

**KING KONG:
Scoping in on the Curious Activities of the
International Monkey Business**

**KONG: Part Six (continued):
The Road to Tayna 2**

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“There is nothing humanitarian NGO’s like better than a good famine and some starving kids, that’s what brings in the publicity and the cash. Pictures of a dead Gorilla will do the same for DFGF-I, WWF, the Gorilla Organization, etc. To be honest the killing of the gorilla will be forgotten in a month and sadly it will not have changed much here.”¹

Robert Poppe

Robert Poppe seemed like a valuable resource. Robert Muir, a conservationist working for the Frankfurt Zoological Society in Central Africa, introduced Rob Poppe, a former British soldier who is training armed rangers in the Virungas National Park in Congo.

“As I am sure my good friend Rob Muir will acknowledge we work very closely together especially on proactive measures such as the one we are involved in at the moment,” Robert Poppe communicated by email from Congo to the U.S. “I am a field worker and my loyalties lie with the conservation effort and with the rangers who are on the ground and not with any particular organization. I completely understand and share your frustrations about the general conservation community.”²

It was Robert Muir who introduced us to the now exiled Mwami who told us that the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International (DFGF-I) project for “community development” and “wildlife conservation” in the Virungas landscapes was a sham. Robert Muir had his

own beef with the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and other DINGOs in Virunga. He promised to take us to the newly-discovered ‘cave-dwelling’ gorillas if we returned to Central Africa to investigate the Mwami story. We trusted Robert Muir when he recommended Rob Poppe for our logistics and security, and then we trusted Rob Poppe.

Ground truth No. 1: Never trust a white mercenary in Central Africa.

“I can think of many NGOs out here who do deserve to have their backsides kicked!” wrote Rob Muir, castigating “conservation” and “humanitarian aid” in the Virungas-Tayna-Kahuzi-Biega region. “However, stay in touch with Rob [Poppe], he’s someone to keep your eye on, and I hope he will go on to play a key role in the future of this park.”³

We spent a week on the road with Robert Poppe in the Virungas region of eastern Congo. From here on, we will refer to Rob Poppe as “the Bodyguard” due to the role he played in providing logistics and security. (Readers of this series will recall the Bodyguard’s role in covering for the conservation clique in Central Africa.)

It is tempting to get into the chain of events which landed us in detention with the Congolese Secret Police, tempting also to deconstruct the lies, attribute motivations we will never be sure of, and in the process try to come to terms with the betrayal of our trust. However, to do so will only deflect from the real story, which is the Tayna Center for Conservation Biology (TCCB) in the Virungas. Even though the Bodyguard stole our video record and audio testimonies, our still photos survive as silent witness to the total exploitation of some of the most vulnerable and suffering people in the world.

The long road to Tayna began in Rwanda.

Hell on Earth

Goma was our first stop after a night of rest in Gisenyi, Rwanda. The Bodyguard was late, but he escorted us quickly through the border to Goma. The forgotten human population is more at risk than the wildlife, and a short visit to the UNICEF tent at the DOCS Hospital in Goma opened a tiny window into the human tragedy. We attempted to take a discrete photo of a young woman who had been beaten, and moved behind her frail shoulders to shield her face. But the wounded woman turned, filling the frame. It was a defiant gesture. She was determined to send a message.

“Look at me! Look at my baby! Understand my suffering! Do not ignore what is happening here!”

Not a word was spoken, but her proud gesture conveyed the pathos of humanity. The broken baby in the filthy body cast, lying alone nearby with no mama to cradle her, made us feel sick. The impulse was to reach out and hold, but how can one then let go?

This is the reality of life and death in DRC.

There is no easy way to say it. Goma is hell. No sooner had the humanitarian crisis eased after the Rwandan genocide than Nyiragongo volcano erupted, flooding the city of refugees with lava, mocking life by sparing the mansions along the shores of Lake Kivu.

First floors of buildings are abandoned to lava rock that flowed through the structures. Children play in the lava fields at the center of town. Vendors peddle wares in front of the city garbage dump where the sickening stench of refuse and sewage makes you gag.

Off the record, a UNESCO diplomat claimed that the ecosystem in Virunga Park will collapse and there will be no more animals to protect in less than two years.⁴

Six to ten million people dead, no animals left in Virunga, and British mercenaries working for Richard Leakey's organization Wildlife Direct are sending out press release after press release blaming it all on rag-tag militias with torn clothing, voodoo patches tied to their arms to make them invisible, and battered Kalashnikovs draped over their shoulders. See

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=2&ItemID=13445>

Wildlife Direct arms and trains an "elite ranger force" in Virunga Park. Video in "Congo 2006: Guns for Hire" on the web (www.vonplanta.net) shows villagers being tortured by this elite ranger force and literally peeing in their pants. Meanwhile, we have photo after photo of dead gorillas and slaughtered hippos that attest to the failure of Wildlife Direct's anti-poaching programs.

The intense international competition to acquire gorillas, orangutans, bonobos and chimpanzees for zoos and private collections drives the funding and competition and proliferation of sanctuaries. Conservation groups hold the only captive mountain and lowland gorillas—so-called orphans—acquired by "sting" operations, confiscation and "rescue." Only two days in Goma and we found a traumatized Mangabey monkey for sale. Why? Because poor Congolese know that Mazungus (whites) will buy primates. And survival is a selfish affair.

Russian or Ukranian MONUC pilots were smuggling gorilla orphans out of Goma in 2005 and, according to a local expert who once worked for DFGF-I, Patrick Mehlman knew it. This particular gorilla orphan, the expert impressed upon us, had learned to use a bar of soap to bathe! DFGF-I took no action or, if they did, the result was buried within the bureaucracy or behind the "good neighbor" public relations of the MONUC mission.⁵

Conservation money has not gone to protect these animals. It is a failed policy. The Virunga National Park—a World Heritage Site—is no longer home to hippos, elephants, buffaloes and a host of other species that once formed a delicate ecosystem in which the famed mountain gorilla also struggles to survive. It is home to well armed and fed "conservation rangers" and mercenaries and others running around with automatic weapons—and a poor, starving people persecuted for growing a few acres of maize to feed their emaciated children.

“There are no white rhinos left in Congo,” said Oscar Kashala, the Congolese medical scientist from Harvard who ran for president in the 2006 elections. “We drove from Uganda to Congo through the Virungas. This is a very celebrated park. Everything was green but there are no lions in Virunga. No gazelles. People here have eaten everything. We didn’t even hear any birds singing. We were seeing half naked kids coming out of the bush. For me—a doctor—to see malnutrition like that is very hard. The kids all have wounds on their feet, and their bellies are swollen. They are all sick.”⁶

Our Bodyguard loved the Russian made Kalashnikovs but he wants the people out of Virunga. He told us that whenever he brings a film crew or reporter into Virunga, they all have a few drinks and fire off a few rounds of ammo because it is “fun.”

“Agreed, we are in the backwater of the world here,” Rob Poppe wrote, in January 2007, in a classic and remarkable admission of reality in Central Africa. It is remarkable because the members of the conservation “clique” don’t make such honest admissions. It is classic because it is based in the mythology of the white invader-conqueror-explorer who situates the “backwaters” or “middles of nowhere” in relation to the centers of power in “the middles of somewhere.” Our personal “somewhere” allows us to define “remote” villages and “backwaters” of the world with “savage” and “tribal” elements, in sharp contrast to our so-called “civilization”—the white, urban, industrialized landscapes of the conquering countries. In the rural areas of Africa the people’s lives and histories revolve around their intimate communities and connections with people(s) and land(s) and selves. Congolese people extracted from their familiar landscapes and deposited in urban landscapes rife with pollution, violence, noise, industrial decay and technological refuse would find it totally savage and inhospitable—their “middle of nowhere” is our “middle of somewhere” and vice versa. Said differently, people live in the Virungas, the land is not exotic, wild or foreign, it is “home”. Robert Poppe, the bodyguard, is the quintessential white conqueror. Indeed, we all are.

Recall from Kong: Part Two: The Mwami’s Tale that our Bodyguard Rob Poppe works as a mercenary training rangers for the Congolese government and its conservation clique in Central Africa. Poppe has some as yet unqualified responsibilities for operations in the gorilla areas of the Maiko, Tayna and Kahuzi-Biega conservation areas—CARPE landscapes No. 10, 11 and 12. Poppe likes guns, “lots of lovely, shiny guns” he said. He described himself as “a former intelligence officer and trained anti-terrorist” expert.⁷

“I am not sure what you want to do outside of Tayna but if you have not seen the northern piece of the park,” Rob Poppe wrote us, it “is also interesting, particularly because what the Gorilla Organization [DFGF-E] puts out in its press releases does not necessarily reflect the real situation. The drive to make this a tourist attraction may also spell the end for this fragile and unique group of Gorillas.”

Out of 29,000 hippos, there are maybe 300 remaining. Elephants are scarce, but poke around the alleys of Goma and you find elephant and hippo ivory aplenty. Our Bodyguard showed us a trader and his shop but would not give the location to Congolese officials of ICCN when we insisted he do so. He said something about “conducting his

own investigation.” Meanwhile, the forests of chimp habitat are exported to Uganda through criminal networks aligned with the regime of President Yoweri Museveni and its partners in Congo and Rwanda.

Villagers in the landscapes where these mercenaries roam are universally terrified, especially of unfamiliar white people, and rely upon the Swiss and U.N.-funded Radio Okapi to warn them about conflicts flaring up. Most villagers are too poor to own an FM radio, and if they do, there is no place to get batteries, and no electricity anywhere. People survive on what they can grow and little else. Rebels will trade bush-meat for acceptance, and like it or not, bush-meat keeps families from starving to death.

“Did you know that 11 out of 13 patrol posts that protect the gorillas in the Virungas do not have access to clean water?” Poppe wrote. “You have seen the state of this place. DFGF-I (and the Gorilla Org [DFGF-E]) are corrupt, extremely inefficient, or just very bad at controlling where their money goes. I suspect all three.”⁸

The Long, Winding, Well Mapped, and Muddy Road to Tayna

Red flags went up again when our Bodyguard and guide stalled and stalled before hitting the road to Tayna.

Ground truth No. 2: never trust a white mercenary in Central Africa.

After two aimless days in Goma the Bodyguard showed up late again, but this time with a Congolese driver and hardy Toyota SUV. We stopped for supplies in the well-stocked NGO store—plasma televisions and disco balls for sale—and piled into the Land Rover. Since we were paying all costs, we figured we’d get a front seat, but the Bodyguard was babying an expensive GPS tracking toy mounted on the dashboard. He planned to link with Google Earth on our return and to produce a print-out of the route.

It was a curious activity on the part of our modern-day Carl Denham—recall the greedy white director wielding the old map in King Kong—since the European Space Agency (ESA) and UNESCO have for years charted the region through a project called Build Environment for Gorilla (BEGo). The ESA web page offers a demo virtual reality fly over of Virunga National Park.

“An influx of refugees into the area in recent years,” reads one ESA article, “has led to illegal forest clearing for agriculture or fuel, as well as illegal poaching for food, reducing the living space left for the gorillas.”⁹

A workshop was held in 2002 to discuss a joint ESA and UNESCO scheme to keep watch on endangered gorilla habitats from space. The participants included representatives from the usual DINGOs and BINGOs and the meeting was held, not in Africa, but in the resort town of Frascati, near Rome.¹⁰

The Virunga Park has not only been mapped and remapped by satellite, there are countless studies done on all manner of biodiversity, including at least one major study on the rate of decay of dung—primate excrement—which yields the startling fact that “dung decays slower at higher altitudes than at lower altitudes.”

Really. We could have told you that. You can also burn dung, and cook with it. Starving people in India, Sudan, and Kenya do it all the time.

This particular study partially authored by Katie Fawcett of the DFGF-I, says it “builds on work begun at Mgahinga Park,” and includes the imprimatur of WCS, DFGF-I, ICCN, ORTPN, UWA, and IGCP.¹¹ A graph in the 97 page document depicts “mean time to fully decay of bushbuck, buffalo and elephant dung at different altitudes.”

Meanwhile, we soon discovered that the girls dormitory at the TCCB “university” at Tayna has unconnected toilets and latrines that partially overflow into the showers. Perhaps DFGF-I could fund a dung study up at the Tanya University? The Road to Tayna could be a book. We will offer only a few impressions here: most important is what we found—or did not find—at the end of the road.

The Dung Hits the Fan

Our route climbed the spine of the Great African Rift Valley, dotted by ranger stations here and there, all within the vast Virungas CARPE landscape. We passed villages and huts and unimaginable poverty, but the rangers and their families are squatting in former European resorts and hunting lodges, now abandoned and crumbling. Living conditions are primitive, even for the rangers, but they have food and clean water, their children are well dressed, and food and medical supplies are plentiful.

First impressions count the most, and our first stop was Kibati. Touted as a tourist stop, Kibati had a maggot-infested latrine surrounded with burlap sacks for privacy, and a rooster—it was no weather vane—perched on top. Goats were everywhere. The entrance sign is riddled with bullet holes. Another sign describes Kibati as the entrance point for excursions to the Nyiragongo volcano—an experience sponsored by ICCN and DFGF-E, whose logos are stamped on the sign for brand recognition.

Some 30 to 40 kilometers north of Goma we stopped at Rumangabo Park Headquarters. Rumangabo presented another stunning landscape, and another sorry hovel of despoiled and bullet-holed buildings with smashed windows. Ranger families greeted us eagerly. Children rushed out enthusiastically to see the novel white people, especially the blond Muzungu woman. Straddling the cistern, the expected DINGO placard announces the ICCN and DFGF-I presence. The children fell all over themselves for a photo, and they pointed laughingly at the crude drawing of a bare-chested villager hauling water from the well, and a DFGF-I logo expertly painted in the lower right corner of the sign.

Rumangabo has long been the epicenter of many a Congolese, Ugandan and Rwandan military operation. Villagers have suffered unspeakable brutalities, again and again and again. Dian Fossey was briefly imprisoned there, and she always maintained in private interviews that she was raped and brutalized by Congolese militia.¹² One might say that her legacy and name is suffering the same fate today, especially at the Tayna Gorilla Reserve. A huge microwave communications tower loomed over the Rumangabo facility: we were told it was for park radios—or perhaps it serves other communications needs on the volatile border with Rwanda and Uganda.

We pick up an armed ICCN guard. Our Bodyguard called him “Guard”—another nameless Congolese slave serving his great white master—and “Guard” responded only to gestures and eye contact. We keep him well watered: our Bodyguard was fawning over his GPS toys while “Guard” was getting dehydrated.

Signs, signs, everywhere were signs. More brand recognition, more false advertising.

The World Wildlife Fund panda logo greeted us on the sign at the entrance to the Kabaraza post. We also encountered a MONUC convoy, commandeered by a cranky commander who declined the photo op—because, he said, “I’m not doing anything”—but permitted photos of the U.N. trucks. We snuck his photo anyway, after he finished a surprisingly friendly conversation with our Bodyguard.

Stories fronted by the Frankfurt Zoological Society, the London Zoological Society and others about the well-trained “disciplined” rangers of the advance force in the Virungas are believable enough—until you meet the rangers. Soldiers in plastic, open-toed shoes who readily hand their automatic weapons over to a middle-aged female Muzungu civilian to play with are no soldiers at all. They are desperate men fighting for a meal ticket and shelter for their families, so that Western interests can have a private militia in the jungle.

Rangers at Kabaraza were eager to show us an elephant skull they found in the last three months. Our Bodyguard was busy with the cranky U.N. commander when the conversation began, but nervously watched as we poked at the elephant skull. He hustled over, interrogated everyone, and told us we had it all wrong, that the elephant skull was “much older.” No forensic expert was available, but dried skin and hair and sinewy tissues were still present. Why was our Bodyguard mercenary so concerned about our impressions of an elephant skull?

Relying on a map to Tayna supplied by none other than DFGF-I’s conservation “hero,” Pierre Kakule, whom we met at the DFGF-I compound the day before, our Bodyguard directed the Congolese driver to leave the main road just south of Lubero. We questioned this decision—we had our own maps—but the Bodyguard insisted he was correct. Hours later it was dark, and getting darker, and the truck was mired in mud, and our Bodyguard wanted to go home.

We suggested camping for a fresh start at dawn. A truck heading in the opposite direction was also stuck on the narrow road, and the driver had wisely abandoned it for the night. The Bodyguard decided it was “too dangerous,” so we wasted more precious hours backtracking to Lubero.

The next two days we tried again and again to go down the same road. The locals told us again and again it was the wrong road, but the Bodyguard insisted it was correct and—with his sophisticated mapping equipment and gender authority—he bullied everyone. We could not get out and walk alone in the middle of a war zone.

Finally fed up with the wasted time and money, we told the Bodyguard in no uncertain terms that we were stopping at the nearest MONUC compound in Lubero and having the PIO (press information officer) draw us a map.

Tayna at Last

After three days, and with MONUC’s help, we steered our Bodyguard and erstwhile GPS expert down the correct road. Actually, it was the best day yet. We averaged 34 kilometers (21 miles) an hour—instead of 9 meters (30 feet) per hour. In retrospect, it is clear that our “expert” Bodyguard, tracker and trainer-of-armed-rangers, was intentionally impeding our mission—either that or Rob Poppe is severely directionally challenged.

Ground truth No. 3: never trust a white mercenary in Central Africa.

The situation at the Tayna Center for Conservation Biology—the “American University” and crown jewel of the Conservation International and DFGF-I efforts—confirmed the Mwami’s story, and more. Here was the result of millions and millions of dollars of American taxpayers’ money: the pot of dung at the end of the rainbow!

Most puzzling is that the “university” is located deep in the countryside west of Lubero—more than a day’s walk from the town. However, mineral mines are clearly marked on maps in the vicinity. Our source from nearby Bukonde village claims that gold, cassiterite and coltan are being mined inside Tayna, and that Pierre Kakule has hatched a plan to have graduating “geology” students at TCCB work for him in the forest.

The Congolese teachers told us they have been working without pay for the last five months. One teacher said that his children, who live in another village, are unable to go to school, and that his family is suffering without income. He stays in hope that the school will get funding again. He said it gets very cold at night, but that he is “getting used to it.”

Photos tell the story of his living quarters. It is no wonder he is cold at night: there is no ceiling or decking and the wind enters from both ends of the building.

The dean lives in a green-tarped tent. He stays, he says, because he “has no choice.”

This is the mantra of the people of Central Africa. Workers on plantations, miners, starving families, villagers at Western outposts beset by “conservation” scandals—there is often no choice but to stay exactly where they are and suffer the consequences. Good land is scarce, controlled by corporations, logging, plantations, mining, and big “conservation” land grabs exclusive to a select few, at the expense of the communal many. Those who try to flee end up in a hell worse than the hell they fled from. Extortion continues at roadblocks or river blocks, young girls are raped, and boys forcibly conscripted. Hundreds of thousands of people have died on the road, in the forests, running for their lives and going nowhere as fast as they can. Their names are not known, and will never be known, to the bean counters or participatory mappers, and Bodyguards. And always these days there is some military element spreading terror and trauma. We are talking about economic and political slavery of millions of people, because the man or woman who “has no choice” in this postmodern world is a slave.

Conservation International says that the “Tayna University (TCCB) was completed in 2004 and built for about \$500,000 by hundreds of local villagers working under the constant threat of theft and violence by militias.”¹³ It mentions “visiting professors” and “specialized courses,” but we found something else. The green tent was just the beginning.

Buildings are unfinished. Piles of bricks made by the “orphans” and villagers are overgrown with weeds. The villagers signed over their land with high hopes and a certain innocent but resigned trust. They expected the promised infrastructure, a real community center. What we saw at Tayna are the ruins of their hope. Piles of stones that villagers brought to the site are covered in mud that washes down rainy slopes. Decay is everywhere, but that suggests that something has been “completed.”

In stark contrast to the scandal we witnessed at Tayna and Walikale and Kahuzi-Biega are Pierre Kakule’s rising mansions on the shores of Lake Kivu.

It is clear to us where the “conservation” money—American taxpayer’s money—has gone.

Things fall apart? Classrooms are pitiful excuses for centers of learning—there are four semi-completed rooms, but each is open at the ceiling to the next, and noise from adjoining classrooms is overwhelming. One classroom is named for DFGF-I CEO Clare Richardson. When we asked why a classroom is not named for Dian Fossey, there were confused shrugs all around.

Western patronage and charity have achieved so low a level of ethics and morality these days that it occurred to us that this “school” may be considered finished, that it may yet be held up as another example of Western philanthropy and generosity, another glossy example of the fortunate, even lucky, *natives* getting something for nothing from the goodness of our hearts.

The place is filthy, the concrete crumbling, the students still hopeful. We cannot show their faces, even though we have photos of them, because they would be in jeopardy. The students asked what we will do to help them. We promised them that we would take the videotape back to our government representatives and make sure that the money their “university” was supposed to receive will arrive. They applauded.

Of course, the videotapes were later stolen and erased by our mercenary Bodyguard. And the U.S. Government, USAID, and the conservation clique are unaccountable. Unwittingly, in our own hopeful foolishness we became yet another team of white people who came, got what we wanted, made promises we couldn't keep, and left.

We asked to visit the girl's dormitory. The halls reeked from poorly constructed latrines, the corridor was black as night under the midday equatorial sun, the roof leaked and the young women who live there pay \$110 a year—a life's wages for some people in Congo—for the “privilege” of living in a gorilla scam slum.

A life's wages for some people in Congo.

The community health clinic, sponsored by the Jane Goodall Institute and Engender Health—the big firm that has subcontracted JGI here—is a house of horrors. It is all the local nurse has to work with. It is the same story all over Congo—a clinic is a place where many people come only to die. The clinic staff had not been paid in five months. Drug cabinets contained vials of Depo Provera with the Pfizer logo. (See KONG: Primate Worship? Or Depo Privations? COA News, May 9, 2007 <www.coanews.org/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=1867>.

In the language of neocolonial gender studies, this is called “dumping,” where pharmaceuticals or foods that are outdated or illegal in the West are donated to some desperate population, through some do-gooder DINGO, while monster corporations receive [1] kudos for corporate social responsibility [2] good press [3] major tax write-offs and [4] massive savings by eliminating the huge expense of destroying toxic biological, chemical or medical waste.

In 2005, the firm Engender Health, JGI's partner, settled a claim in U.S. federal court which was predicated on allegations that promised services were not performed and that unused funds were expropriated for other projects. Under federal law, at the conclusion of the applicable funding period, Engender Health must return any unused funds to USAID. But Engender Health used leftover USAID funds for their own profit.¹⁴

What is truly remarkable is that one year after Engender Health was fined over three million dollars for creative bookkeeping and misappropriation of funds—and through a combination of USAID field support and Global Leadership Priority funding—Jane Goodall Institute is sub-contracting under Engender Health for family planning initiatives in rural Congo.¹⁵ Evidently, JGI and USAID see too many human primates in the under populated gorilla landscape.

The staff nurse at the TCCB clinic was told, and believes, that the local population must be reduced for fear of over-population because it is unhealthy for a woman to have babies one after the other. But with the average life span of men and women being 38 to 44 years old—and the low-population density noted in the report by Weidemann Associates—the population is certainly sustainable.

We saw no official NGO presence anywhere in the backcountry. They were all at the bars and villas in Goma. They are mapping, plotting, conferencing, emailing, purchasing laptop computers and high-tech GPS equipment, promoting themselves in public relations, hiring lawyers, writing research papers about primate dung, driving around town, flying around the world and building private mansions—a.k.a. feeding at the trough.

We interviewed a highly educated Congolese professional who was hired to work for DFGF-I at Tanya. He quit due to the low pay and poor conditions. He had worked for DFGF-I in differing capacities for many years, until Patrick Mehlman and Pierre Kakule showed up, and then things went increasingly bad as they exploited him more and more for less and less compensation or benefit.

He was in charge of vegetable and animal husbandry projects at Tayna—how to raise chickens, pigs, cattle—and vegetables. “There was no money for the project, no animals, no farms, nothing to work with. There were a few chickens, five cows—it was a joke. It was not serious for me. The climate was bad for me and caused problems with my health. My wife was pregnant. Working conditions were terrible. I would have worked as a consultant but they said no. They have a lot of money, but nothing for an experienced Congolese professional who is serious.”

The man was very poor when we met him, living quietly but with dignity and self-respect, esteemed by his neighbors and colleagues in Goma. Another sad story we have heard again and again.

“Even with higher university degrees,” he said, “you can’t get a good job with these organizations. They [whites] go to all these conferences in Europe, U.S. and Nairobi, but I could never go anywhere. It’s evident that DFGF-I doesn’t want to work with people like *me*—people who know what needs to be done, understand the landscape and people, and can make a serious difference.”

Pigs for Profit indeed. And piles of primate dung.

“In addition to construction and support jobs,” reported Conservation International, “the regional population now has access to doctors, nurses, and medical care that includes the services of a 28-bed health center, complete with an operating theater.”¹⁶

This is a complete and utter deception.

The “operating theater” is an empty room with a single gynecological exam table, and even this is broken.

“The conservation clique took advantage of the situation at Tayna,” our Congolese conservation insider, “Ilungwa,” told us in Goma, “in which nobody could come and examine what they are doing in Congo for five or six years. A lot of the money disappears in Nairobi—you won’t get money for conservation anywhere if you are not known in the fancy offices in Nairobi—and then fifteen to eighteen people each take \$60,000 out even before the money hits the ground in Congo. And if the conservation clique is doing this for each and every project—consider it!—total corruption and lack of transparency. This is a disaster. And it is the same culture of institutional predation with the humanitarian agencies. They all band together as predators following their prey. The Congo gets nothing but abuse and then we are blamed for our own suffering.”

Oscar Kashala confirmed this. “I was talking to a tribal chief, and he said SIFORCO [German Danzer Logging Corporation] and CARE International are working in his area, but the people are not benefiting from these organizations. There is no social responsibility by these companies, they don’t care. They just want profits. There is also a matter of ethics: you don’t just come here and mistreat the people and run off with the money!”¹⁷

Tell that to the more than 600 “orphans” at Tayna—another tragic story.

Pierre Kakule told us, in one of the taped interviews stolen by the Bodyguard Robert Poppe, that “the orphans go home at night.” We were perplexed. “If they are orphans, how can they go home?”

They go home to relatives Kakule replied. So they are not orphans: this is a way of life in Africa: children with one or no parents routinely resettle with their extended families; the truly orphaned children have no one.

The Tayna “university” students have twenty mis-matched computers, it’s true, but only seven can connect to the Internet, and only when there is power, and many are old. There is never enough fuel for the generator, and so there is no consistent use or access. The small library has outdated books, one on North American timber wolves, which can’t be very useful in the equatorial forest, unless you are studying predators and pack behavior—applicable to hyenas. The sorriest truth is that children and adults treasure such books, because there is never anything else but the bible, and pictures of wolves in American books nourish dreams and hopes of America.

Both the Mwami and teachers indicated that the lumber for the TCCB buildings was cut from the trees of the Tayna Gorilla Reserve, but we could not verify this. Our photos show extensive logging on both roads that lead to the reserve and we believe these roads lie within reserve boundaries, but our Bodyguard—who carefully mapped our route down the wrong road and synced it with Google Earth—hoarded his GPS data.

Still to be found were the orphans of Mbingi, the celebrated beneficiaries of DFGF-I and CI and USAID's philanthropic largesse. The next day we insisted on stopping at Mbingi, but before we did we made sure that several witnesses heard the itinerary, because we were beginning to fear our Bodyguard. Rob Poppe was increasingly alarmed by the testimonies gathered on video, by the forthright questions asked—by the truth. He stated “if anyone sees this footage, it will damage conservation in the Virungas.”

Ground truth No. 4: never, ever trust a white mercenary in Central Africa.

What we found at Mbingi personified the true heart of darkness—the devil's workhouse. The kids in *Oliver Twist* had it good. At least they could ask for more. There were twenty plus stunted, malnourished children, hair falling out in patches, garbed in dirty green “uniforms” that could pass for prison garb, with the initials for the Tayna Gorilla Reserve—RGT—emblazoned over the right breast pocket. They greeted the Mazungus. The stolen videotape is a powerful testimony to the afflicted children and deplorable conditions.

It was a Charles Dickens' scenario.

The cupboards were bare but for a few measly sacks of half-empty meal for porridge. We asked over and over who is supposed to provide food and got the same answer from different people—“Kakule.”

“Feeding time”—it cannot be called a meal—occurred next. Each child was given a red plastic cup the size of a medium coffee mug and marched up to a dirty green plastic pail that held a pasty gruel. Each cup was filled three-quarters full and the children returned to dirty benches and sat with arms crossed, waiting for the last child to be served. A signal was given, and if we had the stolen truth, you would hear slurping reminiscent of a barn full of cattle. Not another sound. “Slurp, Slurp, Slurp.”

Dickensian orphans in a *Leopoldian* nightmare.

The Road (Back) to Hell

We turned back toward Goma, against the wish of the Bodyguard, who was anxious to play with his GPS toys in the Park's northern expanse. We had seen enough, and the Bodyguard was getting increasingly moody. (Leaving was a wise decision: the promised roads not provided had taken their toll on our vehicle's transmission, and the clutch went out on the outskirts of Goma.)

Some seventeen kilometers to the west of our main route was the village of the latest hippo slaughter. The FARDC—Congolesse Armed Forces—guard at the gate said there were no problems—meaning the dreaded and savage Mai Mai of course—on the route to the village. We took the short detour. Things fell apart about two kilometers from our

goal. Our ICCN ranger “Guard” shouted for the driver to stop. Three men were running toward us, and “Guard” jumped out and stepped in front of our vehicle, rifle ready.

What we saw were three terrified and skinny men carrying hoes, not guns. The ever-thirsty “Guard” stood alert and questioned the men. They were shouting and obviously panicked. There were distant rifle shots. The men said the Mai Mai were in a gun battle in the fishing village, probably with FARDC forces. The Bodyguard ordered the driver to leave and the driver sped off, nearly running down the panicked farmers. It was an apt metaphor for the abandoned people of Congo.

The last thing we saw were their faces, pleading, imploring us to take them away—the wretched, astonished eyes ablaze with betrayal and fear.

The Road to Tayna and back was a long, merciless haul. On arrival in Goma Bodyguard Rob Poppe stole all the video equipment and videos and some notes. Detention by Congolese intelligence and immigration officials—after Robert Poppe’s lies about espionage—marked the end of the road.

¹ Private communication from Goma, DRC, Robert Poppe, January 20, 2007.

² December 12, 2006 email from Robert Poppe to Georgianne Nienaber.

³ Email from Robert Muir to Georgianne Nienaber, December 12, 2006.

⁴ Private correspondence.

⁵ Investigation in Goma, Keith Harmon Snow, August 2006 and February 2007

⁶ Private interview with Oscar Kashala, Kinshasa, DRC, Keith Harmon Snow, August 10, 2006.

⁷ Private communication from Goma, DRC, Robert Poppe, January 20, 2007.

⁸ Private communication from Goma, DRC, Robert Poppe, December 19, 2006.

⁹ http://www.esa.int/esaCP/SEMKEV797E_index_0.html

¹⁰ http://www.esa.int/esaCP/ESALBWF18ZC_index_0.html.

¹¹ http://albertinerift.org/media/file/Volcanoes_Biodiv_survey.pdf

¹² McMaster University.

¹³ <http://web.conservation.org/xp/frontlines/people/06230602.xml>

¹⁴ April 29, 2005 press release issued by the U.S. Department of Justice, Southern District of New York.

¹⁵ Engender Health recruitment posting May 15, 2006 by Doug Cress, Pan African Sanctuary Alliance

¹⁶ <http://web.conservation.org/xp/frontlines/people/06230602.xml>

¹⁷ Private interview with Oscar Kashala, Kinshasa, DRC, Keith Harmon Snow, August 10, 2006.