

NGOs call for oil drilling ban at Africa's Virunga wildlife park

January 21 2016



Virunga National Park reopened to tourists last year after being closed for two years because of militia violence in the region

International environment and rights groups on Thursday launched a joint plea to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ugandan governments not to allow oil drilling in or around the Virunga National Park, Africa's oldest wildlife reserve famed for its mountain gorillas.

British NGO Global Witness said the appeal has been signed by some 60 groups—including Greenpeace, the African Wildlife Foundation and the Zoological Society of London—and urges the two countries as well as the UN cultural body UNESCO to take action.

In November the Congolese government said that seismic tests carried out by British oil company Soco in Virunga confirmed the presence of oil.

The announcement reignited a heated debate over the merits of exploring for oil in the vast park, which covers some 7,800 square kilometres (3,010 square miles) of lush forest, glaciated peaks and savannah in the restive eastern province of DR Congo's North Kivu region.

The UNESCO world heritage site reopened to tourists last year after being closed for two years because of militia violence in the region.

UNESCO has warned several times that any exploration for oil in the park would be "incompatible" with its heritage status.

The Congolese government however has promoted prospecting for oil in Virunga as offering a chance to lift the vast country out of poverty.

'Devastating impact'

According to Global Witness, next month the Ugandan government will receive bids on six new oil licences, all of which include protected areas and one of which shares a lake with Virunga National Park.

"Drilling for oil in Lake Edward may have a devastating impact on both Virunga and the local people and wildlife in Uganda," said Global Witness spokesman George Boden.

There is a need "to act urgently to stop [oil exploration](#) in the entire lake for good," he added.

Last month the European Parliament called for an end to all oil exploration and exploitation in the Virunga region.

The 60 NGOs called on "the governments of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to reach a deal to stop new [oil drilling](#) licences from being awarded in Virunga National Park and the surrounding area."

In 2010, the DR Congo government awarded several oil concessions straddling the park's boundaries, including giving "block V" to Soco, but suspended the permits following a domestic and international outcry.

To date no oil exploration has begun in Virunga, nor have any licences to do so been granted.

Critics warn that, not only would [oil](#) drilling affect the wild life and environment but would exacerbate the armed conflicts that have torn North Kivu apart for more than two decades.

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Citation: NGOs call for oil drilling ban at Africa's Virunga wildlife park (2016, January 21) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-ngos-oil-drilling-africa-virunga.html>

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