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Increasing local awareness about the importance of the Gishwati Forest Reserve and the primates that it shelters, Rwanda

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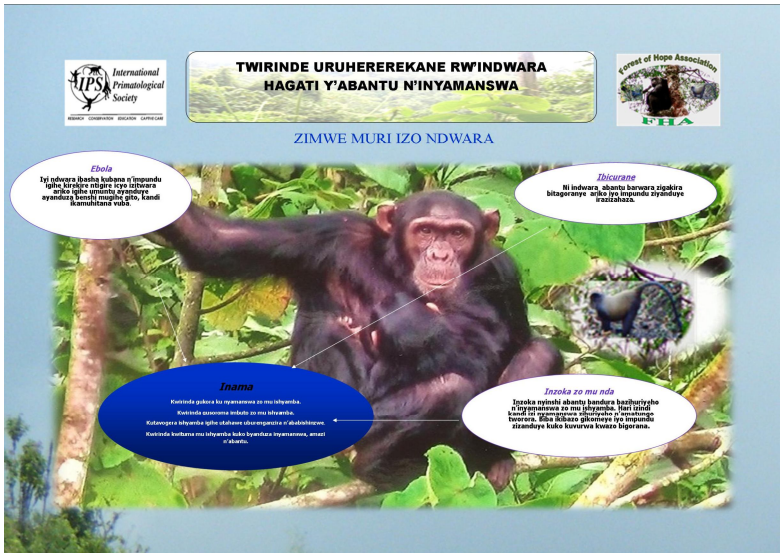
In April 2013, Forest of Hope Association (FHA) was awarded a grant from the International Primatological Society (IPS) to educate local people about the importance of Gishwati Forest Reserve and its biodiversity by focusing on primate conservation. The main goal of the project was to ensure extensive awareness in local community on the importance of Gishwati forest and the biodiversity that it shelters, in order to reduce the primates habitat degradation, poaching, and risks of diseases transmission between humans and primates. Gishwati Forest Reserve is home for a number of threatened primate species including: eastern chimpanzees (*Pan Troglodytes schweinfurthii*, listed as threatened on the IUCN Red List); golden monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis kandti*, listed as endangered); mountain monkeys (*Cercopithecus l'hoesti*, listed as vulnerable); a large number of plant species and more than 130 bird species.

This project was implemented during 12 months. In May 2013, Thierry Aimable Inzirayineza, the Coordinator of FHA visited the 13 eco-clubs and explained to them the components of the project. From June 2013 to August 2013, we designed and developed education materials including 30 posters describing main primates of the Gishwati Forest Reserve, 30 posters describing potential anthropogenic activities that destroy the forest and its biodiversity (including poaching, cattle grazing, mining, charcoal making, timber harvesting and firewood collection).



One developed Poster about transmissible diseases

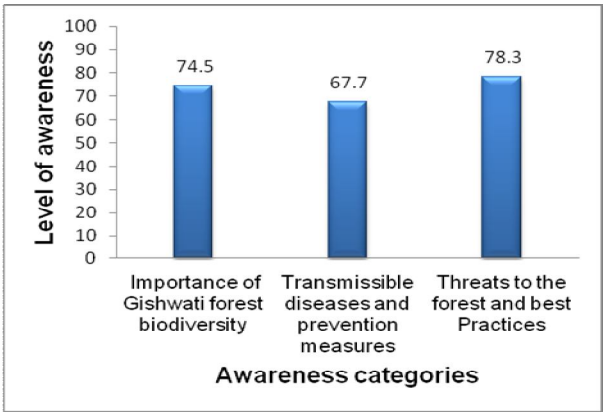
We also designed 100 posters showing the cycle of transmissible diseases between humans and primates and 20 education guides that were used by eco-club members during community awareness. In addition of that, we developed 200 booklets about the importance of the Gishwati Forest Reserve and its Biodiversity, the main human threats to the forest and to primates and the best practices to reduce the threats. These booklets were distributed to communities during the awareness campaigns. The number of posters was doubled because of the $500 that was added by IPS to the grant of $1,500, and the reason was that our project was a Community Conservation Initiative

In September and October 2013, we trained members of the 13 eco-clubs about how to use the education materials. The training participants were teachers who are in charge of eco-clubs and two representative students from each eco-club in schools that surround Gishwati Forest Reserve. They were trained on how to use education materials, and the best techniques they will use to communicate the message to the local community efficiently. At the end of the training we have distributed education materials to school representatives and launched the start of the community awareness campaign.

From November 2013 to March 2014, eco-clubs conducted awareness campaigns in the communities living in villages around schools, and Students reached several households around their schools using different methods. Some eco-clubs had prepared original songs and dances to attract people in the village before the process of utilizing education guides and distributing the booklets. Others have tried to visit all households and educate on a house to house basis in order to reach as many people as possible in the community. Another strategy used was attending meetings and reaching other places that bring people together such as markets and commercial centers, to spread the awareness messages.

Students during the community awareness events

In April 2014, we evaluated the success of the project. 130 members of the communities (10 households in the village around each school) were randomly selected for an interview that was including questions about the conservation message that eco-clubs were spreading in the community. Each of them has answered ten questions grouped into three categories considering three evaluation categories: (1) the importance of the Gishwati Forest Reserve and its biodiversity, (2) transmissible diseases between human and primate, and (3) the main human threats to the forest and the best practices to reduce threats. These data were analyzed using MS. Excel to show the level of local awareness about the project target. The following graphs represent the results.



Graph1: Average score considering the evaluation categories

The total number of households in 13 villages around schools is 1,966 with an estimate of 11,796 people. Based on responses we recorded during the evaluation, about 92.4 % of the interviewees have been reached by this conservation message. This project has increased a positive attitude towards the Gishwati Forest Reserve conservation from 66% (Uwimana, 2011 n=125) to 73.5 % (n=130). Considering the project target, about 78.3% were giving enthusiastic response to questions about the best practices to reduce threats to the forest and primates (Grath1). This level of awareness demonstrates their commitment to participate in this forest management. Also, the level of the awareness on the transmissible diseases information (67.7%) shows a good image of how this project has increased local awareness, as this was a new concept for the local community. These numbers are promising and representing the effectiveness of local community education methods. Even if it is a bit early to say that this project have had an effect on reducing local pressure on the forest and primates, we are confident that it significantly contributed to the behavior change of the local community. This project success has also demonstrated that giving the opportunity to students in schools to share the knowledge they already have is a practical tool to spread a conservation message to the community. Also, students have the opportunity to learn effective communication methods, how to spread the information they learn in school and why these messages are important. We believe that the more local people will be educated the more they will become concerned with the Gishwati forest protection.

As it was planned this initiative was combined with annual eco-clubs competition organized by FHA, where the high ranking community in proving best answers to the questions has to give a chance to its eco-club to get the best annual price. Among the prices that FHA provided include: uniform for traditional dance group of eco-clubs, Radio receivers, soccer balls, etc

Awards to the overall winners

The FHA mission is to engage local people in Gishwati Forest Reserve protection. Currently, we have a plan to continue local awareness raising programs about the importance of the conservation of Gishwati through school eco-clubs. Students in eco-clubs have the capacity to educate the community especially when they have education materials, and they are motivated by annual eco-club competitions that FHA organizes to evaluate their performance. FHA will continue to write grant proposals to support students' activities in the community. If granted, the funds will build on this project achievement to maximize local awareness about the Gishwati Forest Reserve biodiversity to further spread knowledge to the community and its future leaders.

Presentation during the final ceremony