

A tribute to Dr Antoine Mudakikwa, Rwanda's first mountain gorilla doctor



When someone we love passes away, it takes time to understand the loss. We grapple with questions like; "How could someone so precious slip away? How can it be that we'll never see them again in this life?"

This is exactly what the family of conservationists and veterinary doctors experienced when they heard about the passing of Dr. Antoine Mudakikwa, fondly known as Dr. Tony. He goes down history as Rwanda's first mountain gorilla doctor. Hearing the news on the morning of September 20, 2024, was a profound shock. I lost not only a friend, but also my big brother, mentor in veterinary medicine, and lifelong supervisor.

Dr. Tony became more than just a supervisor; he was a confidant – a title he earned from everyone, including his son Rudy, daughter-in-law Bella, and the entire Mudakikwa family.

Since 2004, as the second mountain gorilla doctor in Rwanda after Dr. Tony, I learned invaluable lessons from this incredible man. He taught me that the word "no" shouldn't have a place in my vocabulary. No matter the challenge's size or difficulty, Dr. Tony always answered a call for help. He significantly contributed to Rwanda's current ecotourism and One Health approach system, which is now a source of national pride and a delight for tourists.

Together, we trained wildlife veterinarians and researchers on gorilla survival after rescue from poachers. Through Dr. Tony's leadership, we successfully rescued the first mountain gorilla to survive captivity – "Maisha." He also led us toward success in several projects.

For instance, he spearheaded the transfer of mountain gorillas to the Senkwekwe sanctuary in North Kivu and lowland gorillas to the Grace sanctuaries in the DR Congo, the creation of a clinic (Kinigi Quarantine Facility) to receive and care for gorillas and monkeys confiscated from poachers in the region and advocated for the establishment of a wildlife laboratory for mountain gorilla health in Rwanda.

Other notable achievements to Dr Tony's name include the significant improvement of the working conditions for conservation and veterinary experts and implementing a protocol for mountain gorilla visits to prevent diseases affecting great apes.

Dr. Tony also supported numerous projects with the then Rwanda Tourism and National Parks Office (ORTPN), which later became part of Rwanda Development Board (RDB). Here, he thrived working with great people to transform the conservation and tourism sectors.

The global success of the "Kwita Izina" ceremony stands as a testament to this transformation. This, along with other RDB initiatives like lion reintroduction and rhino introduction, aligns with Rwanda's conservation vision.

A true scholar, Dr. Tony supervised numerous studies and authored over 64 publications in international journals. Fluent in English and French, he communicated with clarity, regardless of his audience. He represented Rwanda with honor at national and international meetings, debating and advocating for the country's conservation efforts with frankness and scientific expertise. Even while achieving all this, he still found time to mentor me in primatology, offering clear and precise guidance for my discoveries.

Described as very kind, Dr. Tony was also known for his strictness. He did not hesitate to deny access to Volcanoes National Park to experts who disregarded conservation protocols. The same treatment was extended to those who ignored repeated warnings during meetings.

Dr. Tony was the ultimate problem solver. He viewed every challenge, especially in our field, as an opportunity. For him, life without challenges was dull. He possessed a gentle heart overflowing with love. Dr. Tony was a joyful and charismatic man who thrived in good company and found happiness in seeing others happy. This is why he had such a vast network of friends, including colleagues from the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and all over the world who came to pay their respects upon his passing.

As a veterinarian, Dr. Tony was always just a phone call away for a second opinion. After quizzing me on my patient care strategy, it was evident he genuinely wanted to understand and support my work. He extended the same support to all teams we trained, earning widespread respect.

While Dr. Tony's physical presence is gone, I am learning to accept this painful reality.

However, the hope of seeing him again on the morning of the resurrection keeps me going. In the meantime, his professional legacy lives on, guiding other experts and friends in the conservation of wildlife animals in their natural habitat.

I continue to teach the discoveries we made together (<https://gorillahealth.org/scientific-publications/>) at universities, international institutions, and even in the field with young conservationists.

Knowledge continues to be shared globally based on the experience and confidence I acquired under Dr. Tony's guidance. Above all, I still have the organization he encouraged me to create, which is [One Health Approach for Conservation \(OHAC\) - Gorilla Health](#).

Let us thank the good Lord for having had Dr. Tony among us and for his love of truth, work ethic and for his tremendous contribution to successful conservation and tourism as well as the "One Health" approach in Rwanda and in Africa.

To Dr. Tony: You fought a good fight and we will strive to carry on professionally and honestly; the values you imparted on us until we meet again.

Rest well my friend.

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