitors several temporary shelters, including a multilevel tree house and a ground shelter where women demonstrate how they grind seed and weave baskets. Two men spin sticks to start a fire, then climb straight up a tree in bare feet, showing how they smoke out bees to harvest honey. At the end, visitors gather in a larger dome structure where the Batwa perform a play depicting the forest god, whom they ask to bless them, followed by passionate dancing.



California native Scott Kellermann moved to Uganda in 2001 to help the Batwa access medical and educational services. Here he speaks with a girl carrying tea leaves. (Photo: Wendee Nicole)

Around the world, governmental policy and its implementation have been slow to catch up with Ostrom's findings.

One exception is in Oaxaca, Mexico, where indigenous Zapotecs have created a sustainable, diversified industry from communally managed forests, bringing the community millions of dollars in assets, according to David Barton Bray, a professor of environmental studies at Florida

International University. The Forest, Agriculture, and Services Communal Enterprise of Ixtlán de Juárez operates under traditional Zapotec forms of governance: No one can buy or sell any of the communal land, and all decisions are made democratically by the hundreds of people who share title to it.

In Uganda, by contrast, the Batwa live on the edge of the forest but have minimal access.

“They can look but not touch,” said Kellermann. “How do you have them living right by the forest, seeing their ancestral home, and they’re starving? If you want to reduce poaching, I think what you need to do is raise them out of poverty, then let them go in and do their religious ceremony, let them get their yams and honey.”

Recently, one of Kellermann’s goals has been to help the people of Karehe and surrounding villages gain legal access to the forests, making them partners in its protection rather than threats to it—and aiding their development in the process.

Listening to the Batwa’s ideas of how to achieve these ends has been a lesson learned. After years of first waiting, then discussing, the Batwa feel they have exhausted all other means and have initiated legal action.

“What we want right now is recognition and compensation,” said Kenneth Turyamubona, one of only three Batwa in Uganda to have entered university, earning his degree in 2013. He now works as the

BDP's assistant coordinator. "The forest was our ancestral land and belonged to us. So the government should compensate us."

In 2013, UOBDU filed a suit with Uganda's Constitutional Court demanding that the Batwa receive their ancestral land back. "If the Batwa have ancestral rights to the national parks—and international law would certainly support them—they should have those rights enforced and their land given back to them," said Kidd of the Forest Peoples Programme. If unsuccessful in Uganda's courts, UOBDU could appeal to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights or to the United Nations.

What would become of the national parks, should the Batwa emerge victorious, is an open question. Kidd thinks the mountain gorilla has a better future with the Batwa in charge of its habitat than with a Western-style government, and if the Zapotecs are any indication, there may be something to that.

"Indigenous communities like the Batwa and conservation groups can support each other in a mutually benefiting way to secure landscapes from further degradation," said Kidd. "The No. 1 tool for conserving large areas of land is securing land use tenure rights for indigenous peoples. The real [enemy is] extractive industries."

Indeed, the two groups may need each other more than ever. [Oil was recently discovered in the region](#), and a paved road through Bwindi park is planned, in part to provide access to the resource.

If native dwellers had land rights, industry would need to appeal to them before engaging in their activities, whether they be oil and gas extraction, mining, logging, or [large-scale agriculture](#). Such an arrangement would have to demonstrate, before the government turned over a gold mine (or a metaphorical one) to people who were living a premodern existence just a generation ago, that it could compete economically with what multinational corporations were offering. Under [avoided deforestation programs](#) such as U.N.-REDD+, entities in a cap-and-trade scheme needing credits for their greenhouse gas emissions can pay owners or tenants of carbon-rich lands to keep those areas intact. But REDD+, for one, includes no language requiring that indigenous and local user rights be protected, leading many indigenous groups to come together to [oppose it](#).

The Ugandan government has created multiple-use zones in the national parks, trying out integrated conservation and development projects, though without much success. Studies are showing the programs don't help the people who lost the most when the parks were created and haven't dissuaded locals from illegally accessing the forest. According to Kellermann and others, many of the poorest can't get permits to take advantage of the MUZs—being illiterate, they don't know how to fill out the application.



Former denizens of forests that are now protected as mountain gorilla habitat are suing the government of Uganda for

Kellermann has seen some progress since 2001, including at Bwindi Community Hospital, which is now run entirely by Ugandans: The area it serves has achieved a much lower mortality rate compared with the rest of Uganda, and a drop to 6 percent for children under five from the 40 percent that prevailed when he got there.

In 2008, he had another memorable meeting with Batwa leaders; they were discussing a matter that needed to be brought to the government. One suggested that Kellermann be the one to raise the issue. “I agreed, as I knew the official,” Kellerman recalled. But then something he wasn’t prepared for happened: Another member of the community, Kellerman recalled, stood and said, “Can’t we speak for ourselves?” Then another added in agreement, “We should go together.”

An elder suggested the BDP executive council lead the process. “The BDP speaks for us,” the man said.

Kellerman realized then that the Batwa had developed the voice to express their needs. The BDP council approached the government officials and resolved the issue.

When Kellerman talked with the government official later, he said, the man “noted that the Batwa were organized. Now they were a force to be reckoned with.”

Reporting for this article was funded by [Mongabay.org](https://www.mongabay.org)'s Special Reporting Initiatives Program.

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