

“Snare Aware” Mountain Gorillas

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People often ask whether mountain gorillas are still hunted, and if poaching remains a problem in the Volcanoes National Park. Until the ghastly resurgence of attempts to capture gorilla infants in 2002, there had been no known deliberate killing of gorillas in Rwanda for 20 years. Poachers set traps for antelopes, but these traps are indiscriminate towards their victims. If a gorilla is caught, his strength can enable him to break free, but during the struggle wire may cut into a hand or foot, and if these cuts become infected the animal may die. To protect gorillas and other animals, anti-poaching teams patrol the forests daily, to find and destroy snares, whilst a veterinary team will intervene to anaesthetize snared gorillas, and treat the wounds.

In “Gorillas in the Mist”, Dian Fossey described the gorillas’ “trap sense”: *“Some gorilla groups seemed to be more “trap-wise” than others, perhaps because of having more experiences with the havoc caused by traps. One day I watched a group purposefully deflect their travel route from a fairly visible line of arched bamboo poles”*. Anyone who has seen Bruce Davidson’s film “Shattered Kingdom” cannot have failed to be impressed by the sight of the silverback gorilla Luwawa smashing a snare. Luwawa’s ability to recognise and destroy this danger to his family made his tragic death all the more poignant – shot dead in Zaire in 1995. Luwawa’s acquired knowledge, gained through experience of poachers’ snares, was lost... would other members of his family have learned from their protectorate’s behavior? This powerful documentary was my first indication that gorillas were capable of recognizing snares and fortunately, although not truly surprisingly, the intelligent Luwawa was not alone. We have since seen evidence that other silverbacks are aware of snares intended for antelope.

In Rwanda, Karisoke research assistant Ymke Warren coined the term “snare aware” after we saw three different silverbacks manifest behaviour around snares which indicated that they recognised the threat posed. In past decades, the gorillas’ home ranges were likely riddled with snares, thus they could have come into contact with traps regularly and have learned through hard experience how dangerous they can be. We have seen silverbacks’ reactions to snares vary from avoidance, to threatening other gorillas to keep away (pig-grunting),

even to the point of biting individuals who approached a snare. Usually the individuals threatened were immatures – infants and juveniles who would have had little or no experience of snares. On one occasion the individual bitten was our assistant Ymke. Ymke described the incident: *“Shinda chestbeats and charges downhill, disappearing from view. Arriving at the area where Shinda’s original run was heard, observer sees a set wire snare. Observer removes snare and moves away. Observer is two meters from snare, with wire in hand, when Shinda reappears charging. Shinda charges again, ending one meter from observer, he stands and stares away from observer for 60 seconds then turns and bites observer in thigh. He stands over observer for several seconds before moving off up hill four meters”*.

It could be assumed that Shinda associated Ymke with the snare and reacted to the danger by assaulting her. But take into account the time that these gorillas have spent in the company of researchers -- almost every day of their lives since birth – together with their ability to distinguish between human individuals. Our interpretation of this incident was that Shinda’s behaviour was intended to dissuade Ymke from coming into contact with a dangerous object, and that his punishing bite may have been intended as a lesson.

For much of 1997 and 1998, the Volcanoes National Park was closed for security reasons. When we regained access to the park and the gorillas, I was amazed to find the habituated population intact. How did they escape becoming trapped and maimed during a time when monitoring and anti-poaching activities were impossible, rendering the gorillas particularly vulnerable? The development of “snare awareness” may explain why apparently no gorillas were trapped. That they kept themselves safe from harm is a testimony to the gorillas’ intelligence and ability to learn.

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