

Better late, than never

OB Nick Radford tells us of his life-changing adventure working with lowland gorillas in Africa. You can follow Nick's adventures at <https://nickradfordmh.wordpress.com>.

Don't move. It was a simple instruction that was proving difficult to follow.

When a 200 kilogram, 2.5 metre silverback gorilla is charging directly at you, roaring and beating his chest inches from your face, frankly, the only thing you are thinking about is moving.

As the charge ended and the adrenaline flowed, I reflected on how exactly my life had led me to the rainforest of the Congo Basin, where I am now tracking gorillas for a living.

Six months earlier I was living a comfortable life in the South West of England. I was recently married, with a beautiful house and a well-paid job. But, in a Generation Y cliché, something just wasn't right. My wife and I both had a sense of being unfulfilled. We were hungry for adventure and looking for something 'more'.

We knew we wanted to spend our lives protecting the natural world. But we were both in our mid-30s with successful careers in other fields. Changing direction at this moment in our lives was easy to dream about, but felt impossible to do.

The seeds of this passion were planted at Bryanston. Anyone who was taught biology by Doc Adams could not help but get caught up in his enthusiasm for the natural world. I went on to read biology at Oxford and on graduation I fully intended to pursue a career in natural sciences.

However, the years went by and events took me down a different road. I ended up in that large group of people who 'don't use their degree' in their line of work. Yet, the calling to get back to nature never went away.

We finally took the leap because of this calling. In the lifetime of most of the people on the planet, over half the world's wild animals have disappeared. In another 50 years we will have lost so many species that the natural world will be unrecognisable. Our survival depends on these things: on healthy ecosystems, abundant biodiversity and well functioning natural processes. They should be protected too for the beauty, wonder and joy that they offer.

So with these arguments fresh in our heads, with our house rented, our belongings packed away in storage and our old lives neatly wrapped up, in October last year we boarded a plane to the Central African Republic.

Racked by decades of corruption and sectarian conflict, CAR is the classic African-failed-state disaster story. The poorest country in the world, it is one of the most remote and least stable parts of the African continent.

Yet in the midst of this human chaos, there exists one of the natural wonders of the world. One of the last great swathes of tropical habitat, the Dzangha-Sangha Forest is home to one of the highest levels of biodiversity on the planet. Like every other wild place, it is threatened by habitat destruction and poaching.

We came to work with the lowland gorillas. We have taken a year-long volunteer position with the WWF (the World Wide Fund for Nature) and our role is to study the gorillas and collect behavioural data, while also keeping them accustomed to human presence. This enables ecotourism opportunities, thereby generating an income for local people. Indeed, it is one of only two places in the world where tourists can visit and observe lowland gorillas. So, giving hope to careers advisors everywhere, even if it did take me 10 years, I am finally using the knowledge I learnt in my degree in my line of work.

We have now been out here six months and life is certainly different compared to a year ago. We live in a simple hut, days away from the nearest town, in a beautiful part of the rainforest. We have no electricity, no running water and basic food. We shower under a waterfall. We have to put up with intense heat, humidity and a quite incredible number of insects. Elephants walk through our camp most days and there is a dazzling array of other beautiful animals. All these things are part of the adventure.

We have traded in our careers, security and plenty of day-to-day comforts. There are of course moments where it is frustrating and the future is far from certain, but in return we might just be achieving that holy grail of the do-gooder spirit, the feeling that we are making a difference to a cause that we believe in.

Of all the things I've learnt in the last year, the one that sticks with me is this: when it comes to following dreams, it is better to follow them late, than never at all.