



Gorilla tourism

in Moukalaba-Doudou

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In the Moukalaba-Doudou national park in the southwest of Gabon something remarkable and inspiring is happening. There, a small NGO called PROGRAM is habituating wild gorillas to develop tourism from which conservation and local communities benefit.

PROGRAM stands for Protection of the Great Apes in Moukalaba. There are many great apes in the national park, both gorillas and chimpanzees. Their total is estimated to amount to 4,500.

This is in sharp contrast with the forests of Minkebe National Park in the northeast of Gabon. There poachers have slaughtered most elephants and decimated the population of gorillas, which had already suffered greatly from the outbreak of Ebola in the year 2000.

To help to protect the still untouched populations of gorillas and chimpanzees in the wildlife paradise of Moukalaba-Doudou, a Gabonese group of great ape lovers established the NGO PROGRAM in 2004. The founders were not only motivated by love for the great apes, but

also by solidarity with the people living in the area, who are often poor and jobless.

The combination of compassion and a good sense of reality were the basis to establish ecotourism as a tool of conservation and local development. Without support of the local population conservation of biodiversity is impossible.

At the end of September 2015 I set out to visit the area to find out what it takes to habituate a gorilla and to try to see my cousin, this big great ape whose ancient ancestors are the same as mine, in the wild. Ghislain Bouassa, tourism coordinator of PROGRAM and Nziengui Pie Evrard called Pie, wildlife tracker, were my companions.

