

Dian Fossey

No One Loved Gorillas More

For eighteen years Dian Fossey lived among the mountain gorillas of Africa, dedicating her life to protecting them. Over time Dian became accepted by the apes and developed an extraordinary relationship with them. Dian Fossey's research on the mountain gorillas of Africa helped to save these rare animals from extinction.

Before talking about Dian Fossey's research in Africa, it is important to understand how she came to be there. Dian was born in San Francisco, California in 1932. She had a difficult childhood, her parents divorced when she was three years old and her mother remarried when she was five. She was an only child, her stepfather did not treat her very well. Dian had interest in animals at an early age, but her parents refused to get her a pet. They let her get a goldfish but when it died, she was not allowed to get another.

When Dian enrolled in college, she chose business classes, because her father asked her to do so. During the summer she worked at a dude ranch in Montana. She felt most peaceful around animals and nature. She loved her time on the ranch. So when she went back to college she followed her heart and enrolled as a pre-veterinary student at the University of California. She struggled in chemistry and physics and failed after her second year. She finally got a degree in occupational therapy at San Jose State College and was graduated in 1954. Dian got a job at Kosair Children's Hospital in Kentucky, working with disabled children. Although she loved her job she wanted to see more of the world.

A friend of Dian's went to Africa on a vacation and she showed Dian the pictures she had taken. That's when she decided she must go there someday. She read a book by George Schaller titled *The Year of the Gorilla* and she became very fascinated by the endangered wild mountain gorillas. She dreamed about going to Africa for several years. She finally decided to use her life savings and get a three year bank loan to pay for the trip. Dian arrived in Africa in 1963 and visited the archeological dig site of Dr. Louis Leakey in Tanzania. Dr. Leakey talked to Dian about going to see the mountain gorillas and maybe studying them. They also discussed Jane Goodall's work with the chimpanzees.

The mountain gorillas live on six mountains within the Virunga Volcanoes, the region in which they live is about twenty-five miles long and about six to twelve miles wide. Dian met with Joan and Alan Root, who were wildlife photographers. They took her into the forest to search for gorillas. When they found a group, Dian was able to observe them and photograph them. After seeing the beautiful majestic black creatures, she knew one day she would be back to study them.

Dian returned to Kentucky and went back to work to pay off her bank loan. Then in 1966 her dream came true, she was going back to Africa. Dr. Louis Leakey had asked her to conduct a field study and census on the great apes. Dian went back to Africa and set up camp between two mountains, Mt. Karisimbi to the south and Mt. Visoke to the north. She combined the two names to come up with the Karisoke Research Center. She started work immediately collecting data.

A gorilla family usually consisted of a male silverback leader, his adult brother or nephew, several female gorillas, and their children. Silverbacks take their name from the fur on their back which turns gray as they age. Dian tried to imitate the gorillas to get close to them. She chewed on celery and other greens when she was near them to draw them closer to her. She spent hours and hours just sitting with them watching, and walking on her hands and knees and imitating their sounds. It took years but in 1970 she

was finally accepted for the first time when a young gorilla she had named Peanuts held hands with her. It was the first human to gorilla contact ever made. Dian grew to love the gorillas as if they were her own children. Dian grew very attached to one gorilla in particular, his name was Digit because he had a crooked broken finger. They had a special bond; she had known him since he was a baby and he would play with her hair or gently whack her with leaves. He would even put his arm around her, to show affection.

Dian wrote two articles for the National Geographic in 1970 and 1971 detailing her work and informing the world of the endangered wild gorillas. She was becoming more aware of the dangers the gorillas faced from poachers. The poachers learned they could make money by selling the gorilla heads to westerners for trophies and the hands and feet for ashtrays. Even more money could be made by selling the gorilla infants to zoos. The whole gorilla family would be killed for one baby, because the family would fight to their deaths to protect the infants.

When Dian arrived in Africa in 1966 there were an estimated 480 gorillas and by 1976 the number was decreasing fast. Something had to be done or they would be extinct soon. She was frightened for her gorillas. Dian worked tirelessly to save the gorillas, she cleared snares and traps and tried to frighten poachers away. The poachers wanted Dian out of there.

Tragedy struck on December 31, 1977. Digit was killed by poachers, he had died defending his family, the killers speared Digit multiple times and his head and hands were severed. Dian was heartbroken, this was the saddest day she would ever know. It was then that she declared war on the poachers. She organized anti-poaching patrols, she offered money for the capture of poachers. It was said, she tortured poachers if she caught them and burnt their houses down. People in the west started thinking she was going insane. National Geographic Society decided she needed a break and she should come down off the

mountain. By this time the number of gorillas left was estimated at 241, the gorilla population had decreased by 50% in twenty years. In 1980 she left the mountains and went to New York. She wrote a book titled *Gorillas in the Mist* it was published in 1983, and was made into a movie in 1988.

In 1985 Dian returned to Africa, she started right where she had left off, sending out patrols to destroy traps and snares. She was not giving up on the gorillas and she was determined to save them from extinction. She had not been back long, and she had just received a long term visa, when on December 26, 1985, she was found murdered in her cabin. She was buried in the gorilla cemetery behind her house, next to Digit. Her killer, probably a poacher, was never found.

In conclusion the mountain gorillas of Africa have been saved from extinction in part by the incredible and heroic efforts of Dian Fossey. She dedicated her life and in the end gave her life to protect this magnificent animal. One thing is for certain, no one loved gorillas more.

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