

# Soco, WWF strike deal to halt oil drive in Africa's oldest park

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A pair of baby gorillas are seen at Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park, on September 22, 2012

Environmental campaigners WWF and oil exploration firm Soco International announced on Wednesday that the British firm had agreed to halt its hunt for oil in part of Africa's oldest national park.

In a joint statement, they said the WWF had in turn pledged not to pursue a complaint against Soco which it had filed with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The two sides have locked horns over plans to tap oil in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga park, home to 3,000 species including the endangered gorillas immortalised by the film "Gorillas in the Mist".

"Both parties look forward to working responsibly with the Democratic Republic of Congo and its people to ensure that future development benefits both people and the environment," Wednesday's statement said.

The 7,800-square-kilometre (3,000-square-mile) Virunga park was created in 1925 when the country was a Belgian colony.

Despite its own environmental rules and international accords, the government of the conflict-racked but resource-rich republic in 2007 awarded oil concessions in much of the park.

The UN cultural body UNESCO has said [oil exploration](#) and exploitation would breach Virunga's World Heritage site status, and in May last year French giant Total—Soco's fellow concession holder—said it would not drill there.



A peacekeeper of the Monusco, the UN mission in DR Congo, patrols near an entrance to Virunga National Park, on March 11, 2014

Soco has already begun seismic testing in the area, though in a separate statement it underlined that no drilling commitments had ever been made.

"In relation to Virunga National Park we will complete our existing operational programme of work in Virunga which we anticipate will conclude within approximately 30 days of the date of this

statement," Soco said in the joint statement.

"The company commits not to undertake or commission any exploratory or other drilling within Virunga National Park unless UNESCO and the DRC government agree that such activities are not incompatible with its World Heritage status," it added.

In addition, it said that it had committed not to conduct operations in any other World Heritage site.

In a separate company statement, Soco chairman Rui de Sousa underlined that the accord with the WWF also focused on the need for the Congolese government and UNESCO to "reach an agreement on the best way to combine development and the environment."

The WWF also issued a statement, in which its director general Marco Lambertini lauded the deal as "a victory for our planet and for good practices in business".

The park includes part of Lake Edward, a huge expanse of water whose fisheries generate an estimated \$30 million (22 million euros) annually for local communities, according to the WWF.

The WWF has also said that the park has huge potential for the sustainable development of hydropower and ecotourism.

"If free from the threat of [oil](#), Virunga can be a continuing source of hope for the people of DRC. As in other African countries, with proper investment, this park can become a leading economic driver for its communities," said Raymond Lumbuenamo, head of the WWF's operations in the country.

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