

Mountain Gorillas Join Facebook



Hollywood celebrities and Uganda Wildlife Authority launch Friend-a-Gorilla campaign in support of conservation in Uganda

What do Hollywood celebrities, mountain gorillas, and Facebook have in common? The Internet, and the newly launched online Friend-a-Gorilla (www.friendagorilla.org) campaign.



The goal of the campaign is to raise funds and awareness in Uganda—as well as around the world—about wildlife conservation while highlighting Uganda as a sustainable tourism destination. The campaign uses a website and Facebook, one of the world’s largest social networking platforms, to allow users to adopt and track gorillas. For a donation of as little as \$1, users can learn about gorillas and Uganda by “friending” gorillas on Facebook. Once a user has “friended” a gorilla, they are provided with periodic updates, videos, and pictures about that gorilla and its family, helping to maintain the relationship between humans and gorillas. All donations go to the Bwindi Trust, a foundation based in Seattle, Washington that supports conservation and park management efforts in the national parks where these endangered gorillas reside.

To build awareness about the campaign within the international media, STAR Uganda worked with Hollywood celebrities (including Jason Biggs, Simon Curtis, and Kristy Wu) and tourism stakeholders such as UWA, the Ugandan Tourism Board (UTB), Emirates Airlines, Ugandan lodges and hotels, among others to help launch the campaign in September 2009. Expanding on these efforts, celebrities and friends of the campaign (such as Sony Entertainment Studios) hosted a red carpet launch in December 2009 to further highlight Uganda wildlife and raise funds.

Results:

- Major positive media coverage of Uganda worth over \$1,500,000 US: this included coverage on CNN, BBC, The New York Times, and USA Today with a total of over 500 press mentions in local, national and regional newspapers;
- Increased sales of tours to Uganda: one Ugandan Tour Operator claimed, “Within a month of the Friend-a-Gorilla launch we sold over \$350,000 in trips to markets we had never sold before”;
- Greater awareness in Uganda about the value and importance of conservation of the country’s natural resources;
- Enhanced the image of Uganda in international tourism markets; and
- Increased social capital: strengthened partnerships among tourism stakeholders in Uganda to promote Uganda in the global tourism marketplace.

“The campaign tagged ‘Friend-a-Gorilla’ has created the best international publicity Uganda has ever had.”

- AllAfrica.com

This project is run by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and supported by the USAID-funded STAR Uganda project. (STAR stands for Sustainable Tourism in the Albertine Rift).