



Safeguarding the Lost Chimpanzees of Kyambura Gorge

Kyambura Gorge Lodge, Uganda



“The Albertine Rift stretches from Murchison Falls to the Virunga volcanoes. It is one of the richest areas of biodiversity in the world. It is also one of the most densely populated areas of Africa. The challenges of safeguarding habitats for wildlife, preserving wilderness, creating world-class tourism products, maximising revenue from tourism, and ensuring communities have a substantial stake, remain enormous.

Volcanoes Safaris and Volcanoes Safaris Partnership Trust have been working on the Kyambura Gorge landscape for almost 20 years. The strategic assembling of four sites that were under severe threat aims to protect the Kyambura gorge ecosystem in perpetuity.”

— Praveen Moman, Founder of Volcanoes Safaris, on 16 February 2019 at the launch of the Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project

The Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project was inspired by the passion of Kuldip Rai Moman for the African wilderness.

Photos by Michael Turek, with additional images from Black Bean Productions, Alex Brackowski, Robin François, Volcanoes Safaris Archive, James Walsh and the Moman family album.

A Conversation between Praveen Moman and Sophy Roberts.





The Queen Elizabeth National Park is situated in the heart of the Western Rift Valley, or Albertine Rift, along Uganda's western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is one of Africa's great national parks. In the 1950s, it had the highest biomass of game in Africa. When the UK's Queen Elizabeth visited the park in 1954, it was renamed in her honour.

The takeover of Uganda by Field Marshall Amin from 1971 led the country into decline and chaos and much of its wildlife was destroyed. Queen Elizabeth National Park was left a shadow of its former glory. The game-rich savannah was stripped bare of elephant, which were hunted for ivory. Hippo, buffalo and cob were poached for their meat. Praveen Moman, founder of Volcanoes Safaris, has a long connection with the park, first visiting in 1955.

In 1997, as the region started to settle after years of conflict, Moman set up Volcanoes Safaris, and began to acquire sites to develop gorilla and chimpanzee tourism in the Albertine Rift. Land was bought for a lodge on the edge of the Queen Elizabeth National Park near Kyambura Gorge — a sunken forest hidden in the plains, where a small population of chimpanzees lived.

In 2000, to help protect the gorge, Moman started piecing together small patches of land bordering the park to create a buffer zone. In 2011, he opened Kyambura Gorge Lodge — an exceptionally situated property, bordering the gorge, with views over the Queen Elizabeth plain and the Rwenzori mountains on the horizon. The land in Volcanoes Safaris' care now encompasses the Kyambura wetland at the head of the gorge, the Kyambura Community Centre and Community Playground, and the four-kilometre buffer zone along the northern edge of the gorge.

The Volcanoes Safaris Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project marked ten years of its work at a community event in 2019. The project stands as a flag-bearer for Volcanoes Safaris deep belief in connecting habitat protection, conservation activities and community livelihoods. At the project's core is the protection of the Kyambura Gorge and the 29 isolated chimpanzees living there.

In the following conversation, Praveen Moman speaks about this unique and challenging project.

Site of Kyambura Gorge Lodge in 2004.

What are your earliest memories of Queen Elizabeth National Park?

In the 1950s my father was the postmaster in the town of Mbarara, 100 miles southeast of Queen Elizabeth National Park. My family regularly visited the park - it was like a playground for them. Uganda was the Pearl of Africa at the time: Queen Elizabeth, President Tito, Ernest Hemingway and Bob Hope had all visited the country. Our family was brought to East Africa from India by the expansion of the British Empire. Some of my great uncles came to work for the British colonial service in the 1920s, followed by my father in 1937. As a young child I remember going on safari in a classic Ford Anglia, driving around for hours in search of the rich game that roamed Uganda's national parks. My father adored the wilderness and the wildlife, and had an insatiable thirst to wander under the blue sky, never noticing the dust and discomfort. He would pore over his collection of maps, pack up the car and head out on safari for as many days as he could, with his family in tow. So I grew up exploring the vast landscapes of the area. I have a vivid memory of the Queen Elizabeth plains heaving with animals and the early morning views over the acacia and euphorbia dotted plains with the Rwenzori Mountains looming in the distance. All that came to an end with the 1972 expulsion of Asians by Field Marshall Amin when my family became refugees in the UK.



And when did you return to Uganda?

In 1982, I was part of a delegation from the European Parliament in Brussels, where I worked on foreign affairs, to Kenya. I then hitched a ride in the EU mail car from Nairobi to Kampala. Returning to Uganda was a shock. The country had become a mess since I had left. It wasn't safe to travel outside Kampala, and even the capital was in chaos, with roadblocks everywhere, and people demanding money and bribes. I stayed only four days, and needed an escort to go to the EU office. Despite the destruction, I was still attached to the country of my birth and kept returning every few years. In 1992 I climbed the Rwenzori Mountains — the so-called Mountains of the Moon — along Uganda's western border. From the foothills, I could see the magical Queen Elizabeth landscape and I was overcome with nostalgia.





When did you first encounter Kyambura Gorge?

By 1997, I was hooked on the idea of rebuilding tourism in the Great Lakes region. After leaving my job in the UK government I set up Volcanoes Safaris and started exploring the Western Rift Valley in Uganda. The park guides in Queen Elizabeth talked about a sunken forest near the old Kyambura hunting reserve — a mysterious gorge tucked in a corner of the park. It was then that I first saw the Kyambura Gorge. The Uganda Wildlife Authority had just started chimpanzee tracking and you could dip down into the gorge to follow the elusive chimps. It felt like discovering a lost world, a perfect tiny paradise, hiding below the plain.







After Amin, Queen Elizabeth National Park became a shadow of your happy childhood memories. Why did you decide to build a lodge there?

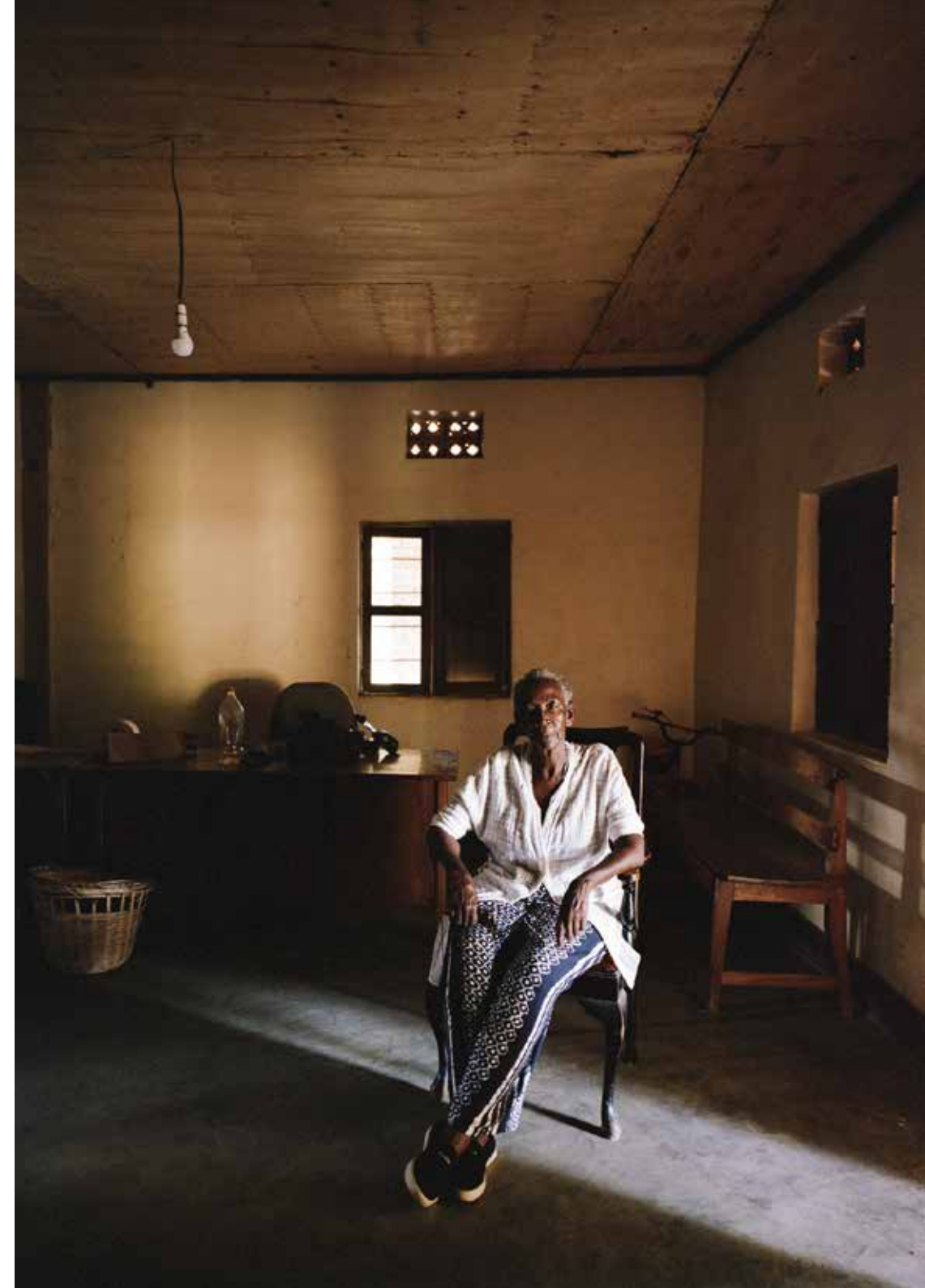
It is really a question of ‘involvements’ as my father used to call them – things I couldn’t help getting tangled up in. In the late 1990s there was so much to be done to restart tourism in Uganda. The parks of the Western Rift Valley are so unique and special – the Rwenzoris, Kibale, Queen Elizabeth, Bwindi and the Virungas. Queen Elizabeth National Park has an incredible diversity in a small area. The wilderness I remembered from my childhood was still there but the wildlife had greatly diminished in the conflict years, the landscape around having become heavily cultivated.

Then there was the plight of the chimpanzees – a relic population of about 15 chimps at the time, stranded in Kyambura Gorge and threatened by inbreeding and habitat destruction. In the same way that Volcanoes Safaris worked to rebuild gorilla tourism after the conflict, I hoped that chimpanzee tourism could also support conservation, bolster the ecosystem and provide income to local people.

I became friendly with Madame Sikola, the daughter of the old Saza Chief and whose family home was next to the Gorge. It was a joy to reconnect to someone who knew the old Uganda. She said it was important that those born in Uganda helped redevelop the country. Today her old home is the VSPT Community Centre.

I started planning the building of the lodge from 2006. Ross Langdon, a talented young architect from Australia, worked on the site for two years from 2009. Sadly he died in the Westgate incident in Nairobi in 2013.

Photos to left show planning and building of Kyambura Gorge Lodge from 2006.





What are the challenges?

The Kyambura Gorge is a tiny habitat — no more than 13 kilometres long and only about 50 metres wide. The majority of the gorge falls within the boundary of the Queen Elizabeth National Park, so is protected, but a section is outside the park and has been threatened by human development. The challenges of Kyambura Gorge mirror a common situation elsewhere in Africa: increasing population and development pressures, declining habitat, and greater human-wildlife conflict. The river that runs through the gorge is becoming more polluted. The future of the lost chimpanzees of Kyambura is under threat if the situation remains unchanged: they will either become inbred or extinct. Local communities are expanding rapidly into all available land and struggling to make a living. Yet despite all these challenges, the rich ecosystem is resilient. With proper coordination, the revenue from tourism can play a major role in the protection of the area, as well as providing a livelihood for local people. Chimpanzee tourism and game viewing can both contribute to this process.

Before the VSPT reclaimed the wetland and created the buffer zone, Stella Ashabe, the VSPT Project Coordinator at Kyambura, used to see the chimps searching for food in the community land, eating local people's bananas and drinking their banana beer! The community were unhappy and wanted to kill the chimps. Now the chimps can look for food without threat in the buffer.





What are you seeking to achieve through the Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project?

We are seeking to safeguard the endangered chimpanzees; restore natural habitats; reduce human-wildlife conflict; and increase income for local people by improving their skills.

In the last ten years we have created a community centre in the local village, a buffer zone around the gorge, and restored the once-decimated wetlands at the mouth of the gorge. Other projects such as the café and coffee cooperative help provide economic benefits to local people.

Nicole Simmons, a researcher from the USA based at Kyambura from 2006, studied the behaviour and feeding habits of the chimpanzee community in the gorge over a number of years, as part of her PhD. Her work showed that although the chimpanzee community almost doubled to 28, the number of females remained very low and there is a risk of inbreeding in the future. Nicole also helped to set up a number of VSPT community projects.

For the Kyambura chimps to survive, creating a corridor to connect them to another population in a neighbouring forest will be critical and is something we want to evaluate carefully. This would require the government, conservation organisations and the private sector to come together and create a forest corridor. It is early days and it is a complex and long-term project that will take some time to evaluate with different partners.

Some of the community initiatives are inspired by the work of Mahatma Gandhi's experiments in self-sufficiency at his Phoenix settlement in South Africa, which I visited in 1990.







How does a buffer zone help?

A buffer zone provides a space between the animals and wildlife of Kyambura Gorge and Queen Elizabeth and the neighboring communities of people living next to the park. By reducing the human-wildlife conflict the buffer zone protects both the wildlife and the people.

One side of the gorge is protected by its position within the Queen Elizabeth National Park. However, the opposite side falls outside the park's boundary, and plantations have been threatening the gorge edge. Ten years ago, we began purchasing the land neighboring the gorge from about forty local owners. We paid market value for their land as well as compensation for any buildings so they could buy replacement land away from wildlife area. By December 2019 we had managed to create a contiguous buffer zone four kilometers long and up to 100 meters across at its widest point along the rim of the gorge. We have been planting a mixture of indigenous tree species to create a wildlife buffer zone where the chimps and other wildlife can roam without threat, and the forest can regenerate. Every guest is invited to contribute to the buffer by planting a tree!

So there is a buffer zone along one edge of the gorge, a national park along the other. What about the two ends?

At the end of the gorge the Kyambura River runs into the Kazinga Channel which links Lake George with Lake Edward. As part of the national park the waterway is protected and a haven for game, making it safe for the chimps. At the other end, where the gorge begins, it is a different story. The land was used as an illegal brickwork and was devoid of trees or wildlife. Between 2009 and 2013 the VSPT purchased 45 acres of land and began a reforestation project, planting over 5,000 indigenous seedlings of fig, African grape tree, and papyrus grass. It's astonishing how quickly the land recovers when given a chance — now there are over 200 species of birds in our restored wetlands, a resident leopard, and colobus and red-tailed monkeys chattering in the trees.

In recent months, the chimpanzees sometimes forage for food here. When I first walked through the wetlands in 2013, it was hard to imagine anything could survive here. Now, the papyrus swamps and bush has regenerated, with hundreds of yellow weaver birds and huge marbled butterflies. Papyrus cleans the water running through the wetlands down into the gorge. The community also harvest the papyrus leaves to make baskets.

Illegal brickworks in the wetland near the Gorge, before 2009, when VSPT started purchasing land in order to re-establish the ecosystem.



How else does the community benefit from conservation of the gorge and its surrounding areas?

As a private company working in a post-conflict region, our first priority has been to ensure that the business is successful. This has taken many years but we now have a lodge much-loved by our guests. The Evening Standard in London said it is 'a heavenly Soho House-like lodge'. As income has increased it has allowed us to further invest in our community projects.

The VSPT Community Centre serves as a training centre for the community, offering education on a range of topics related to conservation, anti-poaching and health. In 2011, we invited local women to join the Kyambura Coffee Cooperative to grow and process coffee. Each member paid a commitment fee and received 100 to 150 coffee trees per person. They maintain, pick and process the coffee, hiring help from others in the community. They can also grow crops on the plantation to take home. At the end of the season, payment for the amount of coffee produced is divided equally between the cooperative members. The cooperative has supported around 30 families. These women now have an independent income, and a way to uplift their families and communities. Some of the members are also trained in soap-making using coffee waste. The Kyambura Community Playground gives local school children a place to play games and sports, especially soccer.

How does the community café play into that?

The Kyambura Community café opened in 2013. Each quarter, the café takes on trainees and teaches them the basics of hospitality. The trainees are chosen from families who cannot afford to put their children through high school education. The training helps them get jobs in hospitality. Over 50 young people have graduated from the program, many of whom have gone on to work as guides, waiters and managers in different lodges. Saidi, one of our keenest guides, and Beatrice, an exceptional butler at the lodge, were originally VSPT trainees.

Are there any other initiatives making a difference to the lives of the local community?

We have been tackling the issue of elephants wandering onto community land and crop raiding. Sometimes the villagers have to be up all night to deter them by banging drums and jerry cans. The VSPT has built an elephant trench approximately 600 metres long to stop these animals infringing on community land. We have also been experimenting with a number of elephant deterrents such as pepper, and a series of wires strung between beehives along the edge of the park — if an elephant blunders into a wire, the vibrations set the beehives rocking, the bees then chase the elephant off. The bees also produce honey, which is harvested and shared around the community.





What do you hope to achieve from this major commitment to the Kyambura area?

Today Volcanoes Safaris and VSPT are the single largest stakeholders in the Gorge ecosystem after the Uganda Wildlife Authority and the local community. Without our intervention, the gorge, and especially the chimps, would be under threat. The area is very vulnerable to the huge pressure of development and an increasing population.

My hope is that our work will help safeguard the gorge and protect the chimps. We hope to ensure local people are given an economic reason to support the preservation of the gorge, the park and the wildlife in this fragile area. If the chimpanzees in Kyambura are to be saved, the focus must be on the local communities that neighbour them.

The Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project is the type of tourism-conservation-community partnership I think is crucial for the protection of such landscapes in the Albertine Rift and I hope it becomes a model that can be used elsewhere.

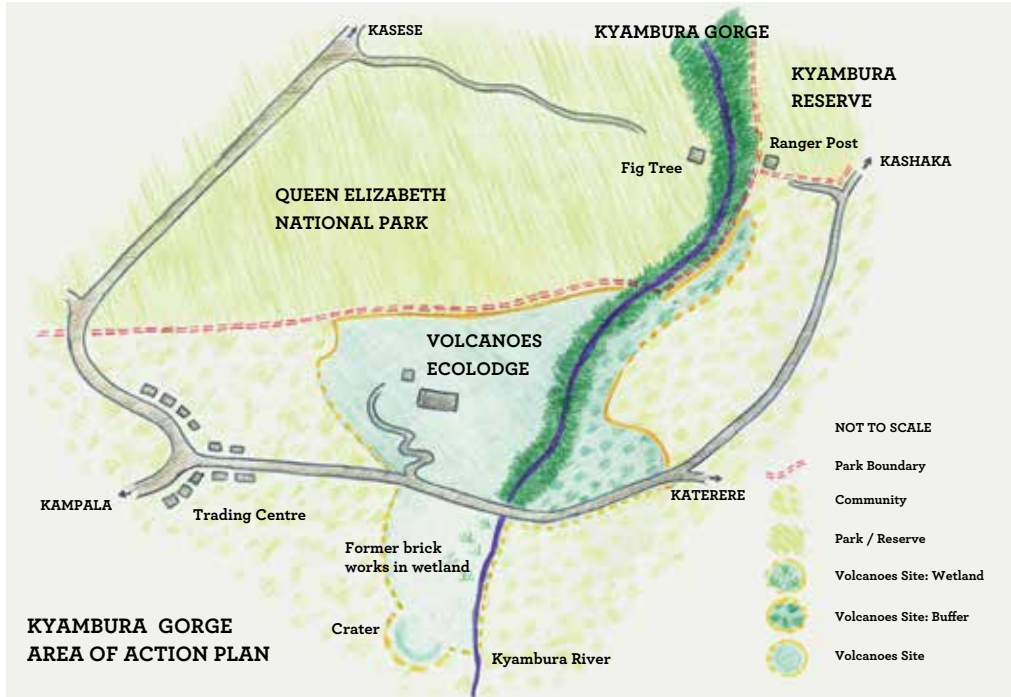
Could you tell us about your partnership with the Jane Goodall Institute?

In 2021, the Jane Goodall Institute Uganda (JGI) and VSPT announced a long term partnership for supporting the threatened chimpanzee population at Kyambura Gorge. The partnership with JGI will build on the work done by VSPT around the Kyambura Gorge landscape over the next few years.



The Jane Goodall Institute/Bill Wallauer





Strategic plan of the project (2008)



Progress of the project (2019)



Kyambura Gorge Lodge

2021 marks the tenth anniversary of the opening of the lodge. Guests staying at Kyambura Gorge Lodge are encouraged to experience the activities offered by the Kyambura Gorge Ecotourism Project. These include a walking safari along the gorge, visiting the buffer zone and the reclaimed wetland, having a meal at the Kyambura Community Café and Coffee Cooperative, and stopping by the playground, bee-keeping project, and elephant trench.

Guests are invited to plant a seedling in the buffer zone or wetland as a direct contribution to the long-term protection of the area. Over 5,000 seedlings have been planted so far.

Donations to support the VSPT and the expansion of the buffer zone are welcome and should be made at www.volcanoessafaris.com. Please do not give cash to any member of Volcanoes staff. Enquiries from individuals and organisations who wish to partner with us are welcome.





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