

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Alternative, Sustainable Fuel Technology Introduced to Rwandans Living Near Mountain Gorillas**

*Musanze, Rwanda* – Rwandans living near the Virunga rainforest, a protected ecosystem home to about 450 endangered mountain gorillas, can now help combat deforestation and raise their own standard of living thanks to the introduction of an alternative, sustainable energy technology: fuel briquettes composed of recycled materials that can be made easily with simple wooden presses. Last month, the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project (MGVP), in collaboration with Art of Conservation and the Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN), took the first steps to establishing the technology in the region by training a group of 20 Rwandans to make briquettes.

Charcoal, a fuel that requires the burning of large quantities of trees to produce, is presently the primary fuel source used by the communities near the Virunga forest in the trans boundary area between Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Alternatively, briquettes, which are made using recycled paper and discarded plant materials like rice sheaves, are cheaper and cleaner-burning. As an added benefit, the production and sale of briquettes offers locals in this economically depressed region the chance to earn extra income.

The briquette making technology, which has been championed in DRC by ICCN officials in Virunga National Park, was brought to Rwanda at the request of the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project. "Deforestation from the charcoal trade is a threat to the mountain gorilla habitat in Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda and the use of charcoal causes respiratory illness in the human population, which can be passed on to gorillas," said John Huston, MGVP's Agriculture Project Coordinator. "When we saw the success of ICCN's briquette program in Congo, we thought it was vital to bring the technology to Rwanda."

Jean Bosco Bichamakara, the head of ICCN's Energy Production Program, led a two-day briquette-making workshop in Musanze for Rwandans participating in MGVP's agriculture partner program and members of the Kinigi community living near Volcanoes National Park, who were sponsored by Art of Conservation, an organization dedicated to educating Rwandans about conservation.

"Although we use charcoal now, we know we need to use a different kind of fuel because we need the forest to produce rain for our crops and clean air to keep us healthy," says Cecile Nyirabahutu, a Kinigi community leader. "Briquette making will also help our community earn money so we can better take care of our families."

Immaculee Uwimana, one of MGVP's agriculture partners, is using a briquette press donated by ICCN to start the initial production of briquettes. MGVP recently purchased Uwimana's first batch of 500 briquettes to use at the MGVP headquarters in Musanze. Bichamakara estimates that once Uwimana and her team are more practiced, they will be able to make 1,000 briquettes per day—enough fuel to supply a typical Rwandan family of eight for a month. MGVP and Art of Conservation plan to work together with local artisans to build more presses.

Much effort is still necessary to ensure the success of fuel briquettes in Rwanda. In addition to building more presses, MGVP and Art of Conservation will coordinate future trainings and marketing and begin a community recycling program to collect materials for making the briquettes. MGVP will also purchase briquettes for use at their facilities to help establish a market for the new fuel.

"This is one small step forward in the greater process of eliminating the charcoal problem in the Virungas," said Julie Ghrist, Director of Art of Conservation. "But by working together—different countries, different organizations, and different groups of local people—we have a much greater chance of success in the long run."

### **About the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project**

Founded in 1986 shortly after the death of Dian Fossey, the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project provides veterinary care to the approximately 750 mountain gorillas living in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It monitors the health of wild mountain gorillas, treats trauma and illness, researches significant issues in gorilla health, and develops protocols and partnerships to support the Mountain Gorilla One Health Program in the Virungas and environs. It works in close partnership with the governments of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other gorilla conservation organizations to achieve mutual goals, and its work is shared to strengthen wildlife conservation efforts around the world. The MGVP depends upon grants and donations to conduct its operations. More information: <http://www.gorilladoctors.org>.

### **About Art of Conservation**

Art of Conservation, Inc. works in poor rural communities surrounding Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda, teaching schoolchildren and other community members about the importance of maintaining a healthy environment for both people and animals and instilling them with an understanding and respect for themselves, their peers, and the natural world. Art of Conservation approaches learning through a unique method, using visual, auditory, and performance arts to teach lessons and inspire creativity in its students. In partnership with other organizations which attend directly to the well-being of the Volcanoes National Park ecosystem and its resident mountain gorillas, Art of Conservation seeks to fill the education gap in the local communities through its activities. More information: [www.art-of-conservation.com](http://www.art-of-conservation.com)