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Forest or people? Saving both in Rwanda

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On the one side stand half a million poor farmers, desperate to find land for more crops. On the other, a patch of once-extensive forest that is the area's ecological lynchpin. In between, one woman

Madeleine Nyiratuza has an unenviable job. As programme coordinator for the Gishwati Conservation Project, it's up to her to convince half a million subsistence farmers that 15 chimpanzees stranded in a clump of trees that used to be Rwanda's second-largest forest are worth saving.



The Gishwati Forest 'eco-guards' Photograph: Will Chesser

Starving farmers and their families, living on the edge – literally and figuratively – have targeted the chimps as obstacles to their own survival. In response, the Gishwati Conservation Project has been forced to set up border controls around the forest, and is also trying to create a 30-mile corridor down to the Nyungwe National Park, which would reunite the chimps with a protected population there.

It's safe to say the region sees an uneasy relationship between man and his evolutionary ancestors.

Monkey Business

In a country desperate for tourist dollars, primates provide the biggest draw. More than 20,000 visitors come every year to see the mountain gorillas of Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, made famous by the movie Gorillas in the Mist.

Created in 1925, Volcanoes was Africa's first national park. When Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962, the new republic chose to maintain the park as a conservation area, despite the fact that the country was already suffering from overpopulation. During the war leading up to the genocide in 1994, Volcanoes became a battlefield. The park headquarters were attacked in 1992 and all tourist activities ceased. The park resumed operations in 1999.

At one point in history, Gishwati was a rich forest corridor connecting Volcanoes in the north to Nyungwe in the south. But human encroachment and farming split the area into three distinct forests. In the 1980s, Gishwati had already shrunk to one fourth its former size. When refugees resettled after the genocide, they slashed the forest down to less than one percent, marooning the handful of chimps that survived.

Those chimps got President H.E. Paul Kagame's attention in 2007, when Gishwati's potential as a conservation and tourism site was highlighted in VISION 2020, Rwanda's long-term development plan to overcome tribal division and poverty. Gishwati could become the next Volcanoes. When combined with Volcanoes, home to gorillas in the north, and Nyungwe, home to chimpanzees in the south, a restored Gishwati could catapult Rwanda into a compelling eco-tourism destination.

'Our president sees the value in managing our natural resources. The simple fact is that we can make money from it,' says Rose Mukankomeje, the Rwanda Environmental Management Agency's Director General. The Gishwati Conservation Project was born.

Ground Zero

33-year-old Nyiratuza learned about the project through a job posting on the internet last year. She beat out 11 other candidates for the role of Project Coordinator. With a Masters degree in Environmental Management specialising in Gishwati, she already understood the complicated relationship between the forest and its denizens. So despite the area's designation as a conservation showcase, she wasn't surprised to find herself in the midst of a volatile situation from Day One.

A few months prior to Nyiratuza's appointment, a farmer shot and killed a chimpanzee for stealing corn from his field. Then a research team from the US-based Great Ape Trust arrived and suddenly, these pesky crop-raiders were sacred cows. By the time Nyiratuza was on site, locals had the idea that their government cared more about a band of monkeys than its people.

'I saw it as a matter of education at that point,' says Nyiratuza, who worked as a school teacher prior to her job with the conservation project. 'No chimps meant no tourism dollars. We had to find a way to live together.'

Nyiratuza led a village outreach program, aimed at the four sectors adjacent to the forest. She initiated discussions on sustainable solutions to crop-raiding. She formed a cooperative for farmers with crops on the forest edge. The group decided to switch from corn to crops with no chimp appeal – Irish potatoes and beans.

At this point, Nyiratuza stayed away from talking about relocation, or the forest boundary's effects on people's

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Border Control

But, difficult thought it was, the issue had to be broached. The project had a goal of replanting 316 hectares, bringing the forest up to one percent of its former size, and land for reforestation doesn't just come from thin air. In Rwanda's most densely populated district, that somewhere meant from beneath a family or a farm.

Nyiratuza approached the problem logically. An official forest boundary was set in 2002 by the government as part of a smaller-scale reforestation effort to address issues with landslides and flooding. The families living there had agreed to the boundary, but nevertheless encroached upon it. Nyiratuza upheld the boundary, using markers to remind villagers where it was, so there would be no excuse for farm creep.

'While researching the actual boundary, I came across one farmer who had half his farm outside the boundary, and the other half in what used to be the forest,' she says. 'He told me he knew he was breaking the rules, but figured he'd get away with it as long as he could.'

A few people had respected the original boundary. Philippe Gasasira, head of the primary school in the Kinihira village, says that he too, was tempted to expand his cattle pasture into the Gishwati forest, but refrained because 'the land did not belong to me.'



Madeleine Nyiratuza listening to Gishwati farmers.
Photo: Will Chesser

But for most, doing the right thing was a luxury they could not afford. Other villagers, lacking Gasasira's headmaster income, destroyed the Gishwati out of necessity, trying to free their children from poverty.

'It's one thing to put food on the table,' says Nyiratuza, who grew up in this district, which falls 70 percent below the poverty line, and as much as 90 percent below at the forest perimeter, 'but families need a little something extra for school uniforms. Without uniforms, their children cannot attend class.'

While she understood their reasoning, Nyiratuza was the one employed to reclaim the land. With the support of a newly-implemented team of four eco-guards to patrol the barrier, she introduced concrete posts at the perimeter.

'This makes it clear,' she says. 'You can't be accountable for something you can't see, can't quantify. Now the people know, "this is our forest."'

Despite the uneasy atmosphere, it is significant that Gishwati's are the only unarmed eco-guards in all of Africa. They patrol the park boundaries in groups of two 24-7. Of the four men, only one, Etienne, has military background. But even he admits to being scared.

'When you come upon a group of men in the forest using machetes to cut bamboo, it is very unnerving to be without a weapon yourself because you can't anticipate how they are going to react,' he says. 'Our mission is education, not force, and we take that risk everyday.'

So far, no one has resorted to violence. Illegal activities, like tree-cutting and charcoal-making, have nearly disappeared since the arrival of the eco-guards. Encroachment is no longer possible, since the boundary is clear and enforced.

'The best indication that we're doing something right is that the locals have started reporting unsustainable activity,' Nyiratuza says. 'They are starting to understand the importance of this forest.'

A Forced Marriage

Nevertheless, the current situation could be called an uneasy truce. One year into Nyiratuza's appointment, some areas have embraced the saving of the Gishwati, working with her to create environmental clubs in local schools and adding conservation to their curriculums. Others remain sceptical at best, resistant at worst. Residents of the mountain village of Kinyenkanda, facing impending relocation, uprooted 70,000 freshly planted seedlings in an area adjacent to their homes. All 152 households lie within the forest boundary, and residents were understandably fearful of their forced departure, even with the promise of \$250 million-worth of Rwandan Francs in government support.

Ultimately, of course, the fate of the chimpanzees and the of the farmers are tied together. Nyiratuza struggles to make locals understand that the destruction of the forest is directly responsible for the floods and landslides that have plagued the community since 2006. More than 30 people died during the last two rainy seasons, hundreds of families fled, farms flooded, and homes were destroyed. The Sebeya River, a major watershed at the base of Gishwati's hills has become contaminated by run-off.

'We need trees on those hills, not houses,' Nyiratuza says.

The challenge for Nyiratuza in Rwanda has been making people understand the gravity of deforestation before a large-scale disaster occurs - often disguised by the short-term gains of increasing farmland.

'The gain is an illusion,' Nyiratuza says. 'Long-term, environmental degradation leads to even greater poverty.'

Quantifying the intrinsic value of a forest in an area of resource scarcity has proven difficult, if not impossible. It's easier to think of it in terms of the opportunity cost of tourism dollars. 'But that's really only a small part of the benefit of the Gishwati Forest for the people of Rwanda, and for the people of the world,' Nyiratuza maintains.

If Nyiratuza fails, the Gishwati will disappear totally. A once-vital habitat will become a wasteland, unable to support either chimps or humans.

If she succeeds, The Gishwati Conservation Project will become a world-wide model. The Great Ape Trust is already hoping to duplicate the methodology in areas suffering similar situations in South America.

'That's why we've nicknamed Gishwati the Forest of Hope,' Nyiratuza says.

Jayne Otto is a freelance journalist. Photographs by William Chesser.

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