

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Art of Conservation Reaches Out to Parents of Students in Conservation Education Program**

*Musanze, Rwanda* – On Friday, March 19, 2010, two hundred primary level 5 students and their parents—plus teachers, local leaders, and a representative from the Rwanda Development Board—gathered on the grounds of Rushubi and Nyange I schools in Musanze District to learn about conservation education and discuss how parents can better support their children's education during "Parents as Partners Open House" events organized by Art of Conservation (AoC). All students in attendance are participants in a year-long extracurricular conservation education course run by AoC, a nonprofit dedicated to educating Rwandans living near Volcanoes National Park (PNV) about the importance of environmental protection.

AoC's Open Houses—one held in the morning at Rushubi Primary School in Kinigi sector and one held in the afternoon at Nyange I Primary School in Nyange sector—were hosted by AoC Director Julie Ghrist, Donat Sebashyitsi, Director of Rushubi Primary School, and Pierre Celestin Nsengiyumva, Director of Nyange I.

"The central purpose of hosting the Parents as Partners Open House is to engage and inform the parents about why conservation education is important and to ask them to join teachers and AoC staff in encouraging their children to do their best in school," says AoC Director Julie Ghrist. "AoC has a limited budget and a limited number of staff so we firmly believe that in order for our conservation messages to spread beyond the classroom, we must enhance the communication between our students and their parents, siblings, and the community at large. The Open House is also a great opportunity for local leaders and government officials to learn more about what AoC is doing."

In her presentation to parents, Ghrist spoke about why conservation is important to Rwandans as well as to people around the globe:

You may be asking yourself, "Why is it important for me and my children to know about conservation?" Did you know that rainforests—rainforest is the type of forest in Volcanoes National Park—cover only about 6% of Earth's surface? That is really a very small portion of the Earth's surface. Yet rainforests are extremely diverse, containing over half of all known animal and plant species. Again, this tells all of us here today that Volcanoes National Park is an incredibly important ecosystem which is so vital to you, to me, to your children, to your grandchildren, to the endangered mountain gorillas, to my mother in the United States, to all living things we share this planet with.

Rwanda's beautiful national parks and its beautiful animals, especially its keystone species, the endangered mountain gorilla, are the country's greatest natural resources. Not only does money from tourism go back into the communities to help build schools and health centers, but the parks themselves are vital to your way of life. In order to stay alive we all need oxygen to breathe and clean water to drink and nourish our crops—which the trees in the rain forest produce.

Ghrist went on to discuss how the AoC curriculum encompasses both health and conservation learning. She explained how there is a significant threat of disease transmission between people and mountain gorillas, and therefore she and her AoC team spend a great deal of time teaching students about staying healthy by practicing personal hygiene.

Invited guests gave presentations as well. Volcanoes National Park Community Conservation Warden Janvier Kwizera thanked everyone in attendance for their active contribution to conservation. He said

AoC is preparing the students for a bright future, and he asked parents to listen to and practice the lessons their kids bring home because the lessons are important. Other local leaders including the Executive Secretary of Nyange sector, Mrs. Pelagie Mukanyandwi, and Migration Officer in Burera District, Mr. Pierre Celestin Ngaruyink, expressed their support of AoC.

Parents also came forward to thank AoC for working with their children and particularly for teaching them English and good manners. At both schools, students sang songs, performed traditional dances, and put on skits about the conservation and health lessons they learned in AoC classes.

"I was so impressed with the children's performances," said Ghrist. "My staff and I take this as one of the biggest compliments we could ever receive for the work we are trying to do here. The children clearly demonstrated that this approach to conservation education through art and creative expression is working! We can see how well they have internalized our health and conservation messages."

### **About Art of Conservation**

AoC offers school children living in the poor rural communities surrounding Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park a year-long intensive conservation education program in partnership with the children's primary schools. AoC approaches learning through a unique method, using visual, auditory, and performance arts to teach lessons and inspire creativity in its students. While primarily dedicated to teaching children, AoC also reaches out to the local adult population by supporting workshops that teach environmentally-friendly living and business practices. In all its activities, AoC highlights how people can improve their lives by being conservationists. To learn more, visit [www.art-of-conservation.com](http://www.art-of-conservation.com).

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