

PRESS RELEASE

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Media download link for photos and video of gorilla Kitoko:

<https://zoo.resourcespace.com/?c=3472&k=5a7b6ba8fb>
password: happybirthday

Visit the zoo's blog for more: <http://bit.ly/ForestsWWD>

UN World Wildlife Day 2021: “Forests and Livelihoods: Sustaining People and Planet” - Happy 1st birthday to Kitoko, one of zoo's gorilla ambassadors! -



SEATTLE—March 3 is UN World Wildlife Day 2021 focused on “Forests and Livelihoods: Sustaining People and Planet.” With the mission of saving wildlife and making conservation a priority in everyone’s lives, Woodland Park Zoo joins in celebrating the central role of forests, the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people globally who rely on forests, and the value of these ecosystems for both wildlife and all of humanity.

World Wildlife Day 2021 is particularly special for Woodland Park Zoo this year because it ushers in the 1st birthday of little Kitoko, a male western lowland gorilla born March 4 during the pandemic. “While the zoo was closed for nearly four months, we shared loads of photos of Kitoko—his milestones and tender moments—with our community and zoo family. He has touched the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of people during a tumultuous time and brought so much joy,” said Martin Ramirez, mammal curator of Woodland Park Zoo.

“Kitoko’s wild cousins live in tropical rain forests, so his birthday is the perfect time to pay tribute to the communities and wildlife who depend on those forests for survival,” added Ramirez. Western lowland gorillas live in seven countries across west equatorial Africa, including Congo, southeast Nigeria, Gabon and Central African Republic.

Forests and woodlands are mainstays of human livelihoods and well-being. Indigenous and rural communities have a particularly close relationship with these natural systems. They rely on these systems to meet their essential needs, from food and shelter to energy and medicines. Forests, forest wildlife, and the livelihoods that depend on them are facing multiple crises: from climate change to deforestation and biodiversity loss, as well as the health, social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of Woodland Park Zoo’s Conservation Partners is the [Mondika Gorilla Project](#), whose long-term goal is to improve the conservation status of African apes and the forests they inhabit by addressing multiple threats to their survival. Observations of individually recognized gorillas over time are allowing researchers to better understand their respective societies, social structures, interactions, resources and habitat needs. They also provide information on the effects that human activities are having on wildlife and the ecosystem.

“Saving gorillas, chimpanzees, and their habitats requires valuing local human cultures and land-use rights,” said Woodland Park Zoo’s Vice President of Conservation Initiatives Peter Zahler. The Mondika Gorilla Project has built a strong relationship with the local people of Bomassa, Bon Coin and Bayanga. “The project employs community members, providing ways for them to support their families and offering alternatives to unsustainable hunting practices. All of this allows the local people to feel empowered and to take an active role in conservation efforts in their region. This is community-based conservation that works for wildlife and for people.”

The majority of remaining critically endangered western lowland gorillas are found in the northern Republic of Congo, which also harbors 33% of western equatorial Africa’s closed canopy forest. The rapid decline of pristine forests has resulted in widespread international

concern. Insights gained from Mondika's long-term, detailed monitoring are critical in identifying areas important to conserve.

Emerging infectious diseases have increased significantly in recent decades, with roughly 70% of these originating in wildlife such as great apes. The Mondika study site has been at the forefront of gorilla health monitoring in central Africa. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Mondika's locally-based field staff continued daily monitoring of the habituated groups of lowland gorillas at below normal levels but almost uninterrupted since last April.

Learn about Woodland Park Zoo and the Association of Zoos & Aquariums' new initiative, "Reduce the Risk: A Crisis in Human and Animal Health": www.aza.org/reduce-the-risk.

Every visit to Woodland Park Zoo supports conservation of animals in the wild. Join the zoo by recycling old cell phones and other used handheld electronics through [ECO-CELL](#) to help preserve gorilla habitat. Reclaiming the minerals in electronics and diverting them from landfills help reduce demand for mining in gorilla habitat. Drop off used handheld electronics including cell phones, smartphones, iPods, iPads, tablets, adapters, chargers, MP3 players, handheld gaming systems and their accessories at drop boxes located at both zoo entrances or the gorilla overlook. Funds generated from ECO-CELL support the Mondika Gorilla Project and [Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund](#).

"Woodland Park Zoo's gorillas and our many wildlife residents are ambassadors for their cousins that rely on forests and woodlands for survival. World Wildlife Day 2021 is a powerful reminder that these animals are symbols of hope and, if we all take meaningful action, we can preserve these important ecosystems into the future for people and wildlife," said Zahler.

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