

outandaboutliving / - WITH PETER MUIRURI

Where former poachers protect wildlife

At Rwanda's Iby'wacu Cultural Village, visitors are entertained and get to learn how those who used to make a living killing elephants and other wild animals became their protectors



Mount Sabinyo looms large over much of Volcanoes National Park in northwestern Rwanda. The cool breeze from the teeth-shaped massif provides a welcome relief from the hot equatorial sun beating down on us as we tour Iby'wacu Cultural Village near the park's main entrance.

As we try to rest our tired souls, a sharp shriek pierces through the compound, reverberating through the nearby woods. From a thatched hut emerges an aging but vigorous man with the agility of a gazelle.

He rolls on the ground, stirring the black volcanic soil. He then walks on all fours as he "chews" some bamboo twigs, all the while imitating the cries and other jungle traits of gorillas inhabiting the nearby park. He closes the show with a wide grin that exposes wide gaps in his lower and upper teeth.

Meet 65-year-old Barora Leonidas, who, together with dozens of other entertainers, uses such theatrics to attract tourists who come here to learn about ongoing mountain gorilla conservation efforts.

But Leonidas is not your usual traditional dancer or comedian. For close to four decades, Leonidas was a vicious poacher who made a living killing elephants, buffaloes and any other wild game he came across. In total, Leonidas was responsible for killing more than 200 animals. Leonidas started poaching at the tender age of 15. This was the only

way of fending for food for his family members who come from the Batwa community, the smallest (and shortest) in Rwanda. The Batwa were known as "the keepers of the forest" and survived from hunting small game as well as gathering fruits from the rich tropical forests. In some cases, he would trade off the meat for other foodstuffs.

Leonidas's story is told and retold to every visitor who comes here. It is also a story shared by his fellow workers at the centre – and for a good reason. Most, if not all, were fellow poachers who combed the local forests for years hunting game for economic reasons.

They would have continued to do this were it not for the efforts of one man who cautiously infiltrated the group sometime in 2004 in a bid to try and contain the growing menace. Edwin Sabuhoro, 40, served as a park warden when he disguised himself as a potential buyer for wildlife trophies. His trick resulted in jail terms for a few poachers.

However, Sabuhoro tells us, jailed poachers did not eradicate the original problem that took them into protected areas in the first place. "The problem was one of economic deprivation," he says. "These people had no food. That is why they were poaching to provide for their families."

Sabuhoro came up with a plan that he felt would deal a body-blow to the poaching menace.

He met with about 100 poachers and convinced the government not to jail them but address the initial problem. Leonidas was among them. Sabuhoro then decided to divide \$2,000 (Sh200,000) — his entire savings — to the poachers who could then rent some land and do some farming.

Sabuhoro, who studied tourism and conservation, decided to organise the group and open an eco-tourism centre where the group would

entertain tourists on gorilla trekking expeditions.

In 2006, Iby'wacu Cultural Village was born. It consists of several huts, built in traditional Rwandan-style, that can be used as accommodation by tourists for a fee.

They are named after renowned people in conservation such as Diane Fossey. Leonidas has one named after him.

All the proceeds go to the group members and their dependants. Sabuhoro takes no salary.

The new project became an instant hit with other poachers who saw it as a feasible alternative to their dangerous occupation. The challenge, according to Sabuhoro, was how to deal with the large number of poachers who wanted to join the programme.

"The poachers realised that you could earn \$20 (Sh2,000) from a hand-made carving than earning a few dollars from poached items. In fact, one of the former poachers here is now worth more than 30 million Rwandan Francs (about Sh4 million). Others have thriving businesses in the local trading centres around here while their children go to good schools. A few are now graduates," says Sabuhoro.

Sabuhoro says the success of the programme to save the mountain gorilla in Kinigi can be used as a model to help protect other endangered species in Africa such as elephants and rhinos. His efforts saw him named the CNN Hero for 2015 in addition to his brief encounter with President Barack Obama as a Young African Leader.

Iby'wacu means "our heritage" and people like Leonidas and Sabuhoro will continue to jealously guard this heritage through song and dance, hoping the rest of the continent will pick up and save our vanishing wildlife.



Barora Leonidas is a former feared poacher turned wildlife protector and 'chief' entertainer at Iby'wacu Cultural Village in Kinigi, Rwanda. [PHOTOS: PETER MUIRURI/STANDARD]

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