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VETERINARIAN . . . IN THE MIST

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Illustration: / Photo (3); Map (Color) JONATHON SLEEMAN, a former resident in zoo and wildlife medicine at UT's College of Veterinary Medicine, is reflected in the glass enclosure that holds Sam, one of two western lowland gorillas at the Knoxville Zoo. Sleeman will be the primary veterinarian for the Rwandan mountain gorillas made famous by Dian Fossey and the film "Gorillas in the Mist." Approximately 600 mountain gorillas, a separate subspecies, continue to survive in the wild; there are none in captivity. Paul Efrid/News-Sentinel staff

(Color) The Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Center, in Kinigi, before it was destroyed during the civil war between the Hutus and Tutsis. The center has now been moved to Rwanda's capital, a 2 1/2-hour commute from the gorillas. Photo courtesy of Morris Animal Foundation (photo returned)

(Color) Members of the Sabinyo group, one of the family groups of mountain gorillas studied initially by Dian Fossey. Twenty-nine! physiological differences separate mountain gorillas from the more common western lowland gorilla. John Cooper/Morris Animal Foundation (photo returned)

Map showing the Virunga mountains, Rwanda and an outline map of Africa

WYNNE BROWN NEWS-SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

"Momma - he's crazy over me ... and the mountain gorilla." (italics)

So reads the mailer from Rosita Gonzalez and Jonathon Sleeman, announcing their marriage and imminent move from East Tennessee to East Africa. One week after their honeymoon, the couple will fly to London, then Nairobi, then to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. For Sleeman, 27, it's a dream+come true. He has just completed a three-year medical residency in zoo and wildlife medicine at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, and will be taking a one-year position as primary veterinarian for the mountain gorillas made famous by Dian Fossey and the book and movie "Gorillas in the Mist."

"I've always been fascinated by wildlife," says the slender young (Englishman, brown hair falling over blue eyes, his accent giving away his Liverpool origins. "It's a life dream for me to be able to contribute to the survival of a severely endangered species as a veterinarian using my veterinary skills."

Some zoological purists argue that a population of wild gorillas shouldn't have veterinary care, that natural selection should be allowed to follow its natural progression of weeding out the weak, leaving only the strong to reproduce.

But Sleeman points out that thanks first to poaching and now to gorilla tourism, this is no longer a natural population.

"Basically, the population's been altered to the point where natural selection really isn't working in a true sense. With 400 animals, each animal genetically is valuable."

More specifically, before the civil war broke out, gorilla tourism was bringing in 4,000 humans a year - who in turn brought along all their


ailments.

"Gorillas are basically just hairy humans," says Sleeman, and thus susceptible to all the germs the humans bring, including measles, respiratory diseases and human hookworm.

Dian Fossey herself suggested setting up a veterinary center, says Ruth Keesling, founder of the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Center.

"You've got to get me a veterinarian," Fossey told Keesling in June+1985, when the gorilla population was down to an alarming 242. "I don't know what the gorillas are dying of. They're all going to die, and I'm going to die with them' - those were her exact words to me," says Keesling.

And frightening words they proved to be, at least for Fossey. Keesling, a trustee of the Morris Animal Foundation, arranged for a site visit to Fossey's camp for Jan. 9, 1986, to see about setting a veterinary center.


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But the day after Christmas, two weeks before the group was scheduled to leave, she received a call: Fossey had been found dead with her skull slashed open by a machete.

The need still remained for a veterinary center. "It was mainly in response to the fact there was a lot of poaching that goes on in the park, mainly for bushbuck and duiker," Sleeman says. "The poaching was being done by the Batwa, a pygmy tribe, indigenous people that live off the land as they have been for centuries. They set metal snares, and gorillas were getting accidentally caught on in these snares. They'd get a hand or limb caught and then gangrene would set in.

"The park rangers were immobilizing and anesthetizing the gorillas and removing the snares. They did a good job, but they're not trained in anesthesia and immobilizing techniques."

The following year the Morris foundation set up a veterinary center, although at that point it wasn't much more than a motorcycle and a tent, says Keesling. Within a couple of years it expanded to a brick building, in Kinigi, just outside the park.

"It was just a basic hospital, darts, dart guns, anesthetics, antibiotics," Sleeman says. "The project has been reasonably successful in the sense that a number of gorillas and certainly a number of limbs have been saved."

Conditions were hard at the center, and veterinarians were rotated every six months. Then in 1989, civil war broke out between the Hutus and the Tutsis and half a million people were massacred. Conditions for the gorilla project became even rougher: "The vet center was destroyed and looted twice, the area became a demilitarized zone, and it was basically like the Wild West, the way they described it - no police, no army," says Sleeman.

The center has now been moved to Kigali, Rwanda's capital, a 2 1/2-hour commute from the park. One reason, says Sleeman, is that it is safer and will be easier to evacuate the staff, should civil unrest erupt again.

He and his new wife will be provided with basic creature comforts: a three-bedroom house with a washer, refrigerator, running water "and even electricity - at least some of the time," he says, smiling ruefully.

Keesling adds there will also be a houseman, known as a "zamu," whose job is to guard the house, boil drinking water and help with chores.

Rwanda is a tiny country, smaller than the area bounded by Johnson City, Nashville and Chattanooga, and it is the most densely populated nation in Africa, with 823 people to the square mile. The Virunga mountains are a ring of five volcanoes encompassing pieces of Uganda and Zaire, as well as Rwanda. In 1967 Fossey set up camp between two of the volcanoes, Karisimbi and Visoke to study what remained of the world's 480 mountain gorilla population.

She named her camp for the two volcanoes, and Karisoke Research Center is still the most famous place where mountain gorilla behavior and demographics are studied, Sleeman says.

Ten years later, one of her favorite gorillas, Digit, was killed by poachers, and Fossey set up a memorial, the Digit Fund. By 1987, two years after her death, the board voted to affiliate with the Morris Animal Foundation.

The Digit Fund has been renamed the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and, fortunately, Fossey's prediction about the gorillas' demise hasn't come true. The most recent census, according to Keesling, is around 600 gorillas.

In 1979, the Mountain Gorilla Project, a separate organization, was initiated in response to a government plan to use 5,000 acres of gorilla habitat for cattle pasture. It had a three-pronged approach: to beef up anti-poaching patrols, to bring in money and to educate the rural Rwandan public about the gorillas. It has been successful on all counts: No gorilla has died from poaching in Rwanda since 1983, the park is the largest income earner of the country, and more than 70 percent of rural Rwandans have said they want to preserve the forest rather than converting it to agriculture.

Toward the end of her life, Fossey became more concerned about saving the lives of the remaining gorillas than learning about how they functioned. She became notorious for her anti-poaching patrols, and some felt her techniques were too war-like and focused too much on intimidation.

Nevertheless, says Sleeman, "If it wasn't for Dian Fossey, the population would be a lot smaller."

The Virungas are not an easy place to work. Sy Montgomery, in her book "Walking with the Great Apes," describes the area:

"On sunny days there is no more beautiful place on earth than the Virungas; the sunlight makes the Senecio trees sparkle like fireworks in mid-explosion; the gnarled old Hagenias, trailing lacy beards of gray-green lichen and epiphytic ferns, look like friendly wizards, and the leaves of palms seem like hands upraised in praise. But rain transforms the forest into a cold, gray hell. You stare out, tunnel-visioned, from the hood of a dripping raincape, at a wet landscape cloaked as if in evil enchantment. Each drop of rain sends a splintering chill into the flesh, and your muscles clench with cold; you can cut yourself badly on the razorlike cutty grass and not even feel it. Even the gorillas, with their thick black fur coats, look miserable and lonely in the rain."

Sleeman will be making two trips a week to the Virungas to visit his gorilla patients.

Routine observations will include looking for any sign of disease: "Seeing if anyone's sneezing today, anyone's got diarrhea, anyone's got a bad cut, and just monitoring them.

"Most of these problems are natural, and most of them will resolve on their own, but it's important to make sure nothing gets out of hand." If any gorillas are found dead, he'll do a necropsy, and every trip will include analyzing fecal samples to be sure the gorillas' parasites are within normal bounds.

+ How will Sleeman know when to intervene and when to let nature take its course?

"This is a controversial area. ... basically the distinction is made by asking: Is the injury a natural occurrence or from something that's a human influence?"

"If two gorillas have a fight over a female, and one gets cut, that's a natural occurrence, and we don't intervene - unless it looks like it's life-threatening.

"If it's obviously human interference, like a snare or spear wound or a disease caused by a human, then interference is called for.

"A lot of national parks use that distinction, and it probably is the best compromise to come up with in terms of management."

What worries Sleeman most about the new job?

"The possibility of civil unrest - not just for personal safety, but the way it would disrupt the project, having to evacuate and the

risk of all the project stuff being looted, all the data we've collected being destroyed."

"At the moment the political situation is calm and relatively safe.

"A year ago the infrastructure was destroyed, and they're still getting back on their feet. There are a lot of refugees and displaced people in refugee camps, particularly in Zaire and Burundi.

"There are a number of Hutus who want to regain power, and there have been reports of open military training and reports of arms getting into refugee camps.

"How serious these threats are is hard to judge, and obviously that's a concern. It could be very peaceful for the next decade or it could be civil war next year. It's hard to predict.

"At the moment it's safe.

After finishing his bachelor's and veterinary degrees at Cambridge University in England, Sleeman was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study zoo and wildlife medicine in America.

He says that UT's program appealed to him the most since it had the most hands-on experience. Students rotate between the exotic animal clinic, the Knoxville Zoo, the red wolf release program in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and the Protect the American Eagle program with Dollywood. In addition, each does an independent study. Sleeman's was to investigate alternative methods of administering anesthetic - a project that could well

prove useful in his new position.

He and Gonzalez have also spent the last few months taking a non-credit class in French, the official language of Rwanda. Most of the natives also speak Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili. Many of the new government officials speak English, since they are Tutsis from Uganda, where English is the official

language.

Language will be important because another part of Sleeman's job is training and hiring local people to help out whenever possible.

"A lot of people have accused the project of neo-colonialism, and that's a big, big topic. ... But the gorillas have become a major income earner for the Rwandan government, and economic stability is important and obviously an important natural resource for them and worth protecting.

"I see myself as training them, showing them how it's done, so eventually they can do it themselves."

Gonzalez, originally from Newport, Tenn., will also be a part of the project. She will be helping Sleeman with administrative duties and will be keeping track of accounts and payrolls.

She is a graphic designer, as well as a writer and photographer, and holds a master's degree in communication from UT. Rwanda offers her creative possibilities as well as adventure.

"I'm hoping this will be an opportunity for me to increase my work in photography and writing which I haven't had the time to do," she says.

"I've been doing mostly graphic design work, and the other skills have slid, yet those are the two things I hold dear." She is planning on pursuing some freelance options once they arrive and get settled.

This job is likely to be a tough act to follow for Sleeman. What does a wildlife veterinarian do after taking care of Dian Fossey's gorillas?

He ponders the question.

"To keep working in wildlife conservation, perhaps in a progressive zoo where there's captive breeding and to be involved in a number of in situ programs. The best example is the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust (set up by Gerald Durrell, author of *My Family and Other Animals*).

"Or maybe at a university - I quite enjoy teaching, working in wildlife hospitals, I'd like to return to the UK eventually.

"The job's renewable for one more year. I think two years will be enough," Sleeman says, smiling at Gonzalez.

The wedding announcement is right: Sleeman is indeed crazy about mountain gorillas. At best, the project sounds difficult, uncomfortable and inconvenient - and at worst, dangerous.

Yet, he says, "Mountain gorillas are regarded as the flagship species for the conservation organizations. It's a unique animal and part of the world

heritage.

"I think it'll be an incredible experience."

More information about the Morris Animal Foundation and its health studies is

available by calling 800-243-2345

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