

Quest for oil threatens Africa's oldest wildlife reserve

30 March 2014, by Marc Jourdier



Africa's most venerable wildlife reserve, the Virunga National Park, located in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and already hard hit by deforestation, poaching and armed conflict, may be threatened by the quest for oil

The quest for oil may be the latest threat to Africa's most venerable wildlife reserve, located in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and already hard hit by deforestation, poaching and armed conflict.

Early in March, European Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs warned that "with oil production there would be a major risk of pollution at this site, located near the sources of the Nile."

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and other environmental bodies, including local ones, have also voiced concern about the planned joint operation by small British firm SOCO International PLC and the Kinshasa government in part of the Virunga National Park.

The whole protected territory on the border with Uganda and Rwanda covers 800,000 hectares (two million acres) and has attained worldwide

renown, notably for its rare and endangered mountain gorillas.

SOCO has stated that in July last year, its chairman Rui de Sousa met with WWF chief David Nusbaum, and proposed that they "work together to find the best way forward".

The firm also expressed a commitment to "improving our dialogue" with all parties "about how (its) activities in eastern DRC could affect the flora and fauna of the Virunga National Park and the livelihoods of the regional population."

Created in 1925 in the far east of what was then the Belgian Congo, the whole park was declared an "endangered" part of the global heritage by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994.

The area is exceptionally rich in biodiversity, but is located in scarred North Kivu province, tracts of which have been ravaged by successive conflicts for more than 20 years.

Poachers and logging teams have damaged the reserve, as elsewhere in Africa, but the park is also criss-crossed by rival armed groups and soldiers, while local people have taken up illegal residence.

A global protest campaign erupted after SOCO in 2010 won a contract from the Congolese government to jointly prospect for oil on a concession overlapping the park's territory.



Mountain Gorillas play in dense undergrowth at the Virunga National park in Rwanda, June 17, 2012

International resistance proved strong enough to make Kinshasa suspend SOCO's permit the next year, until a "strategic environmental evaluation" had been conducted.

The launch of the study failed to satisfy the WWF and local organisations, which argue that such contracts and permits handed out by the state violate both Congolese law on conservation and the UNESCO convention protecting World Heritage Sites.

The WWF filed a complaint against SOCO and on February 14 welcomed a British government announcement of an independent probe into the oil company's activities in the DRC, including alleged "threats against local activists."

Opponents denounce the fact that SOCO has functioned inside the park for several months since the government directly associated the company with its own evaluation, thus potentially biasing the outcome.

'The curse of oil'

"No drilling has been planned or is warranted at this stage," SOCO announced in its outlook for 2014,

but it said activity would include "scientific studies involving a seismic survey of Lake Edward, environmental baseline studies and social projects."

Sceptics argue that the seismic survey is a cover for hidden oil prospection that could have serious consequences for the environment.

For Kinshasa, the bottom line is the need to find oil for the economic development of the country, which misrule and conflict have rendered one of the poorest nations in the world, despite vast mineral wealth.

Bantu Lukambo, director general of a non-governmental organisation named Initiative for Development and the Protection of the Environment, believes the government's stance is a conceit.

Based in North Kivu's capital Goma, Lukambo cites damage done at Muanda, on the Atlantic coast far across the vast nation, where black gold has been pumped for about three decades. He rejects "the curse of oil".

A recent report by a French NGO, the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development, said that "far from constituting a manna for development", [oil production](#) at Muanda had instead led to pollution and the degradation of the environment.

Conservation offers more gains

For Thierry Vircoulon, the central African project director of the International Crisis Group, "the confirmation of oil reserves in the east would exacerbate the dynamic of conflicts" there.

Disavowed by the British government, SOCO has declined to take the same position as French oil giant Total, which signed a similar deal with Kinshasa but undertook never to operate in the Virunga National Park.

SOCO has pointed out that it plans to operate only within a small geographical area of "lowland savannah around Lake Edward and the lake itself", and that it "will never seek" to enter the gorilla

habitat.

This is insufficient for UNESCO, which has declared that oil prospecting and production are "not compatible" with world heritage statutes. The organisation warned that part of the park may be unlisted, a prospect that horrifies wildlife activists.

The WWF argues that the DRC has more to gain in economic terms by protecting the park and developing sustainable tourism, fishing and hydroelectric projects, rather than undertaking a search for [oil](#) that might not even be there.

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