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## VIRUNGA BRIEFING

# Oil exploration and exploitation: the potential impacts on mountain gorillas

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**While they live about 37km away from the area where oil exploration is likely, many of the world's critically-endangered mountain gorillas could be affected by oil exploration and exploitation. Here's how...**

The most recent census figures show that there are just 880 mountain gorillas in the world – incredible gentle giants that are among our closest animal relatives. There are two distinct populations – one in an area of around 330 sq km in Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the other in the Virunga Volcano Massif, which lies across the borders of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The volcano region is a single ecosystem that covers about 450 sq km, yet it's separated into three national parks: Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda and the southern sector of the Virunga National Park in DRC.

Mountain gorillas constantly cross the international boundaries within the Virunga Massif, but a census in 2010 estimated that nearly 200 individuals make their home in Virunga National Park.

Thankfully the oil concessions that have been allocated so far in Virunga National Park don't overlap the gorillas' home range, but that doesn't mean they're safe. We believe that oil exploration and exploitation would pose significant indirect risks to Virunga's gorillas and to the other threatened wildlife within the park.

### Increasing infrastructure

Any oil exploration work requires seismic testing to determine where the best places are to find the oil. This can involve strips of vegetation being cleared and infrastructure such as roads and bridges improved so suitable equipment can be transported to the testing areas. As a result of increased human activity, developments like this are often linked to deforestation and poaching. Many tropical species are specially adapted to their habitats and avoid any kind of clearings, so they could be seriously affected by habitat loss. Other species are susceptible to being killed by



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increased traffic, being hunted by humans near roads, or an increased threat from predators due to loss of habitat.

The seismic lines create access to previously inaccessible locations. For instance, in the early 1980s, Shell explored for oil in Tanzania, and its 'cutting lines' (where forest is cleared to make way for seismic lines) provided access to three quarters of the country's Selous Game Reserve. Poachers, mining prospectors and farmers have subsequently used these access tracks.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Belize's Sarstoon-Temash National Park, rangers have seen an increase in illegal logging and poaching along the seismic trails cut by the US company Capital Energy.<sup>2</sup>

## **More people in the park**

In other parts of Uganda, it's been observed that most species of large mammal (e.g. elephants, hippo and buffalo) were negatively affected by activities at a drilling site to test for oil after seismic testing – even by the limited activity involved in maintaining the site, which only requires a few people and some vehicle traffic<sup>3</sup>. There are several cases where the increase in numbers of people in the exploration area has led to an increase in the local bushmeat trade and the decline of a number of wildlife species. If this were to happen in Virunga National Park, it could seriously threaten hippos and other large mammals which have been heavily poached in the past, and also prevent other mammals from migrating to the exploration area.

## **Impact on field staff protecting wildlife in the region**

Virunga National Park currently protects its gorillas and other important wildlife from poaching threats, thanks to more than 50 field staff – both national park and NGO staff – for every 100 sq km. That's more than 20 times the global average<sup>4</sup>. But with the threats described above like logging and poaching, it's reasonable to expect that park authorities may be forced to divert resources away from the gorilla sector, making it difficult to retain this level of protection.

## **Community perceptions**

The presence of these protected areas has been vital in ensuring the survival of the gorillas. If communities perceive that the park has been sold off, they may increase their incursions into the park. This could accelerate habitat loss, increase the presence of harmful snares and expose the gorillas to increased risk of disease from humans.

## **Summary**

Species such as hippos, elephants and buffalos within the concession areas face direct threats from oil exploration in Virunga National Park, owing to both habitat disturbance and increased poaching.

Wildlife outside the concession areas, including the mountain gorillas, will potentially be threatened by the indirect impacts from oil exploration and exploitation in the park.

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<sup>1</sup> African Natural Heritage, Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania  
<http://www.africannaturalheritage.org/Selous-Game-Reserve-Tanzania.html>

<sup>2</sup> Robin Oisín Llewellyn (2011) Seismic trails cut by US oil firm in Belizean national park used by illegal loggers

<sup>3</sup> Prinsloo, S, Mulondo, P, Mugiru, G and Plumptre, AJ (2011) *Measuring responses of wildlife to oil operations in Murchison Falls National Park*, Wildlife Conservation Society and Uganda Wildlife Authority; unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> Gray, M and Kalpers, J (2005) Ranger based monitoring in the Virunga-Bwindi region of East-Central Africa: A simple data collection tool for park management. *Biodiversity and Conservation* 14: 2723-2741.