A Complex Model of Sustainability within the Context of Economics and Social Policy
The Batwa Pygmies of Southwestern Uganda

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges in this part of Africa is managing the balance between creating sustainable ecotourism around the Mountain Gorillas, while creating a sustainable secure existence for the Batwa pygmies. We typically think of striving to establish sustainable existence models as a virtuous pursuit, but in this case the cost of Mountain Gorilla sustainability is the destruction of traditional Batwa sustainability.

The Batwa pygmies shared the Virungas National Park with the Mountain Gorillas until 1991 when the governments of Rwanda, Uganda and Democratic Republic of the Congo required their forced migration from the park. The migration was part of governmental social policy to preserve the natural habitat of the endangered Mountain Gorilla. The park became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1991.

Traditionally the Batwa existed within the limits of what nature could provide. These hunter gatherers lived in peace and harmony with the forest which meant collecting only what they needed for daily consumption. In the forest they lived in “harmony” with nature and now outside the forest they feel that they live in “battle” with nature. It is frustrating for the Batwa to understand why they cannot use the forest like they used to. They cannot understand why the Mountain Gorillas are allowed to live in the park but they are not.

The driving economic factors recognize the tourism dollars derived from Mountain Gorilla viewing permits versus the cost to the government and local community to support the Batwa. The Mountains Gorillas are seen as a revenue source while the Batwa are seen as a revenue sink. The economic issues add a level of complexity to the sustainability models in this example.

The Mountain Gorilla population is continuing to grow in the park, while the Batwa are continuing to try and establish a sustainable existence outside of the park.