

Gorillas vs oil: DR Congo seeking way to explore at Virunga park

March 15 2015, by Marc Jourdier



A mountain gorilla from the Kabirizi family in Virunga National Park, eastern Democratic of Congo, pictured on April 7, 2011

In the Virunga national park, Africa's oldest natural reserve and home to the mountain gorilla, the endangered great ape and its habitat face a new threat: oil exploration.

Even though the British petroleum company Soco says it has ended its project in the park, the government of Democratic Republic of Congo is not abandoning its plans to exploit potential oil reserves there.

Kinshasa on Friday said it wanted to find a way to explore for oil in the perimeter of Virunga, listed since 1994 as a UNESCO world heritage site which has already suffered from decades of armed conflict in Congo's restive east.

Congolese Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo said the authorities have contacted UNESCO to see how "to explore judiciously" there in order to "reap the profit of its resources to benefit the people who live there".

In January, Matata informed international lenders that Kinshasa had still not given its approval to explore for oil within the limits of the park, but that if such a decision was taken, it would seek a slight modification to the park's boundaries.

Virunga's vast band of natural reserve stretches for 7,800 square kilometres (3,000 square miles) astride the Congolese border with Rwanda and Uganda and includes savannas, forests, swamps and active volcanoes.

Created in 1925 when the DRC was a Belgian colony, the Virunga park is a refuge for many animal species but most especially its emblem, the [mountain gorilla](#), immortalised in the film about zoologist Dian Fossey, "Gorillas in the Mist."



Patrick Karabaranga, a warden at the Virunga National Park, sits with an orphaned mountain gorilla in the gorilla sanctuary at the park HQ at Rumangabo, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on July 17, 2012

UNESCO has said the exploration and extraction of oil was "incompatible" with the continent's most biologically diverse protected area, also home to a quarter of the world's mountain gorillas.

Nevertheless, in 2010 Kinshasa had granted French oil giant Total and British group Soco permits to explore concessions along large portions of the reserve.

After strong opposition from both the local and international communities, Kinshasa suspended the permits in 2011 and Total agreed not to enter into the limits of the park.

Seismic results mid-2015

Soco did the same last June, but not until having finished a seismic study as part of an "evaluation" the government had requested to estimate the effects an oil operation would have on the environment.

"Processing of the seismic data has been completed and data interpretation is currently underway in the UK and should be completed by mid-2015," the company said in a statement on Thursday.



A mountain gorilla pictured on the slopes of Mount Mikeno in the Virunga National Park, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on November 28, 2008

"After providing the DRC government with interpretation of the seismic

results, SOCO will have no further involvement in the block," its statement said, referring to the concession which had covered the southern half of the park.

Opponents claim that the tests amounted to a hidden [oil exploration](#) project. But the oil companies aware of the controversy surrounding their work say they have no role in deciding Virunga's future.

"While we acknowledge that the DRC government is anticipating discussions with UNESCO involving the future of the Virunga National Park, we have no involvement in these discussions," Soco said.



Villagers from Gisigari and Rugari in the Virunga National Park, some 50 kms north of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, gather to collect water on June 17, 2014

Contacted by AFP, the UNESCO representative in the DRC, Abdourahamane Diallo, said there were no formal "negotiations" between the UN cultural agency and Kinshasa over oil exploration in Virunga or changing its boundaries.

"So far there has been no formal request" on the part of the Congolese authorities to declassify a part of the park, said Diallo, adding that UNESCO was providing information and awareness to the Congolese politicians on the implications of Virunga's classification as a [world heritage site](#).

What those opposed to exploiting the park's resources, such as anti-corruption group Global Witness, fear is that the Congolese government will give a permit to another company.

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Citation: Gorillas vs oil: DR Congo seeking way to explore at Virunga park (2015, March 15) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-gorillas-oil-dr-congo-explore.html>

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