

Zoologist Dian Fossey: A Storied Life With Gorillas

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PUBLISHED JANUARY 18, 2014

Dian Fossey was a leading authority on the study of endangered mountain gorillas in the forests of Rwanda.

Fossey was [born in San Francisco](#), California, on January 16, 1932. She graduated from San Jose State College in 1954 with a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy. Nearly ten years later, in 1963, she decided to take out a bank loan and withdraw her life savings to [embark on a journey](#) to Africa.

After arriving in Tanzania, she met [Louis Leakey](#), archeologist and National Geographic grantee. Leakey told Fossey about [Jane Goodall](#) and her research living with chimps, which had begun three years earlier. In 1966, [Fossey was selected](#) by Leakey to study the social interaction of gorilla groups; Fossey continued this research for 18 years.

Much like her fellow researcher and friend Jane Goodall, [Fossey is remembered](#) for her study of the social interactions of primates and for conservation efforts. Her research greatly enlarged our understanding of gorillas' communication methods, habits, and social structures.

Fossey was a strong [advocate for the conservation](#) of endangered gorilla populations. She published a book about her work and struggle for conservation in 1983 called *Gorillas in the Mist*, which was later [adapted into a movie](#) starring Sigourney Weaver.

On several occasions, Fossey was invited to write for *National Geographic* magazine. In her article published in January 1980—called "[Making Friends With Mountain Gorillas](#)"—Fossey explained how she was able to achieve her success with gorillas:

The textbook instructions for such studies are merely to sit and observe. I wasn't satisfied with this approach; I felt that the gorillas would be doubly suspicious of any alien object that only sat and stared. Instead, I tried to elicit their confidence and curiosity by acting like a gorilla. I imitated their feeding and grooming, and later, when I was surer what they meant, I copied their vocalizations, including some startling deep belching noises.

Tragically, Fossey was [murdered](#) at her research camp on Mount Visoke on December 26, 1985. There is speculation that her murder was [related to her efforts to conserve](#) the dwindling gorilla populations in Rwanda. The search for her killers is ongoing, and her research with gorillas continues today through the [Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International](#).

Much of Fossey's research was supported by the [Leakey Foundation](#) and the [National Geographic Society](#).

Read her articles "[The Imperiled Mountain Gorilla](#)" published in April 1981 and "[Making Friends With Mountain Gorillas](#)" published in January 1970.