

**THE DIAN FOSSEY GORILLA FUND OBSERVES MOUNTAIN GORILLA YOUNGSTERS
DISMANTLE TRAPS**
Reported by E.M. Fay

The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund tracks gorilla families and provides medical care and protection. This adorable baby was found to be missing. Please visit the website: www.Gorillafund.org for more information.

As one of our nearest animal cousins, gorillas have long fascinated humans. We are both members of the hominidae family; they are at once like us and unlike us. Certainly, they can grow larger than most humans, and yet they seem to live simpler lives than we do, with all our technology and self-perceived sophistication. But whatever the outward differences, there are myriad similarities between the gorilla and homo sapiens, perhaps more than we realize.



Baby gorilla breaking up snare trap. Photo by Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund

We humans often credit our species with being the only animal who thinks ahead, who makes complex plans, who analyzes our condition; i.e., we generally assume ourselves to have cognitive skill beyond that of other living beings. However, numerous scientific studies, as well as simple observation, have demonstrated that animals have a capacity for thought with which they are not always credited. From fish to primates, observed behaviors reveal aptitudes not previously understood, except by scientists and others in intimate contact with the subjects.

In the small central African nation of Rwanda, the indigenous Mountain Gorilla has been under threat ever since humans discovered their existence. Although early Man may be forgiven for viewing the obviously powerful gorillas as a danger to himself, and therefore having sought ways to eliminate them, modern humans do not have that excuse. The work of such visionaries as Dian Fossey and her colleagues has educated us about the essential gentleness and intelligence of the predominantly herbivorous gorilla.

Although the consensus of public opinion has largely turned against the hunting of gorillas merely for “sport” or “trophies,” the killing and/or capture of gorillas, both adults and children, has tragically continued in the form of illegal poaching. Poaching is one of the chief threats to the Mountain Gorillas’ and indeed, all gorillas’ survival, but so, too, is the conversion of natural land to agricultural use, with subsequent loss of gorilla habitat and food supply, as well as mining activities, which despoil the land and water resources, and disease, the latter of which can be caused by increased contact with humans.

Fortunately, the Rwandan government has recognized the critical nature of the situation and does provide considerable help to gorilla conservation efforts. As Erika Archibald, Ph.D., the Communications Director of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund told us, “They have their own tracker teams, anti-poaching teams, veterinarians, and also run the whole national park and gorilla tourism. They do a lot of events and education as well, to protect the gorillas. They are clear that the gorillas are one of their main national treasures.”

Such an understanding of the gorillas’ value – not only as a tourism resource, but as individual beings with their own intrinsic worth – is essential if we are to save this magnificent species, something that the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund has been working indefatigably to do for several decades. Happily, there is another ally in this cause that people in the field have been aware of for some time: the gorillas themselves.

Over 40 years ago, Dian Fossey herself observed adult Silverback Gorillas breaking apart the structures of sharp, pointed-wooden snares that poachers had set up in the forest to catch gorillas. These cruelly devised snares had caused a painful death for many gorillas, and apparently, those individuals who saw their friends and family members caught in them and suffering, determined to dismantle the snares when they had the opportunity, for they did so and were seen to do so by Ms. Fossey and others. She wrote about the phenomenon in her brilliant and moving, best-selling book, "Gorillas in the Mist."



Although researchers knew that adults had figured out how to disarm the fiendish traps, it has now been reported and documented that young gorillas have learned the technique, too. Conservationists from the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund recently observed a pair of juvenile gorillas using the same skills as their elders as they destroyed the diabolical devices meant to ensnare them. As reported by Veronica Vecellio, a Program Director from the Fund, in a July 17th posting on the Gorilla Fund's blog, a gorilla had been killed nearby in one of the traps a few days previously, so it is reasonable to assume that the youngsters had seen this and learned to be wary of them.

Veronica said, "We knew that gorillas do this but all of the reported cases in the past were carried out by adult gorillas, mostly silverbacks. Today, two juveniles and one blackback.....worked together to deactivate two snares, and how they did it demonstrated an impressive cognitive skill."

(Read the remarkable full account at: <http://gorillafund.org/blog>)

Wildlife Watch was thrilled to learn that these capable juvenile gorillas had developed this useful skill, but of course, it is a sad commentary on humanity that the innocent gorillas need to be aware of the danger that humans pose to their existence.

In the light of the many instances of intelligent, coordinated behavior by gorillas that have been witnessed by Dian Fossey and her colleagues, we asked Dr. Archibald if it was likely that the cognitive skills of gorillas are similar to humans. She replied, "I don't think that's something scientists will ever be able to answer, but we work only in the field and that is more of a question that would be investigated by scientists working with captive gorillas (such as in zoos)."

It does seem to us at Wildlife Watch that the more humans recognize the fact that gorillas – and other animals – have their own complex thoughts, feelings, and social structures, the more likely it is that we as a species will come to respect them and leave them to live their lives in peace. In the case of gorillas and other primates, we have so much in common that a certain amount of empathy should be given. The hunting of gorillas is something that all persons of good will ought to deplore and work against. There *has* been a strong effort made towards conservation in recent years, but the problem of poaching will not go away by itself.

What can concerned people do to preserve the lives of the Mountain Gorillas of Rwanda? Wildlife Watch agrees wholeheartedly with Dr. Archibald of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund: "Learn all they can, educate others, support groups that are working directly in the field to save gorillas, and try to influence others to lend support and to understand the connections of all life."

And remember we are not alone in this vital endeavour. As the example of the clever juvenile gorillas showed us, and as Vecellio says, "Today we can proudly confirm that gorillas are doing their part, too!"

Please read about the important work being done by the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and find out how you can help at <http://gorillafund.org>