

The keepers of the forest

Batwa pygmies

by Dave Gibson

When Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, was created in 1991 to protect critically endangered mountain gorillas, hunter-gatherer Batwa pygmies were evicted and no longer allowed entry. Known as “the keepers of the forest,” the displaced Batwa became expendable victims of the action even though they had lived in harmony with the flora and fauna for thousands of years. The hunting of primates was considered taboo because they thought them too close a relation. Although not intentionally targeting them, occasionally a gorilla or chimpanzee would get caught in

one of their nets. The real threat to the great apes came from an encroaching population of other ethnic groups that were clearing trees for husbandry. With no formal title to the land and no compensation offered from the government, the disenfranchised Batwa lost their identity and ability to provide for themselves, relegated to squatting on the periphery of the newly gazetted parkland.

The difficult transition since then has been disastrous for the Batwa pygmies. Most of the Batwa perform day labor in the fields in exchange for food which barely keeps them alive. With no money paid for their work and stigmatized by society, the practice and prejudice perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty. Malnutrition and mortality

rates are high with an average life expectancy of twenty-eight. The pygmy men I met were nothing but skin and bones and the best fed among their families that I encountered was the lone baby being sustained by breast milk.

One of the only ways that the Batwa earn hard currency is by offering tours of their small villages to tourists. Singing and dancing are an integral part of the show and bystanders are encouraged to join in. Stories are related about how life used to be when they collected honey from “stingless” bees and thrived off the forest’s bounty. Medicines derived from indigenous plants are displayed and their multitude of uses detailed by a shaman. Fire-starting using two pieces of wood and shooting a bow



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and arrow into a decoy are included during the hands-on experience. The income the Batwa generate is realized mostly in the summer months when Europeans take their vacations.

Besides generously sharing their cultural heritage, the Batwa privileged me in another quite unexpected way: by facilitating the satisfaction that comes with giving. After their animated demonstrations showcasing traditional life, my guide gave a short talk in front of everybody citing how the Batwa were happy to welcome me to their village and some more words that I didn’t hear. The part I missed mentioned how a donation would be appreciated. My guide looked at me and I looked at him. He looked at the villagers and back at me. Everyone was silent. I had been told in an orientation at my lodge that in addition to a \$25 fee (of which the Batwa only receive half), a cash contribution would be expected at the end of the presentation, but I hadn’t heard that either and left my wallet behind. The basket for donations sat ominously empty and I presumed my time with the Batwa over. The smiles had vanished from their faces and most of them wouldn’t even acknowledge me as we departed. Walking down the hill, I knew that something bad had happened and asked my guide about it. He explained the unfortunate situation and I responded the only way I knew how to - with a plea of ignorance. In reference to me stiffing an entire extended family of a dozen individuals, I could see that he was disappointed for them and coldly stated as a matter of fact, “They’re used to it.” – In other

words: they are used to being slighted for the last twenty-five years.

Feeling terrible about what I had done - or hadn’t done as the case may be - I decided to make a cash gift to the Batwa on my way out the next morning to, in part, assuage my guilt. Unaccustomed to the concept of philanthropy, I’d never given more than spare change a couple of times to homeless people in the States. I was hoping to use any leftover cash to pay for my airport hotel room in Qatar and parking at DIA when I got back home. It was painfully obvious that they needed the money more than I did. With a phone call through an intermediary from Engagi Lodge, I requested that one of the village’s representatives meet our vehicle at the road. All twelve of the Batwa villagers sat in the grass huddled in a tight bunch when we pulled up. Through my guide and translator of the previous day, I can still remember my impromptu address word for word: “Please accept my apologies. I am old and do not hear well. I enjoyed my visit to your village very much and especially liked the dancing. Thank you for letting me make fire. The old man is a very good shot with the bow and arrow. Thank you.” With that I handed a crisp one hundred dollar bill to one of their members. In a complete reversal from the uncomfortable scene of the day before, they enthusiastically applauded the best received speech of my life and smiled from ear to ear. We said our goodbyes and I headed to the next stop on the itinerary knowing that they would at least eat well for a week.