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<FORUM>

Chimpanzee Viewing and Regulation: Mahale Mountains National Park

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Background

There is one habituated group of chimpanzees in the Mahale Mountains National Park, M group, comprising some 50 upwards individuals.

This group is exploited for various purposes:

- 1) As research subjects for the continued Kyoto University research project, which requires the continuous presence of observers on a daily basis.
- 2) As attractions to an increasing number of tourist visitors, most of whom are hosted by Greystoke camp during the tourist seasons of June–October and December–March.
- 3) As subjects for film documentary makers, who require detailed footage of chimpanzee behaviour over extended periods.

All these “users” are of benefit to the project, park and conservation as a whole in various ways, providing publicity for important conservation issues, advanced primatological and ecological data, and revenue for the park itself—all have a crucial role to play.

However, they all also compose a threat to the chimpanzees and the project. This can be simply described as that of stress and infection.

There is therefore a clear need to begin taking a more pro-active role on the regulation of chimpanzee viewing in the forest so that the risks above can be minimized.

Areas of Regulation

1. The introduction of a minimum viewing distance rule
2. The restriction of numbers of chimpanzee viewers
3. The restriction of hours of chimpanzee viewers
4. Other rules
5. Introduction of code of behavior

These areas of regulation are not revolutionary, and I am not here trying here to assess their value, which I think is fairly well-understood and agreed upon. I have taken this opportunity to examine them carefully, assess whether they are practical, and make further suggestions.

1. Distance Rule

Prior to taking tourists chimp viewing, we now voluntarily supply a chimp briefing. One of the main issues this covers is the need to keep 5 m distance from the chimpanzees to avoid risks of stress and infection. The tourists have been found reasonably willing to accept this and adhere to it, but it is not easy to maintain in situ.

Problems

- 1) Some others viewing the chimpanzees (some other tourist groups, some film crew staff, some researchers, some park guides) do not adhere to the rules, thus invalidating our reasons for it, and therefore, our authority
- 2) The chimpanzees are very mobile, and often approach much closer than this rule allows

Solutions

- 1) A commitment by everyone to keep this rule. The researchers and research team, rangers and trackers particularly (that is, the “experts”) need to set an example to the visitors: the tourists and film crews, and become self-regulating.
- 2) The distance, set originally for gorillas, who are much less active, should be increased. 5 meters distance for a very mobile chimpanzee is actually still very close. Eight meters would be more than adequate for a visitor to still have a quality experience, and would allow the chimps more room for maneuver.
- 3) An acceptance that this distance rule isn't merely set for static viewing, but also for when following chimps on paths—or moving through the forest. The most obvious infringements occur when trackers, researchers, rangers, and tourists walk past the chimps on the path.

2. Restriction of Viewer Numbers

Problems

We now rigidly restrict to maximum six tourists

per group from our camp but frequently meet many, many more people when viewing, whether these are other tourist groups, or those connected with research and park maintenance. Furthermore, we require a park ranger plus a tracker and our own guide, and often, a trainee, swelling our numbers in a group immediately to 10.

Solutions

We should encourage TANAPA to take a firm hand concerning which tourist/film/visitor groups are allowed in the forest, when, and for how long. There still appears to be unrestricted access for all. We currently have to negotiate amongst ourselves to avoid bumping into other visitors. This is not always successful.

Film crews must be regulated somehow, not only on their distance and behavior in the forest, which is generally more intrusive, but when they are permitted to film. As they require full day and general access, should they be restricted to off peak tourist season—or on days when tourists are present should they be required to withdraw during the tourist slots?

Numbers of “professionals” viewing chimps must be regulated. No one should be viewing the chimpanzees who does not have a good reason and purpose. To help us with this, all “staff”, whether guides, researchers, trackers, rangers should be issued with appropriate uniforms and badges. Sponsorship can supply these. Research teams, camps and TANAPA could all agree quotas of how many permits (badges) can be issued and used at any one time.

Efforts should be made on the part of rangers and tourist trackers to follow individuals not being followed by the research. More communication from the researchers on their preferred subjects, where possible, on the day would help the rangers/trackers identify their “targets” for that day and keep out of the way of the research, and vice versa. Some efforts are made towards this already and it is reasonably successful. A bit more effort on all sides would solve this. Some allowances should be made for the fact that tourists get their most exciting viewing when observing the high-ranking males, more specifically the alpha male.

Long term, high grade TANAPA employees need to be trained as professional trackers/

guides/rangers so that numbers accompanying tourist group can be reduced to one or two at most. This would require language training, forest discipline, chimpanzee behavior, forest navigation, first aid and general guide etiquette. Within our staff, we have already embarked on training our own trackers and guides in the absence of qualified personnel from TANAPA.

Most importantly, if Mahale is to generate good revenues and continue to satisfy visitors to its full potential, a new project needs to be put in place to habituate a new group of chimpanzees to relieve increasing pressures on the one study group. The new group could be reserved exclusively for one or two interest groups.

3. Restriction of Hours of Viewing/Visits Problems

A tourist may have started viewing the chimps then the chimpanzees will move and viewing will stop.

Group size relieves pressure but multiple groups in the forest becomes hard to coordinate and messy, often affecting the quality of chimpanzee viewing.

Solutions

A tourist group will be given a time slot within which they can view. Ideally this should be the only morning or the only afternoon slot. There should be two slots available per day. Within that slot they will be permitted one–two hours of viewing. If it is continuous viewing, one hour is plenty, if the chimps are particularly mobile this should be extended to two hours and possibly monitored with a stop-watch.

Restrict number of tourist groups per day to two.

A re-evaluation of park fees could encourage visitors to come to Mahale, while restricting chimpanzee access. This could involve payment of a reduced park entry fee, coupled with a specific chimping permit for desired visits to the chimpanzees.

4. Other Regulations

- a) No eating
- b) No smoking
- c) No defecating

In emergency, hole should be dug 50 cm deep. Researcher etc should carry a trowel.

- d) Disinfecting of shoes?
Best choice of non-toxic disinfectant-trays in exit points, disposal effects etc.
- e) No flash photography
- f) No beepers etc on cameras
Cameras and electronic equipment with alarms etc can be noisy—disturbing general level of peace, and probably added chimp stress.

I do not see any great problems here.

5. Regulations and Code of Behavior

General guide to manners in the forest—posted on guides huts, Bandas, research posts, camp tents etc etc—about no shouting, restricted movements etc etc.

No real problems here just dissemination of information which would encourage the visitors to support the rangers keeping regulations.

A Final Problem

The biggest problem I see in implementation of all of these rules, even once they are agreed upon and laid down is that this is not a new project, and old habits die hard. We are looking at some quite serious re-education and commitment to these regulations if they are to have any success at all, particularly amongst the entrenched stakeholders, officials and staff.
