



THE “GRANDMOTHER OF GORILLAS”, Nyogokuru w' Ingagi, DR. RUTH MORRIS KEESLING, PASSES AWAY AT AGE 88



DENVER, CO – Ruth Morris Keesling, a leading international wildlife conservationist and animal health research benefactor, has died. She was 88.

Her passing on April 18 was jointly announced by her family and the Mountain Gorilla Conservation Fund, one of several nonprofits she founded or led during a distinguished career that spanned six decades and four continents.

Among the numerous field studies, veterinary research programs and ecotourism operations that she launched and supported, Mrs. Keesling most notably led successful efforts to protect and provide veterinary care for critically endangered mountain gorillas. Her efforts started in Rwanda and expanded to neighboring Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When she stepped in, there were only 248 mountain gorillas confirmed in the wild. Human encroachment on their natural habitat was pushing the gorillas into smaller pockets of forest.

Conservation was hindered by larger geopolitical circumstances, as the gorillas' natural range is in some of the world's poorest, most crowded and violent countries. Poaching, war and disease were thinning their ranks to the point where the species was expected to go extinct by the end of the 20th Century.

More than three decades later, the mountain gorilla population now stands at 880. While the species remains critically endangered, experts agree their immediate conditions are stable and their future is considerably brighter.

Mrs. Keesling was an early and vocal proponent of an interdisciplinary approach to conservation, combining veterinary field care with scientific studies, armed ranger patrols, political awareness, cultural education, media coverage tourism and local economic development.

Today, this conservation method is commonplace. But in the 1980s when she started her field programs in earnest, the idea of intervening to treat sick and wounded animals in the wild was experimental and controversial. Equally new was her commitment to educate and hire local professionals to staff the programs.

And, moving from philanthropy to a commercial model by charging Western tourists to visit animals in their range not only funded some operations, but created local jobs and generated tax revenue.

“If we don’t manage all these issues at the same time, the mountain gorilla could easily slip into an irreversible decline,” Mrs. Keesling said. “Gorillas share 98.6% of DNA with humans and need to be protected.”

Born in New Jersey in 1930, Mrs. Keesling learned to love animals at an early age. She grew up in the first small animal hospital in the U.S., established by her veterinarian father, Dr. Mark L. Morris. She eventually became a partner in his related businesses, Mark Morris Associates and Theracon Laboratories, an animal nutritional research organization. Dr. Morris’ work combining veterinary care with specific pet diets led to the commercial development of Prescription Diets and Science Diets for dogs and cats.

She graduated from the University of Colorado in 1953 with a degree in journalism. She subsequently was president of the university alumni organization and received its highest honor for her support and work on behalf of the university.

Her support of animal welfare and conservation began at the same time.

In 1948, she joined the Morris Animal Foundation founded by her father as a lifetime trustee and executive committee member. The foundation is the largest non-profit devoted to the health of companion animals in the world.

Subsequently, she joined the board of the Denver Zoological Foundation and was elected as a lifetime trustee. She helped to develop and expand its education and veterinary programs, and she was instrumental in developing the \$16 million Primate Panorama exhibit, a modern habitat for zoo gorillas and orangutans.

But it was a conversation with famed anthropologist Dian Fossey at a scientific meeting in the early 1980s that changed the course of Mrs. Keesling’s career – and the prospects of a species’ survival.

Fossey had been studying mountain gorillas in the rugged mountains of Rwanda since the 1960s. Fossey was directing an increasingly aggressive campaign to protect mountain gorillas from poachers and local farmers. She asked Mrs. Keesling to send her a veterinarian to treat gorillas who suffered severe wounds from snares, among other injuries and illnesses.

Fossey was murdered in her remote camp in 1985 before that veterinarian could be recruited, and her killing remains unsolved. Her story – and the threat to the mountain gorillas – was dramatized by Hollywood in the movie “Gorillas in the Mist.”

Mrs. Keesling quickly established Fossey’s memorial in the same mountain cemetery where the anthropologist buried numerous gorillas, and she assumed leadership of Fossey’s nonprofit, the Digit Fund – named after a favorite gorilla killed by poachers.

Mrs. Keesling soon changed its name to the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and widened its campaign to support mountain gorilla conservation and build regional capacity. In 1989, she established a sister nonprofit in London known as the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund – Europe to tap into the international concern for the species. This nonprofit later changed its name to the Gorilla Organization and expanded its mission to address the increasing threats to all gorilla sub-species throughout Africa.

Beginning in 1986, Mrs. Keesling opened a small clinic called the Volcano Veterinary Center in building provided by the Rwandan government and established the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project. For the next 15 years, this unique venture would recruit and support a rotation of overseas veterinarians from zoos and universities to provide regular health care to the gorillas, as well as conduct field studies.

The effort had to be suspended several times because of civil war between deeply divided tribal factions, culminating in the Rwanda genocide in 1994. As many as 1 million people were killed in the strife, including many of the original gorilla program employees who worked as rangers, guides and laborers. Veterinary facilities and Fossey’s original remote camp were ransacked as well.

A decade after the Rwanda veterinary clinic opened, Mrs. Keesling established a wildlife veterinary medicine department and training center at Makerere University in Uganda. She secured curriculum from the University of California-Davis, and she solicited funding for renovations and equipment from foundations and donors – most notably the Howard Gilman Foundation and John Lukas of the White Oak Plantation. To date, the program has trained more than 35 wildlife veterinarians who provide field care to great apes and other endangered species in national parks in several African nations.

In 2000, the university invited Mrs. Keesling to help organize and chair a global conference around mountain gorilla conservation. Subsequently, she established the Mountain Gorilla Conservation Fund, a separate nonprofit to support the conference and expand conservation efforts in Uganda.

Since 2002, the MGCF has hosted conferences, local teacher training and conservation curriculum development. It has worked with local authorities to establish 25 secure garbage facilities near national parks to prevent gorillas from accessing food waste and stopping the spread of diseases into the animal population. MGCF also funded a new visitor's center where tourists purchase their permits for gorilla trekking.

In 2013, Makerere University expanded the program and renamed the facility the Ruth Keesling Wildlife Health and Research Center, with a focus on wildlife research, health care and ecotourism. In addition to classrooms and laboratories, the center features a separate secure laboratory for bio-hazard research into immediate and emerging threats to rare species, and a bio-bank to for long-term storage of biological samples for long-term study. The center expands Makerere's capacity to 100 wildlife veterinary students and scientists.

With the support of Eckerd College in Florida, the center also features an educational and research garden for the propagation of local crops, as well as model of the mountain gorillas' natural habitat and exhibit demonstrating the threats to their survival.

In 2014, Makerere University awarded Mrs. Keesling an honorary doctorate degree of science for "her distinguished and selfless contributions" to the university and the survival of mountain gorillas. The university noted that support from Mrs. Keesling and her network of nonprofit was instrumental in the scientific studies that led to the reclassification of mountain gorillas in Uganda into a separate subspecies, which prompted new protection and conservation programs.

Nearly 30 years after Uganda established a regulated gorilla tourism program, a 2017 government-commissioned study shows the program collects \$2.1 million annually in two national parks and generates a wider economic impact of nearly \$20 million.

Services: 11:00am Thursday, May 24, 2018 at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral 1350 Washington St. Denver, CO 80203. Mrs. Keesling is survived by her husband of 61 years, Tom Keesling, three sons; Tom M. Jr., James H., Frank M. with wife Vivian and seven grandchildren, Brian, Jackie, Kevin, Fowler, Logan, Lauren and Audrey. The family requests that contributions in her memory be made to Mountain Gorilla Conservation Fund c/o Ruth Keesling Wildlife Health and Research Center, www.saveagorilla.org. Mail: MGCF 4380 S. Syracuse St. #455 Denver, CO 80237