



L.O. To retrieve information from a Non-Fiction text.

Gorillas are gentle giants and display many human-like behaviors and emotions, such as laughter and sadness. In fact, gorillas share 98.3% of their genetic code with humans, making them our closest cousins after chimpanzees and bonobos. The largest of the great apes, gorillas are stocky animals with broad chests and shoulders, large, human-like hands, and small eyes set into hairless faces. The two gorilla species live in equatorial Africa, separated by about 560 miles of Congo Basin forest. Each has a lowland and upland subspecies. Gorillas live in family groups of usually five to 10, but sometimes two to more than 50, led by a dominant adult male—or silverback—who holds his position for years. The bond between the silverback and his females forms the basis of gorilla social life. Females become sexually mature around seven or eight years old but don't begin to breed until a couple of years later. Males mature at an even greater age. Once a female begins to breed, she'll likely give birth to only one baby every four to six years and only three or four over her entire lifetime. This low rate of reproduction makes it difficult for gorillas to recover from population declines. Both gorilla species have been decreasing in numbers for decades, and a 2010 United Nations report suggests that they may disappear from large parts of the Congo Basin by the mid-2020s.

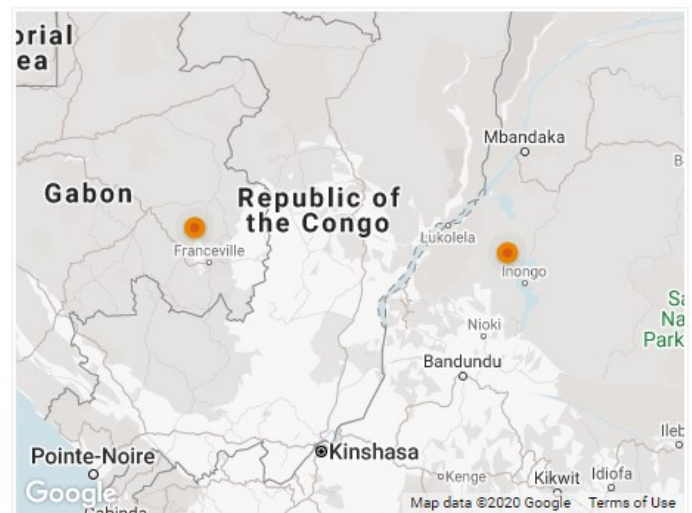
Conservation efforts by WWF, other organizations, and governments are making a difference for gorillas. New protected areas are being designated for some gorilla populations, and the population of mountain gorillas has continued to increase in recent years, leading to its downlisting from Critically Endangered to Endangered in November 2018.

 **POPULATION**
100,000 to 200,000

Aa **SCIENTIFIC NAME**
Gorilla gorilla and *Gorilla beringei*

 **HEIGHT**
4-6 ft.

 **WEIGHT**
up to 440 pounds



1. How are Gorillas like us? Find 4 similarities.
2. Where do the gorilla species live?
3. How many babies is a female gorilla likely to have in her lifetime?
4. What is being done to protect gorillas?
5. Where has there been the most success in protecting gorilla populations?

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Local Ba'aka people help track gorillas in the Congo Basin

A gorilla tracker walks the forest in search of signs. Discarded stems say: a gorilla ate here. Snapped seedlings, overturned logs, a faint depression in the dirt— all telltale signs. A trained eye can distinguish the footpaths of gorillas from those trodden by forest elephants, who tend to be unkind when startled and so require a wide and respectful berth.

"The first rule of tracking is listening well," explains Ossolo Dacko, one of several Ba'Aka trackers working at Dzanga-Sangha Protected Area, in Central African Republic, home to one of the world's only populations of habituated, western lowland gorillas. When Ossolo moves across the jungle, normally with guides and tourists in tow, his ears are trained to interrogate every breaking limb and leaf rustle. Inevitably, he leads them to the gorillas.

Like many Ba'Aka people, indigenous to the Congo Basin, Ossolo was a natural-born animal tracker. He learned the ways of the forest as a child from his father, who taught him how to hunt for game, collect honey, and forage for medicinal plants and mushrooms. Traditionally, Ba'Aka tended to avoid gorillas. "Our parents were scared of them," Ossolo says. Only rarely did they even hunt them, using snares. The Ba'Aka have a superstition that if a pregnant woman were to eat gorilla meat, it could kill the fetus. So the notion of spending hours face-to-face, peacefully, alongside these great apes? "It's really amazing," Ossolo says. "Today I sit next to a gorilla every day!"



More than two decades ago, WWF launched Dzanga-Sangha's gorilla habituation program with the help of primatologist Chloé Cippolletta. Tourists arrived soon after. The park hired local Ba'Aka, who already accompanied park rangers on poaching patrols, to track and monitor the daily whereabouts of the habituated gorilla groups.

"I quickly realized that their forest knowledge was not only essential to the survival of tourism, but equally as critical to the survival of their culture," says Allard Blom, WWF-US's Managing Director for the Congo Basin, who spearheaded the gorilla program. At the time, Ba'Aka had recently completed swift transformation from a society of hunter-gatherers to sedentary agriculturalists. The younger generation was losing the traditional ability to track wildlife. "At the time, there was no economic incentive to do it any longer," explains Blom.

The gorilla habituation program provided the Ba'Aka living near the park with a new opportunity. By 2020, Dzanga-Sangha employed more than 50 Ba'Aka as gorilla trackers. Today, WWF is working to sustain benefits to the community despite the global travel shutdown caused by COVID-19.

"They are really, really respected back in their villages," says Terrence Fou, who runs the gorilla habituation program. "Everyone wants to work in the program."

With his monthly salary Ossolo says he's been able to build a house, provide food and clothes and healthcare for his wife and four children, and extend that support to a much wider family circle. The park also covers his children's school tuition. "I always remind everyone in my family, when I come home with my salary, that this money is thanks to the work that I'm doing. And also, because I'm doing the work very well."

1. What is tracking?
2. Why is Ossolo surprised to have become an animal tracker?
3. Why is there a benefit to WWF to hire the Ba'Aka people and how has it benefited them?
4. How has Ossolo personally benefited from working in the program?