

Dr. Dian Fossey: Renowned Primatologist and Conservationist

Dr. Dian Fossey, founder of the Karisoke Research Center in the Virunga Mountains of Rwanda, initiated groundbreaking studies of mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. She was considered one of the world's foremost primatologists and animal conservationists. Along with primatologists Jane Goodall and Biruté Galdikas, she was known as one of Leakey's Angels, chosen by anthropologist Dr. Louis Leakey to study and observe great apes in the wild. Jane Goodall studied chimpanzees, and Biruté Galdikas studied orangutans. Dr. Fossey focused on the critically endangered and often misunderstood mountain gorilla.

Dian was born on January 16, 1932 in San Francisco, California. An excellent student, Dian had a strong emotional connection with animals from an early age. Although she pursued some pre-veterinary coursework in college, she ultimately graduated with a degree in occupational therapy from San Jose State College. After graduation, she moved to Kentucky and worked in occupational therapy at a children's hospital. Her interest in animals never waned though. She longed to travel and learn about wildlife in other places around the globe. After seeing photos from a friend's trip to Africa, Dian decided that she wanted to visit there herself to learn more about the native wildlife.

In 1963, she spent her life savings, in addition to a bank loan, financing her first trip to Africa. She traveled throughout Africa over a seven-week period visiting Kenya, Zimbabwe (formerly known as Rhodesia), Tanzania (formerly known as Tanganyika), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly known as Zaire). While there, she visited Olduvai Gorge. This was the important archaeological site of Louis and Mary Leakey. Dr. Louis Leakey spoke with Dian about the fieldwork that Jane Goodall was conducting in Africa and impressed on her the critical nature of long-term animal studies.

After visiting with Dr. Leakey, Dian accompanied wildlife photographers into the Virunga Mountains, a mountain range of extinct volcanoes that border the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. Upon observing the shy mountain gorillas for the first time in the wild, Dian resolved to return in the future to learn more about the great apes.

In 1966, Dr. Leakey was able to secure funding for Dian to return to Africa and begin a long-term study of mountain gorillas in the Virunga Mountains. Dian began her fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, regularly recording the behavior of the gorillas as well as their social structure. She observed that mountain gorillas live in small groups led by a silverback, an adult male gorilla identified by the silver fur on his back. The small groups also include other younger male gorillas, female gorillas, and baby gorillas. In order to gain their trust, Dian imitated their behaviors such as scratching. This process is called habituation.

In 1967, Dian was forced to leave her research post due to political conflict in the Congo. She relocated to the mountains in neighboring Rwanda and established the Karisoke Research Center. She continued her research among the mountain gorillas and in 1970 appeared on the cover of National Geographic magazine. The coverage resulted in worldwide attention for the gorillas, dispelling myths about their

aggressive behavior and bringing focus to the threats they faced in the wild.

Several years later, she earned her Ph.D. in zoology from the University of Cambridge. Now known as Dr. Dian Fossey, the educational credential helped her secure additional funding for her field research.

Dian worked tirelessly to protect the gorillas from illegal hunters. Although usually not the direct target of poachers, mountain gorillas were often injured by the traps set for other animals.

Habitat loss was another issue facing the gorillas. As the human population grew in the surrounding area, parts of the forest were being converted for agricultural use. The methods Dian used to combat these threats angered and upset many of the local people.

During her time at the Karisoke Research Center, she had formed an especially close bond with a gorilla she named Digit. In 1977, Digit was killed by poachers, deepening Dian's concern about the long-term survival of mountain gorillas. She moved back to the United States several years later to complete a book manuscript based on her work at the research center. *Gorillas in the Mist* was published in 1983.

Dian returned to Rwanda in 1985. On December 27th of that year, her body was found in her cabin. The murder of Dian Fossey remains unsolved to this day. She was buried at the Karisoke Research Center, next to her gorilla friend Digit.

Her legacy is carried on through the conservation efforts of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, originally named the Digit Fund. Mountain gorillas remain a critically endangered species. Although their numbers have slowly been increasing, scientists estimate that there are only 880 mountain gorillas remaining in the wild.

Questions

1. Why were Dian Fossey, Jane Goodall, and Biruté Galdikas known as Leakey's Angels?
2. What does "waned" mean in this sentence from the passage?
"Her interest in animals never waned though."
3. How did Dian Fossey gain the trust of the gorillas she was studying?
4. What are the primary threats to endangered mountain gorillas?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. primatologists
2. waned
3. secure
4. habituation
5. dispelling
6. credential
7. poachers
8. legacy

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "She was considered one of the world's foremost **primatologists** and animal conservationists"

- a. scientists who study numbers b. scientists who study primates c. people who live with primates d. rainforest specialists

2) "Her interest in animals never **waned** though"

- a. lessened; decreased b. increased or grew c. earned; became profitable d. mattered

3) "In 1966, Dr. Leakey was able to **secure** funding for Dian to return to Africa"

- a. advertise; publicize b. increase or expand c. get or obtain d. save; set aside

4) "This process is called **habituation**"

- a. hide or camouflage b. toleration; accustoming c. live with or reside d. practice; manner

5) "The coverage resulted in worldwide attention for the gorillas, **dispelling** myths about their aggressive behavior"

- a. strengthening; increasing b. creating; inventing c. simplifying d. dismissing; eliminating

6) "the educational **credential** helped her secure additional funding"

- a. qualification or achievement b. faculty; professors c. publication d. scholarship money

7) "Digit was killed by **poachers**"

- a. earthen pits b. lumbermen; loggers c. illegal hunters d. predators; carnivores

8) "Her **legacy** is carried on through the conservation efforts of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International"

- a. writings; journals b. base camp; headquarters c. funding d. a gift passed down; heritage