

DIAN FOSSEY

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(1) I was a primatologist and conservationist and I'm famous for studying gorillas in their natural habitats from 1967-1985. I was a strong opponent of poaching and labored to protect gorillas until I was murdered in 1985. Before my death, I wrote a best-selling autobiography called *Gorillas in the Mist*. The book was turned into a movie three years after I was killed.

(2) I was born in San Francisco, California on January 16th, 1932. I had little contact with my father and my step-father was very distant. I ended up being a very quiet and insecure child. In my isolation, I turned to my first pet goldfish for emotional support which began my life-long love of animals. I also did a lot of horse-riding and became an accomplished and prize-winning equestrienne.

(3) My step-father was a businessman and wanted me to study business and finance. I didn't want to do this and enrolled in pre-veterinary courses instead. He disapproved and my family decided that they would not provide me with much financial support from that point forward. I did various odd jobs to support myself. Unfortunately, I wasn't very good at chemistry and physics and failed my second year of college. I changed my degree to occupational therapy and in 1954, I graduated and began working in a hospital with sick children. I was very good at my job but something was still missing. I couldn't get the idea out of my head that I was suppose to be dedicating my life to working with animals.

(4) In 1963, I made a life-changing decision. I took out all my life savings and borrowed \$8000 from a bank and used this money to fund a seven-week safari in Africa. I visited Kenya, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rhodesia. I met Mary and Louis Leakey who were famous paleoanthropologists conducting ground-breaking research on the development and evolution of hominids. They weren't just influential to me, they also influenced Jane Goodall to study chimpanzees in the wild a few years earlier. The Leakeys convinced me that I would be the perfect candidate to study gorillas in the wild. For eight months I learned to speak Swahili and took classes in primatology. The Leakeys were not worried that I was untrained in this type of research. They believed that my passion, devotion to my project and ability to adapt to extremely different living conditions would make me successful. They saw the same



Dian Fossey
Zoologist, Primatologist (1932-1985)

potential in me as they did in Jane Goodall. The Leakeys would also end up inspiring Biruté Galdikas, a Canadian, to study orangutans in the way Jane Goodall and I were studying the other great apes. Together Goodall, Galdikas and I became known as Leakey's Angels or the Trimates.

(5) I finally started my field research on mountain gorillas in Parc des Virungas in Zaire in 1967. I used different techniques to get the gorillas to trust me so that I could get close enough to study them. I began mimicking their actions as well as their grunting sounds. I made myself submissive and showed them that I ate the plants that they ate. Soon they began to trust me. I relocated my research to Rwanda later that year due to political instability. I ended up creating the Karisoke Research Center in a remote area of the rainforest. Many research students visited the center, but few stayed for long due to the uncomfortable conditions. It was wet, cold, muddy and dark. I myself, felt quite at home in this environment.

(6) Though poaching (the illegal hunting and capturing of wild animals) was illegal, the law was not enforced. Gorillas were in high demand. Zoos wanted gorillas in their collections, especially babies who attracted visitors. Since Gorillas defend babies to the death, I often saw 10 to 20 adult gorillas killed in the attempt to capture just one baby for a

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zoo. Gorilla meat is considered a delicacy and a high status food in some areas so they are hunted for bush meat. As well, their fur and other body parts are considered trophies and magical charms by some people. As of this current year, there are less than 900 wild mountain gorillas left in the world.

(7) I realized that I needed to protect gorillas from poaching. I formed anti-poaching patrols to protect the gorillas whom I began to view as my family. In 1978, my favorite gorilla, named Digit, was killed. He took five spear wounds to the chest while attempting to protect his family from poachers and their dogs. His sacrifice allowed the others in his group to escape. He had been decapitated and his feet and hands had been cut off to be made into trophy ashtrays. I was devastated when we found him

and then enraged. I tracked down the poachers, and had them sent to jail. I was also against tourism to see the gorillas. Since gorillas are closely related to humans, they can get human diseases after close contact. I had seen some gorillas die after contracting human diseases. Tourism also disrupted the gorillas natural behaviors. I was an aggressive advocate for the gorillas and made enemies.

(8) On the morning of December 27th, 1985, I was found in my room hacked to death by a machete. None of my valuables had been taken so robbery was ruled out. To this day, my murder remains unsolved. My diary was found in my possessions and the last entry was "When you realize the value of all life, you dwell less on what is past and concentrate more on the preservation of the future".