

DMA Minutes for January 21, 2015

Attendees: 102 Guests: 2

Speaker: Les de Villiers, arranged by Alex Garnett, regaled us with his exploits in Uganda and Rwanda tracking and observing mountain gorillas. Mr. de Villiers, with a doctorate in economic history, finally realized his dream of seeing gorillas in the wild after postponing planned trips in 1994 and 1999 due to political upheavals. He is a long-time leader of South African safaris and author of numerous books.

Mr. de Villiers described the Mountain gorillas as larger and with thicker coats than the Lowland species. Mountain gorillas are not found in zoos and there are approximately 800 in existence today. They are an endangered species! Prior to his trip, Mr. de Villiers read extensively the works of renowned gorilla expert George Schaller, an 82 year old native of Connecticut, who literally lived with gorillas for 2 ½ years. His works described the “human touch” of this animal while Dian Fossey’s publications brought their plight to light. She was hacked to death in 1986 by the very poachers she was battling. Mr. de Villiers made the gorillas “human” and described his enthrallment with them after trekking 3 hours to their “family retreat” in the Virunga Mountains.

Later in his presentation, he took us systematically through his trip preparations: “payment of \$750 for one hour of “playtime”; his hiring of a guide, a tracker, two protectors and porters for convenience; his 3 hr. trek to an elevation of 8,000 feet; the rules of engagement when confronting gorillas, e.g. no sudden movement. He described the “silverback”, leader of the pack, showed pictures of mothers with 3 month-old babies and described his experience as “life-changing”.

Our speaker later responded to questions about ebola and how it is viewed and treated in Africa, how laws are more stringent in their enforcement than here in the U.S. (By the way, has anyone heard from our Ebola Czar since his appointment months ago?)

Mr. de Villiers’ talk, “Gorillas in Our Midst” was most educational and shined a fresh light on the species. Human in demeanor, gentle not confrontational, playful, somewhat nomadic and content would be adjectives to describe this primate. (It should be noted that our speaker had the courage to compare these gorillas to women: ‘human, hairy, girlish and dangerous.’ I’m not sure I’d take that description back to your wives or significant others after the meeting.)

This Date in History:

1956- Elvis Presley made his first TV appearance;

1986- the space shuttle “Challenger” exploded on take-off killing all 7 on board. New Hampshire teacher Christa McAuliffe, the 1st ordinary citizen allowed in space was among them. Her famous quote: “To teach is to touch the future.”