

The scientific contributions of Dian Fossey biography sample

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



Dian Fossey was an American woman whose love for animals drove her in interest in zoology. Her study of Mountain Gorillas changed how we understand the connection between humans and other primates. Her conservation efforts brought attention to the plight of this endangered species that she so diligently studied. Due to her extensive research and hand on approach she became one of the most renowned women scientists of the twentieth century.

The Early Life of Dian Fossey

Dian was born in 1932 in San Francisco, California (Mowat, 1987). She had a relatively normal childhood, although her parents separated early in her life. As a young adult she attended San Jose State College and obtained a degree as an occupational therapist (Mowat, 1987). After college she took a job in a hospital, but felt unfulfilled in her new career path. She never married or had any children; she confessed that she always felt more comfortable with animals than people (Mowat, 1987).

After reading a book about gorillas, Dian was inspired to leave behind her mundane life and start a new life of adventure as a scientist in Africa. Dian left with practically nothing and had no promise of a job. She had no scientific training before leaving for Africa (Mowat, 1987).

Once in Africa, she met up with the anthropologist Louis Seymour Bazett Leakey, who was known for his works regarding the ancestry of humans (Mowat, 1987). Leakey was presently studying primates and allowed Dian to join his team. While in the Congo, Dian's life changed forever when she viewed her first wild Mountain Gorilla

Once she laid her eyes on her first gorilla, Dian knew that her interest in

gorillas went much further than a simple seven week study. Even after she returned home she could not forget these misunderstood creatures.

Determined to become a scientist, Dian met with primatologist Jane Goodall who was nice enough to give Dian a crash course in the field research process. In 1966 Dian headed back to Africa (Mowat, 1987).

The Scientific Research of Dian Fossey

Starting with little more than a tent and a handful of volunteers, Dian founded Karisoke Research Center deep within the heart of the Congo, despite the violent civil war that was taking place there. She started studying four gorilla groups in the area.

Her observations proved that gorillas were not the violent creatures than many others claimed. She used the animal's own vocalization and body language to gain their trust and view them safely (Fossey, 1983). These methods forever changed how field research is conducted (Fossey, 1983). Her behavioral studies showed that gorillas have very close family groups and complex relationship (Fossey, 1983). Physically she was able to determine that gorillas have unique facial characteristics and a digestive system that led them to lead a primarily vegetarian lifestyle (Fossey, 1983). She published the book "Gorilla's in the Mist", geared towards the general public, chronicling her time spent with the great apes. By humanizing these animals she was able to draw the public's attention to the dire situation the gorilla's faced. Poachers had become a great detriment to the wild population, without Fossey's message of preservation, gorillas may have very well become extinct before someone took interest in their plight,

numbers were that low (Fossey, 1983).

Her research about gorilla behavior were published in numerous scientific journals and are still considered the premier and most highly respected research on gorillas to this day. Because of the danger associated with the study of mountain gorillas little was known about them previously. By gaining this understanding of gorilla behavior, comparative studies between primates was much more complete. Her works spurred further studies in the fields of anthropology, zoology, and biology. She later went back to college and earned her doctorate in zoology at Cambridge University to lend credence to her research(Mowat, 1987).

The Death of Dian Fossey

Fossey remained at the research center for the remainder of her life, only occasionally returning to America for lectures or to spread her message of conservation. She did lecture at Cornell University during her trips home. However the harsh jungle and lack of medical care, led Fossey's health to greatly suffer as a result (Mowat, 1987). She was afflicted by many medical issues that she refused to treat for they would mean leaving behind her beloved gorillas.

Dian's desire to protect the gorillas led to her downfall. She adamantly spoke out against the local poachers, often disabling their traps and confronting them head on. She was greatly disliked by locals and the war torn government. In 1985, Dian was found murdered at the research center (Mowat, 1987). It is still unknown for sure who murdered her, but she had made many enemies due to her work. She was buried at the Karisoke center

with the gorilla she had studied for most of her life (Mowat, 1987). However her message lives on through her works and the efforts of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund who cares on the tradition of her research and conservation efforts. Her contributions to the scientific community have changed research methods and proved the gorillas were indeed a species worthy of saving.

Works Cited:

Fossey, D. (1983) *Gorillas in the Mist*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Fossey, D. (1978). Mountain gorilla research, 1969-1970. National Geographic Society Research Report, 1969 Projects: 173-186.

Mowat, F. (1987) *Woman in the Mists*. New York: Warner Books