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Great Ape Trust gains status in Rwanda as international non-governmental organization

Des Moines, Iowa – August 27, 2008 – Great Ape Trust of Iowa has registered with the government of Republic of Rwanda as an international non-governmental organization (INGO), an important step as the [Gishwati Area Conservation Program](#) moves forward.

Great Ape Trust's status as an INGO "recognizes the legitimacy of our mission and legalizes our financial and employment commitments in Rwanda" said Great Ape Trust Director of Conservation [Dr. Benjamin Beck](#), who is leading the project, one Africa's most ambitious conservation and ecological research efforts ever. "Securing INGO status shows that we are in synchrony with the leaders of the district and with community development programs."

The Gishwati Area Conservation Program is a joint effort of the Rwandan government with Great Ape Trust and Earthpark, Iowa-based projects founded by Des Moines businessman Ted Townsend. The project was unveiled by Townsend and Rwanda President H.E. Paul Kagame in September 2007 at the Clinton Global Initiative, a non-profit effort launched in 2005 by former President Bill Clinton to bring together a collaboration of global leaders to devise and implement innovative solutions to some of the world's most perplexing challenges.

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The Gishwati Forest Reserve in Rwanda's Western Province has been selected for the country's first national conservation park. The historic 10-year project will create a 30-mile (50km) forest corridor that will connect a group 13 chimpanzees facing extinction in an isolated pocket of the Gishwati Forest Reserve with the Nyungwe National Park, giving them more space, more food, and greater access to unrelated mates.

With approval of its application, Great Ape Trust joins hundreds of INGOs playing important roles in Rwanda's reconstruction, many of them offering humanitarian aid, but also a number of conservation groups, such as the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

"Earning these designations is not easy," Beck said, explaining that organizations must show that they are promoting the goals of both Rwanda's community development plans and its Millennium Development Goals, a United Nations initiative adopted by Rwanda and 191 other countries. "It is a complicated process but bureaucracy is minimal in Rwanda and we had lots of advice and help from our governmental partners".

The Gishwati Forest, the centerpiece of the project, was extensively deforested in the 1980s by agricultural development and in the 1990s during the resettlement of people following the civil war and genocide. Human encroachment, deforestation, cattle grazing and the introduction of small-scale farming resulted in extensive soil erosion, flooding, landslides and reduced water quality – as well as the isolation of the small population of chimpanzees.

Teams from Great Ape Trust have visited the area three times in 11 months, and they report that cattle grazing in the forest has been significantly curtailed – a major development in the few short months that the project has been under way. Madeleine Nyiratuza, the program coordinator, has arranged a series of meetings with Rwandan officials at the national, district and local levels, and with local people living near the forest's edge.

The goals of the project address conservation issues, as well as well-being of local people who have relied on the forest to sustain their families. "Forest restoration will help to control flooding and landslides, and improve air and water quality," Beck said.

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“But conservation of the chimpanzees and the forest must also go hand-in-hand with poverty reduction and improved living standards in the neighboring communities.”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The **Gishwati Area Conservation Program** is a collaborative effort of the Rwandan government; Great Ape Trust of Iowa, a scientific research facility in Des Moines, Iowa; and Earthpark, a national environmental education center proposed for Pella, Iowa. The project in Gishwati was unveiled at the Clinton Global Initiative last fall by Rwanda President H.E. Paul Kagame and Ted Townsend, founder of Great Ape Trust and Earthpark.

The Gishwati Forest, in Rwanda’s Western Province, was deforested in the 1980s by agricultural development and in the 1990s during the resettlement of people following the civil war and genocide. Human encroachment, deforestation, grazing and the introduction of small-scale farming resulted in extensive soil erosion, flooding, landslides and reduced water quality – as well as the isolation of a small population of chimpanzees. The Gishwati Area Conservation Program will also reduce poverty’s threat to conservation by improving water quality, controlling floods, promoting ecotourism and enhancing local employment. The project will also develop a chimpanzee field study site at Gishwati that includes planting a 30-mile (50km) tree corridor to connect the Gishwati Forest Reserve, the chimpanzees’ home range, to Nyungwe National Park.

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, it will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities. Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing a unique educational experience about great apes.

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Earthpark will be an icon of ecological literacy and learning to improve the lives of people, species and the environment around the world. This unique learning campus will demonstrate sustainable and restorative solutions to the myriad ecological threats facing humanity, using state-of-the-art educational tools and online communication with schools, communities and government worldwide. Earthpark will include four acres of tropical rainforest, a 600,000-gallon aquarium and more than 1,000 species of plants and small animals in a re-created ecosystem.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes