

A transnational wildlife drama: Dian Fossey,  
popular environmentalism, and the origins of  
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## A Transnational Wildlife Drama: Dian Fossey, Popular Environmentalism, and the Origins of Gorilla Tourism

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### Abstract

This essay offers a transnational examination of popular environmentalism in the post-World War II era. By exploring the many stories that have coalesced around Dian Fossey, specifically her fieldwork with mountain gorillas in Rwanda, her rise to fame as a female celebrity scientist in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the representation of her work in popular media, the essay examines Fossey's contradictory role in the emergence of gorilla tourism as a new form of global wildlife conservation. Fossey's story and her legacy expose the complex intersections between gender, race, nature, and cultural representation as environmentalism emerged as a global issue in the second half of the twentieth century. Her work with the

mountain gorillas and her image as a celebrity scientist created a new logic for human-gorilla encounters that informed a new way to value wildlife. The essay speaks to the larger implications of thinking and acting with animals on a global stage and what it reveals about the cultural origins of transnational environmental policy as well as the impact of these culturally informed environmental practices. It traces the shift away from traditional conservation and the Romantic ideal of wilderness toward the new conservation and the ideal of natural capital.

## A Transnational Wildlife Drama: Dian Fossey, Popular Environmentalism, and the Origins of Gorilla Tourism

Marguerite S. Shaffer

Historically a western construction, "nature" has become complexly global in its significance. In the late twentieth century, nature must be lucrative to endure. The survival of primates, people and animals, depends on a dialectic of love and money, both of which have been built into global scientific and popular primatology.

—Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (1989)

In 1988 the film *Gorillas in the Mist*, borrowing the title of a memoir by the recently murdered, world-renowned primatologist Dian Fossey, premiered in movie theaters across the United States. The film popularized Fossey's unflagging, almost fanatical, commitment to saving the dwindling population of wild mountain gorillas living in the Virunga Mountains in central Africa, capitalizing on more than a decade of American media fascination with Fossey and her work.<sup>1</sup> Staged as a fraught African romance, which pits Fossey's love affair with National Geographic wildlife photographer Robert Campbell against her devotion to the mountain gorillas she has been studying and protecting for over two decades, the film sentimentalizes global wildlife conservation. In this environmental tragedy there are no winners. Following a gendered formula, the film portrays Fossey as a hysterical fanatic choosing her commitment to the gorillas over marriage and a "civilized" life; her "beloved friend" Digit, the gorilla star in the film, is hacked to death by African poachers; and in the end Fossey too is murdered for her descent into madness in the African jungle as she fights to protect the gorillas at any cost. From the film's logic, the American devotion to saving the gorillas is undone by African savagery, ineptitude, and corruption facilitated by European profiteers, and American film viewers are left to internalize and enact their commitment to gorilla conservation and sustain Fossey's work as consumer voyeurs.

Although the film serves up a formulaic Hollywood melodrama standing in for the complexities of transnational wildlife conservation in postcolonial Africa, the sentimental wildlife dramas it depicts offer some insight into the

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