



Gorilla tourism

in Moukalaba-Doudou

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In the Moukalaba-Doudou national park in the southwest of Gabon, a small NGO called PROGRAM offers tours to tourists to see gorillas, forest elephants and other wildlife. Ecotourism from which nature 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 nature conservation and local development. Without support of the local population conservation of biodiversity is impossible.

NGO PROGRAM is habituating a group of gorillas inside the Moukalaba-Doudou national park. Habituating means making gorillas get used to the presence of humans, so they will not run away or charge when humans approach them. The gorillas remain wild and trackers and tourists have to stay careful, but it is easy to trace and observe them when they are well habituated.

I still remember very well how I set out to visit the area at the end of September 2015 to try to see my cousin, this big great ape whose ancient ancestors are the same as mine, in the wild. Tourist guide Ghislain Bouassa and wildlife tracker Pie Evrard Nziengui – called Pie – were my companions.

TCHIBANGA, SOUTHERN GABON, SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 26, 2015

It is around 15.30 in the afternoon when we leave the city of Tchibanga and head for the village of Doussala on the border of the Moukalaba-Doudou national park. The open platform of the van is full of people, supplies and medicines for the pharmacy of the village. Outside the city the dark asphalt of the road soon comes to an end and we continue on a yellow-red dirt road. The sun is shining over a varying landscape with savannahs and forests. We are on our way!





White-fronted Bee-eater (*Merops bullockoides*).

TREASURE TROVE OF BIODIVERSITY

There are not many places in Africa where tourists can see gorillas in the wild. However, in the southwest of Gabon, in the forest near the village of Doussala just outside Moukalaba-Doudou national park, tourists have a fair chance to see gorillas, especially in the right season when the trees carry fruits. NGO PROGRAM organizes trips to go there. You stay in a simple ecolodge and local trackers, employed by PROGRAM, take you in the forest. PROGRAM also runs a fine but simple campsite inside the national park, called Mbani. The food is great. There are also so many other animals and birds to enjoy and beautiful trees as well, especially in the primary forests surrounding Mbani camp. The savannahs and rainforests of Moukalaba are the home of gorillas, chimpanzees, other species of monkeys, forest elephants, buffalos, hippos, red river hogs, antelopes, leopards and more than 300 species of birds, many of them very colourful. Big butterflies swirl through the forest and three species of crocodile can be found in the rivers.

We pass small villages. The houses are made of wooden boards, with corrugated iron roofs and sometimes the whole house is made of corrugated iron, with only one opening to go in and out. People sit together in front of the houses or walk around.

On the savannah at the left side of the road we see a group of grey waterbucks, their necks bent down, enjoying the soft, green grass. A big male with antlers looks up and stares in our direction. At this time of the year the savannahs are set on fire to generate new grass for wildlife to feed on. The fires also serve two other purposes. People can then find and collect mushrooms which pop up in the fields and feel safer because the tall grass around the villages is burned down, so they see can see further.

BEE-EATERS When the car stops for a moment, I notice around thirty birds sitting on an electricity line across the road. They fly up off and on, turn back and settle on the line again. Bee-eaters! Their bellies are deep pink, there is a white stripe beneath the eye, a black stripe across the eye and their head and back are greenish-grey, beautiful! I look at them moving my binoculars from right to left. I am excited. Then, to my big surprise and joy, I discover two different looking bee-eaters sitting next to the pink ones. These two have a striking white forehead, white chin, pink throat, yellow belly, blue lower underparts and a light-green back. I am thrilled, seeing these colourful birds make the whole trip worthwhile already! Later I see a big tree without leaves. In the late afternoon light, the barren branches above the thick trunk form a huge circle full of black veins which are decorated with over a hundred pink gems: rosy bee-eaters who may have chosen the tree to spend the night.

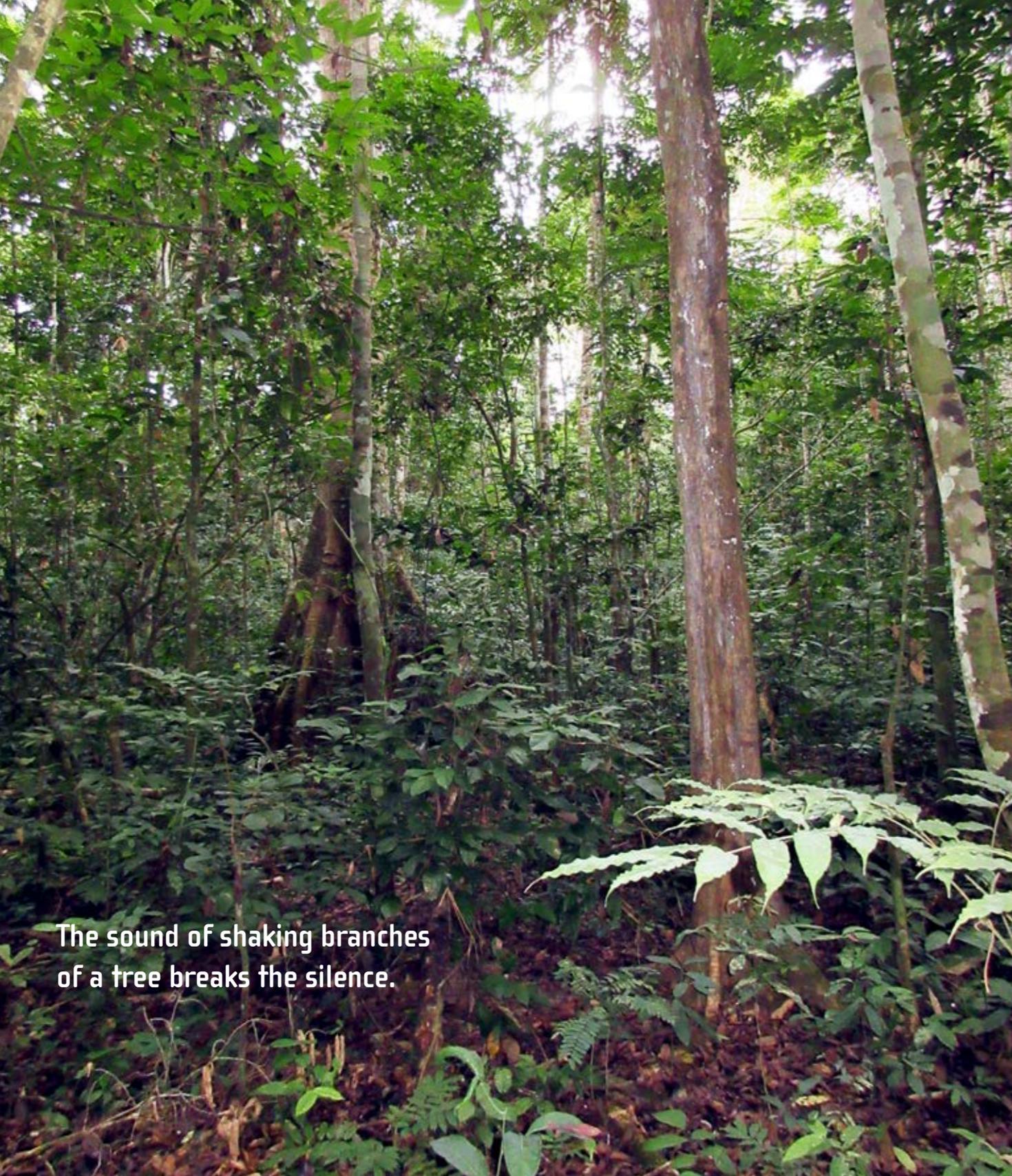
We arrive at our destination, the village of Doussala, which is located along the Moukalaba river, and on the other side is the Moukalaba-Doudou national park. Doussala is small with wooden houses on each side of the road, like the villages we have seen before. Less than hundred people live here. Ghislain gets out of the car and looks for the head of the village, it is customary to first inform the



Nziengui Pie Evrard is wildlife tracker. In the past he used to hunt. 'Taking tourists and watching how they love animals made me understand that animals are really important and should be protected. If my children would want to see a duiker (a small deer, ed.) when they are grown up and it would not be there anymore, I would be ashamed, so I want to protect the animals.'



Tourist guide **Ghislain Bouassa**: 'Nature gives us everything. When nature is healthy, I am healthy. When something goes wrong with nature, I am affected.'



The sound of shaking branches of a tree breaks the silence.

head personally when you arrive. In Doussala the head is a woman, Marie, she is small, looks forty and is sitting on a stool, peeling cassava.

We stay in Case Madre, the ecolodge of PROGRAM outside the village. It is built on a hill at the edge of the forest and overlooks the savannah for many kilometres, until the land rises into the forested Doudou mountain range. Case Madre is the former house of the director of the local timber concession of timber company Compagnie Equatoriale des Bois du Gabon (CEB), which in the past exploited the forest in what is now the southern part of Moukalaba-Doudou national park. CEB left in 1989, but some buildings have remained.

ROMANTIC The lodge is simple, but romantic. There is no electricity, when it gets dark oil lamps are lit and shadows are cast on the wooden walls. The rooms are spacy. There is no streaming water, the bathrooms have big buckets filled with water of the river. Plastic bottles from the store in the city provide drinking water. The kitchen stove works on a gas cylinder. Housekeeper and cook Mamina from the village

We walk on narrow trails of forest elephants.

has a free evening, so Pie and Ghislain prepare dinner – rice, vegetable sauce, baked bananas and deliciously baked fish –, while I write in my notebook on the veranda, listening to the chirping sounds of cicadas and mysterious screams of unknown creatures in the forest behind the lodge.

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 27, 2015 What will the day bring, will we see a gorilla?! In the morning tracker Pie had heard a gorilla shouting very near the lodge! It is around 10.30 when we enter the forest looking for him. Pie walks up front, I am behind him and Ghislain walks at the back. I feel very safe with them. We walk on narrow trails of forest elephants, we come across their dung from time to time. Somewhere in the forest the Guinea Turaco calls. It does so roughly every

JOINT EFFORTS

In the region of Moukalaba-Doudou four organisations cooperate to protect biodiversity: the Gabonese National Park Agency ANPN, Gabonese ngo PROGRAM, Kyoto University (and other universities in Japan) and Gabonese Research Institute for Tropical Ecology IRET. The local population participates through their committee CCGL (Comité Consultative de Gestion Local). US Fish and Wildlife Services and Worldwide Fund for Nature WWF are major donors of PROGRAM which also receives financial support from the French Embassy in Gabon, French Fund for the Global Environment FFEM and the US Embassy in Gabon. PROGRAM receives technical support from ANPN, Kyoto University, CBG timber company, Ecologic (ngo in Japan) and Ibonga (ngo in Gabon).

half hour and local people refer to the bird as the African watch, Ghislain tells me. Pie points at gorilla shit, which is green-brownish, more or less the size of a baseball, orange-brown seeds stick out. They are seeds of the fruit of the Musanga tree, which gorillas love.

RESIN While Pie focusses on finding more traces of the gorillas, Ghislain sheds light on what the forest has to offer to humans. He points at a tall tree, the Okoumé tree, *Aucoumea klaineana*, the most popular hardwood tree in Gabon. At the foot of the trunk there is a white mass, it is very sticky resin, which can be used for different purposes, Ghislain explains. Indigenous people make torches of the resin, to light up ceremonies. The resin is an effective mosquito repellent and also used to close a gap in a pirogue. And, when you put a tiny piece of resin in a bottle of drinking water, the water will taste better after three days.

Pie notices pieces of a stem of an Aframomum brush lying on the ground next to the trail. The stem has been split up across its length. Pie explains that this was done by a gorilla. Gorillas like the spherical first part of the inside of the stems. I ask Pie whether I can eat it as well. Yes, he says and breaks another stem, splits it and hands the inside over to me. It tastes like ginger and it is kind of sweet, and really good! It is a kick to eat the same food as gorillas eat!

Trees and animals help each other, Ghislain explains as we continue our way. Trees help animals with food such as leaves, fruits, bark and roots. Animals in their turn help trees to multiply by shitting the seeds of their fruits in other parts of the forest. Seeds of fruits which lie at the foot of a tree are not likely to germinate: they have to be transported. The seeds of odika fruits even get enriched in the stomach of the forest elephant. Thanks to the gastric juices of the elephant the odika seeds have a better chance to germinate. Sauce of odika seeds is very popular in Gabon. Without elephants no odika sauce!

We keep following their trails and notice how the elephants have torn down trees with their trunks. Occasionally Pie stands still and listens as if he is hearing something. When we cross a small stream, there is some noise in the bushes and in small open space, a red capped mangabey appears, a light coloured monkey, violet red on top of his head, a rather dignified appearance. He looks at us and continues on his way. It is hot, my shirt is soaked. Pie cuts a large piece of liana hanging down from a tree with his machete. While we hold the liana almost straight above us, moving our head backwards and opening our mouth, the liana releases drops of water from its inside and quenches our thirst.

SOUND Then we hear a vague, flaring sound far away in the forest, I can hardly hear it, but Pie recognizes the sound immediately. It is a gorilla beating its chest with his hand! My mind and body instantly focus, I feel my heart beating faster. Will it really happen during my very first walk in the forest, will I really see a gorilla so soon?

Pie walks in the direction of the sound. It starts getting hillier. Pie leaves the elephant trail and goes down a slope very slowly. I follow him, Ghislain is behind me. There are many dry leaves on the ground, they crackle enormously. Grey stones lie loose and may slide when you step on them, where can I put my feet without making a noise?!

After moving down exasperatingly slow, Pie signals us to

stand still and wait. We are still on the slope, about ten metres above the floor of the narrow ravine in front of us. It is pretty steep, I try not to fall and grab the small stem of a young tree, growing straight up towards the spots of light in the green canopy. Silence surrounds us and we wait, my eyes move from the left to the centre to the right and back, to not miss anything. The sound of shaking branches of a tree breaks the silence. Leaves and branches in front of us are moving fiercely. A very young black gorilla with a round baby face appears between two white, big branches of a huge Musanga tree. He sits still for a few seconds, looks around and then goes down quietly back into the leafy mass. I have seen a gorilla in the wild! The first one in my life! We keeping waiting for hopefully more things to happen. A few minutes later, another but older young gorilla climbs one of the big white branches. I can see him very clearly. He walks up fast and through my binoculars I can see enthusiasm on his black face, he is looking forward to the yellow-green fruit hanging above him. Stretching an arm, he takes the fruit and enjoys eating it. Then he spots us. He looks sharply and goes down quickly, disappearing in the green foliage.

HUGE Suddenly a very loud shout can be heard, from very near, from the darkness of the ravine floor in front of us. I am terror-stricken. Waiting for the gorillas I had already seen something huge and black moving in our direction and then sitting against a big grey rock. I had wondered if it might be a big gorilla, but I could not see it very well and, besides, the young gorillas had taken all my attention. Now the huge and black body started to move again up the slope on the other side of the ravine, to the left and then showed himself to us in full glory, twenty metres away, the silverback, the big leader of the group! Standing on the slope on his feet and hands in downwards position, his piercing eyes looked at us with great suspicion. I smelled his strong scent. Two hundred kilos of clenched strength, black, silver grey on the legs, red brown on top of his head. Pie made reassuring sounds with his tongue. The silverback kept looking for perhaps a minute, then turned around, showing the silver grey of the bottom part of his back and disappeared.



Western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*).

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM: TOURISTS CONTRIBUTE TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND NATURE CONSERVATION

There is much unemployment and poverty in the region. PROGRAM involves local people in its ecotourism activities. By engaging PROGRAM, tourists contribute to poverty alleviation and community development. Local people earn money by assisting in the transport of tourists, by tracking gorillas and other wildlife in the forest, by cooking for the tourists, housekeeping in the ecolodge and through cultural festivities such as performing Bwiti dances. The village of Doussala as a whole receives funds from PROGRAM as well. All together, 50% of the turnover of PROGRAM's ecotourism activities goes to the local population, PROGRAM states.

PROGRAM has done more, they tell me. They have repaired roads and bridges in the region and have brought electricity to the village of Doussala by installing a diesel engine. PROGRAM has also set up production of handicrafts and organic honey which add to generating income for the villagers.

PROGRAM raises awareness among the local people about the importance of protecting biodiversity, despite the fact that forest elephants often ruin the crops of their plantations, which is a big problem. They try to convince the villagers that they must be proud of their natural heritage, which is of such great value to the whole world. The bottom line however is that people need to eat and need money to buy clothing and send their children to school. A job in ecotourism enables them to do that. They then do not have to go hunting to sell commercial bushmeat, one of the big threats to wildlife and biodiversity in Africa. Instead they will protect nature, since it is their source of income.

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King Kong is a peaceful vegetarian

The movie poster with the image of a huge, aggressive King Kong rising high above the city of New York is well known. Japanese PhD-student Keiko Tsubokawa, who has studied gorillas in Moukalaba-Doudou, tells that the real character of a gorilla is the opposite: 'Gorillas live a very calm and peaceful life.'



Keiko Tsubokawa from Kyoto University in Japan has studied gorillas in Moukalaba-Doudou. 'My personal objective is to know more about human evolution. I want to compare communication among humans and among gorillas and other great apes. It is a kind of dream to know our common ancestors, how they may have lived and how they may have communicated.'

Keiko: 'Gorillas have different characters, as is the case with humans. They have the same emotions, they can be angry, depressed, satisfied and cheerful. Silverbacks, the dominant males, may fight with each other over females, but normally they avoid that. When silverbacks meet each other, they beat on their chests, but actually they do this to avoid fatal violence.' Cheerful and angry. Yes, silverbacks can become very angry. What do you have to do when a silverback makes a charge? Primatologist Juan Ortega told me: 'Don't run, stand still and avoid eye contact. The silverback may charge but not attack.' Never go alone, that's for sure. One time Ortega got really scared. He was facing a charging gorilla together with a companion, but he was able to use his walkie-talkie and reach two other members of his team. When the silverback saw them coming, he went away.

The gorilla is the largest of the great apes and has a strong appeal on humans. Not only on the movie poster. In Central Africa a gorilla may be killed because people want to obtain his power. A gorilla hand may be put in a soup for that reason. Hunting gorillas for meat is not a treat, Ghislain tells. 'The meat of a gorilla is comparable with bush pig, it's not special.'

ANCESTORS Tracker Pie is a former hunter. He told me that he could never shoot a gorilla or a chimpanzee: 'I love chimpanzees and gorillas because they behave like humans. We are similar, we have same habits, we have common ancestors. Our traditional belief says that when you eat a chimpanzee or a gorilla, it's like you are eating a human, you would be a cannibal.'

There are other animals that are forbidden to eat, Pie says: 'For a woman it's completely forbidden to eat snakes or animals with fur, like monkeys, cats and mangoestes.' Some clans have an animal as totem. Obviously you cannot kill your totem. The totem of Pie's clan is the leopard.

'I love chimpanzees and gorillas because they behave like humans.'

Gorillas are vegetarians. They eat fruits of trees, leaves, stems of plants, flowers, bark, roots and dead wood. The only 'meat' they eat are ants and termites. The silverback may weigh 150 – 180 kilos, females around 80 – 100 kilos. The gorilla species which lives in Gabon is the western lowland gorilla. In the zoo western lowland gorillas may reach the age of 50 years or more. How old they get in the wild is not known.

Western lowland gorillas live in groups of 7 to 10 members on average. The dominant male, the silverback, is the boss. There are several females and sons and daughters of different ages. How do gorillas spend their day? Keiko: 'Their daily routine is to get up around sunrise, 6.00 a.m. or before, and have breakfast. At 09.00 a.m. they take a nap during 30 to 60 minutes. Then they eat again. At noon they take another nap during 30 to 60 minutes. After that they move to search for food. Around 02.00 p.m. they once more take a nap of 30 to 60 minutes. It depends on the day,' Keiko adds, 'if they have interaction with another group, the day may be spent differently.'

At the end of the afternoon, towards sunset, gorillas make a bed of leaves in a tree or on the ground to spend the night. During the night they sleep. In this part of the world it gets dark at around 6.30 p.m., so gorillas sleep long! Keiko: 'If there has been very much rain in the night and the gorillas have not slept well, they may have a big sleep in the morning.'

COMMUNICATION Young males between the age of 10 and 12 start to keep distance from other members of the group and at some stage leave the group and become solitary males. Later they will seduce females of another group and start a group of their own. Keiko wants to specialize in communication and vocalisation among gorillas. She tells that western gorillas and eastern gorillas speak different dialects. Very interesting, I had never thought of that!



Wildlife trackers Doukaga Guy-Roger (left) and Moukagni Jean-René assist gorilla researcher Keiko Tsubokawa.



Spanish primatologist Juan Salvador Ortega habituates gorillas. The goal of habituation is that gorillas become indifferent towards the presence of humans.

How do you habituate gorillas?

Ngo PROGRAM is habituating a group of gorillas inside the Moukalaba-Doudou national park. Habituating means making gorillas get used to the presence of humans, so they will not run away or charge when humans approach them. The gorillas remain wild and trackers and tourists have to stay careful, but it is easy to trace and observe them when they are well habituated.

Gorillas run away when they spot or smell you. How do you habituate them so they do not run away? It starts with the identification of a group, Spanish primatologist Juan Salvador Ortega explains. He has habituated gorillas for PROGRAM in Moukalaba-Doudou national park. The first step in identification is to get to know the number of the group and recognize the features of its leader, the silverback. After identification, Ortega distinguishes four phases: 'Phase 1 is increasing the contact with the group of gorillas, you try to see them every day. This phase is characterised by fear and aggression among the gorillas. Once you have reached a good frequency of contacts, there is a greater

tolerance among them, this is phase 2. The gorillas avoid you and there is still some degree of aggression. You keep the contact very brief though. You spot them and you move out.'

Ortega continues: 'Phase 3 is increasing the length of contacts. The silverback can be aggressive. He has less fear and wants you to stop following the group. Then the silverback allows his kids who are curious to look at you. The females avoid contact. Phase 4 implies full tolerance among the gorillas. The silverback and therefore the rest of the group gets fed up with you and ignores you. You find them every day and you can follow them the whole day through. Indifference is the goal of habituation. Females are the last to get habituated.'

The process of habituation takes five to eight years on average. Imagine, going into the forest with trackers most of the days for so many years. That takes much patience and perseverance.