

Africa's oldest national park counts on sustainability

June 29 2014, by Marc Jourdier



Workers in the Virunga National Park dig and scour the bed of a future canal in Matebe, some 75 kms north of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on June 17, 2014

People living in and around Africa's oldest wildlife reserve—threatened by armed groups and oil prospectors, are pinning their hopes on sustainable development projects for energy, agriculture and tourism.

In the region around the park, about 70 kilometres (45 miles) north of

Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, villagers struggle to make ends meet.

Locals have been battered by 20 years of strife including two civil wars and have suffered brutality at the hands of a range of armed movements and ill-disciplined government troops.

There are no roads or reliable clean water supply, since successive regimes in Kinshasa have done little to maintain or develop infrastructure left behind at the end of Belgian colonial rule in 1960.

Under a scorching sun, dozens of workers busily scoured the bed of a future canal that cuts through the rich vegetation. Once completed, the channel will draw water from the Rutshuru river to power a 12.6 megawatts hydroelectric station which by 2015 will bring power to 140,000 people, starting with residents of the town of Matebe, a few kilometres from the park.

Work on the hydroelectric project began in December, a month after government soldiers backed by UN troops defeated rebels of the Movement of March 23 (M23) who had seized control of area.

Sustainable projects

The canal is one of many projects launched by the Virunga Alliance, founded in 2008 to instigate [sustainable development](#) techniques designed to help the four million people living in and around the park.

The coalition includes park authorities, civil society groups and members of the local community.

Aiming for investment totalling \$150 million (110 million euros) over 12 years, the Alliance is funded by a variety of organisations.



An entrance to Virunga National Park is seen near Rutshuru in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on June 17, 2014

Among them are the European Union and the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, a private US charity which works to improve living conditions for "the world's most impoverished and marginalised populations".

The Alliance intends to promote sustainability in four main sectors: energy, fisheries, agro-industry and tourism.

Tourism has the highest profile, as many people associate the Virunga name with the rare mountain gorillas which live in the UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Baboons pictured at the Virunga National Park near Rutshuru in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on June 17, 2014

As well containing the dense forests of the Congo Basin, Virunga also features open savannah, lakes, high mountains and breathtaking volcanoes.

Deforestation, smuggling and fighting have all depleted Virunga's resources in recent years. Another big threat to the delicate ecosystem came in 2010 when European oil companies sniffed out possible reserves in the southern sector of the park.

Confronted with a highly vocal campaign by local activists and international environmental bodies led by conservation group WWF, the British oil company Soco followed the lead of France's Total and announced on June 11 that it would stop prospecting inside the park.



Villagers from Rugari in the Virunga National Park, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo look at a water pipe on June 17, 2014. People living in and around Africa's oldest wildlife reserve are pinning their hopes on sustainable development projects.

In return the WWF agreed to withdraw a complaint it had lodged with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development against Soco.

UNESCO's World Heritage Centre director Kishore Rao urged the Congolese government to "follow up ... and cancel all the oil exploration

permits granted within the Virunga National Park, as requested also by the World Heritage Committee."

'We're very happy'



Workers in the Virunga National Park dig and scour the bed of a future canal in Matebe, some 75 kms north of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on June 17, 2014

The 7,800-square-kilometre (3,000-square-mile) reserve currently provides work for scores of people, including nearly 175 local recruits in Matebe alone.

Angelus Katembo, an engineer, earns \$450 (330 euros) a month, or about \$15 a day. "That's comfortable," he told AFP.

In contrast, unskilled labourers earn around \$3 a day. One of them, bricklayer Kasereka Batsholi, said he was just glad to have found work.

Further north, near the town of Beni, a small power station has started production on the outskirts of the national park to provide electricity for a factory producing palm oil.



A board advertising a hydroelectric project in the Virunga National Park is seen on June 17, 2014 in Matebe, some 75 kms north of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Once they have electricity, people living around Virunga will be able to stop burning charcoal, which they often source illegally from trees they fell.

In Rumangabo, 50 kilometres north of Goma, the Virunga Alliance

intends to bring drinking water to the population.

"We're very happy," resident Richard Saidi said, as locals currently need to walk six kilometres to find clean water.

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Citation: Africa's oldest national park counts on sustainability (2014, June 29) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-06-africa-oldest-national-sustainability.html>

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