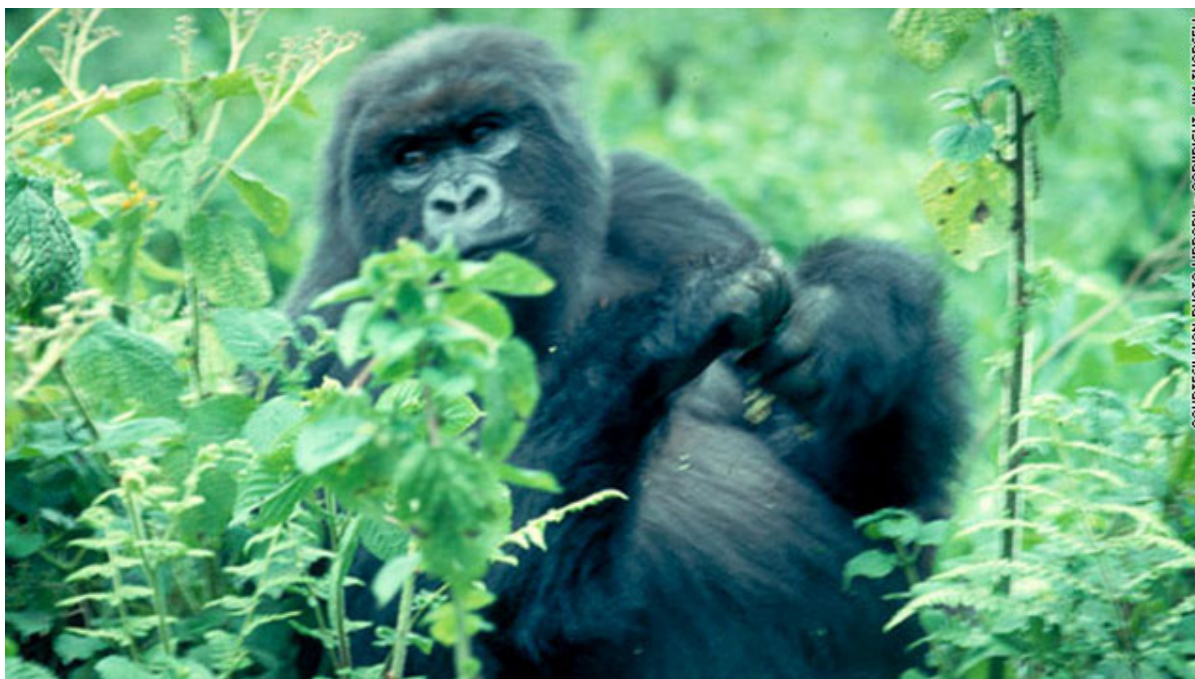


Rwanda makes 'landmark' pledge to rescue environment

By **Emily Wither** for CNN

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Rwanda's forests are home to primates including the endangered mountain gorilla.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Rwanda has pledged to reverse degradation of soil, land, water and forests by 2035
- Initiative is an attempt to balance population and resources
- Environmental network IUCN hopes Rwanda will inspire other countries to follow suit

(CNN) -- In what has been described by environmental groups as a "world first" for a developing country, Rwanda has said it will make sustaining its environment a national priority.

Rwanda is often referred to as the "land of a thousand hills," and is blessed with rich volcanic soil and lush rainforests. But its natural environment is in need of a helping hand.

With its rainforests torn apart by civil war in the early 1990s and a rapidly growing population that needs land and food, the Rwandan government has made an ambitious commitment to the environment.

"By year 2035, Rwanda will have achieved a country-wide reversal of the current degradation of soil, land, water and forest resources," pledged Rwandan Minister of Land and Environment Stanislas Kamanzi at the recent U.N. Forum on Forests.

The forum marked the declaration of 2011 as the U.N.'s International Year of Forests.

Rwanda has experienced strong economic growth in recent years, but experts say that has been part of the problem.

Rose Mukankomeje, from the Rwanda Environment Management Authority, says it's all about an imbalance between population growth and the natural resources available.

"One illustration is the Gishwati rainforest which has been reduced by up to 90% since 1960 and it's the home of chimpanzees and other biodiversity," she said.

Mukankomeje says rainforest destruction in Rwanda is bringing with it a whole host of problems: seasons are no longer the same, temperatures are higher, farming is less productive and the cost of fire wood has drastically increased, she says.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) says it hopes that the government's ambitious plan to restore natural environments across the country will now be picked up by other nations. If that were to happen it could spark what the IUCN says would be "the beginning of the largest restoration initiative the world has ever seen."

The IUCN has been brought in to help work out Rwanda's strategy for the future.

"We need expert advice, which, strengthened by local knowledge, will enable the development of landscape strategies and will translate existing political commitment into real and rapid action on the ground," Kamanzi explained.

Stewart Maginnis, from the IUCN, has begun working with the government and says what really makes this project unique is the reasoning behind it.

"What they've (the Rwandan government) realized is that with 85% of the population subsistence farmers they won't actually achieve their national economic development targets and poverty reduction goals unless they really invest in restoring natural infrastructure and forest restoration," he said.

Maginnis says the initiative will not just be about planting trees in Rwanda. The plan is to look at everything from restoring water systems to improving soil conservation and sustainable agricultural production.

According to the IUCN an estimated 1.5 billion hectares of the world's lost and degraded landscapes -- an area roughly the size of Russia -- offer opportunities for restoration.

"This is the lowest-hanging fruit to advance the achievement of many international environmental and development goals, such as combating poverty and hunger, and curbing climate change," said Maginnis.