

BIODIVERSITY

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION RELATED VIOLENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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FOREWORD

This article is published as part of a collaboration between the Climate Security & Peace Project (CS2P) of the NGO CliMates, and the Climate, energy & security program of the French institute of international and strategic affairs (IRIS). This collaboration aims to support the engagement and visibility of young research fellows working on the impact of climate change, and other forms of environmental degradation on human security, by offering a supervision contributing to the development of their competencies.

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ABSTRACT

Anchored in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this article looks at the **hidden face of biodiversity conservation**. Based on widely studied facts in the protected area of the **Virunga National Park**, it aims to share a **warlike reality generating multiple acts of violence against local populations in the name of biodiversity protection**. We therefore call for the questioning of a global conservation strategy whose actors, on the ground, offer, if none, little room - territorially and in the management of the area - to the populations directly affected by their arrival.

KEY WORDS: biodiversity, conservation, violence, DRC.

INTRODUCTION

On January 6 2020, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) stated that “despite ongoing efforts, biodiversity is deteriorating worldwide and this decline is projected to continue or worsen under business-as-usual scenarios”[1]. To protect sites “of particular importance for biodiversity” [2], at a time when 15.34% of the land surface is covered by protected areas (PAs)[3], the UN proposed to reach 30% by 2030[4].

PAs aim at conserving and protecting fragile and unique ecosystems as a way to limit environmental degradation and climate change. Yet, if ill-designed, such policies might contribute to increasing risks to human security, especially to populations adjacent to PAs. As we shall demonstrate, even though indigenous tribes’ environmental related knowledge and know-how have been increasingly recognized at the international scale, **the creation, multiplication and often militarization of such areas** (i.e. the use of military techniques and armaments by the rangers) **limit the role of local populations as protectors of the environment**[5], threaten their traditional way of life, and pose important risks to their security.

This article explores the **implications of terrestrial PAs for local populations in the context of the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, by looking at Africa’s oldest[6] National Park: Virunga, a widely studied PA characterised by ongoing violences[7] and best known for protecting one third of the remaining mountain gorillas on Earth[8]. The first section of this article will introduce the DRC’s relationship with terrestrial PAs. Then, the violent tensions within PAs will be addressed before embarking on a third part devoted to the militarization of Virunga National Park. We will show that **even if the Virunga National Park is crucial to biodiversity protection, its management puts local populations’ security and rights at risk.**

SITUATION REPORT IN THE DRC

The DRC is part of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world, defined as a group of nations that contains more than 70% of the earth’s biodiversity[9]. With more than half its territory covered by dense forests and woodlands, the DRC possesses “over 50% of Africa’s tropical forests”, along with endemic and endangered species such as Grauer’s gorilla, mountain gorilla, the okapi or Congo peafowl[10].



Sources: Geographical, Worldwildlife, UNESCO, Domestic Forest[11]

According to the World Database of Protected Areas, the total number of PAs amounts to 52 in the DRC as of 2021, covering a total of 13.83% of the country's territory[12]. **PAs are divided into distinct management categories established by the International Union for Conservation and Nature (IUCN)** according to their type, ranging from category I to VI : strict nature reserve (I.a.), wilderness areas (I.b.), national park (II), national monument or feature (III), habitats/species management area (IV), protected landscape (V), PAs with sustainable use of natural resources (VI)[13].

In addition to the intrinsic benefits of nature conservation, the DRC's PAs are considerable tourist attractions, with corresponding economic incentives. As such, the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) has made tourism an integral part of its official website on which it promotes activities such as tourism of vision - the possibility to see endemic species of fauna and stunning

landscapes - and tourist hunting, recalling that the DRC "was the first African country to initiate the habituation of gorillas to human visits and to initiate tourism to habituated gorillas"[14].

At first sight, the multiplication of PAs seems to be advantageous for the DRC, not only due to economic benefits that the country derives from PAs. In the most favourable scenarios, benefits from the establishment of PAs at the local level are manifold: increased tourism, improved quality of life, maintained local culture and conserved scenic beauty and intrinsic values of nature[16].

However, apart from PAs with sustainable use of natural resources (IUCN Category VI) which are said to support "local people living in the PA or its buffer zone", Categories I to IV are, in reality, "often used to justify their removal"[17], which can lead to **great tensions between the park's stakeholders and local populations.**

VIOLENT TENSIONS INSIDE PROTECTED AREAS

Establishing and/or managing PAs usually comes with a risk of tensions, especially “when two or more parties hold strong views over conservation objectives and when one of such parties tries to assert its interests at the expense of the others”[18].

Views over conservation objectives usually fall between the lines of either *preservationism* or *devolutionism*[19]. **Preservationism considers the implication of indigenous people in the process of conservation as an “error”** and hopes for decisions to be taken without - if not against - them. **Devolutionism, on the other hand, argues for the necessity of increasing the ability of these populations to control their resources**[20].

Throughout time, the role attributed to local populations in maintaining biodiversity has oscillated between a naïve belief in the myth of the “good savage” protecting the environment and the idea that they are harmful predators[21].

However, in 1982, at the Third World National Parks Congress held in Bali, a **growing consensus on the necessity to systematically integrate the needs of local populations into PA management plans** emerged[22]. More recently, the 2020 CBD recalled that “the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities and a recognition of their rights in the implementation of the framework” should be “the first enabling condition” for the realization of the biodiversity framework[23].

Yet, these devolutionist declarations recognizing the **need to take local stakeholders into account** are to be followed by actions on the ground[24], especially in PAs “located in conflict zones or plagued by ‘poaching crises’” where there has been an **intensifying tendency towards “green militarization”**[25]. Green militarization is a practice that involves, according to Lunstrum, “the **use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation**”[26]. Such a green militarization can be seen in the case of the Virunga National Park, located in Eastern DRC.

Containing a very high diversity of plants and habitats, Virunga is one of Africa's leading national parks in terms of biological diversity[27]. Virunga's first aim is to protect mountain gorillas, an endangered species exclusively living in the Virunga Massif and Bwindi's forest. This PA is also a protected space for more than a thousand animal species and at the same time home to more than four million people[28] affected by numerous conflicts. **The DRC, especially its Eastern part, is indeed destabilised by the presence of over 130 armed groups[29], authors of exactions and whose main activity is to illegally exploit natural resources, putting the country in a situation of crisis[30]. Their existence has been generating the militarization of biodiversity protection, which consequently raises the issue of local populations' safety around the park.**

VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK AND THE MILITARIZATION OF BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION

As such, Virunga National Park (see Figure 1) is an example of militarized conservation[32]. Indeed, in order to achieve the objectives for which the PA was created as well as to respond to a particular geopolitical context, **rangers of the park are in the possession of powerful armaments such as "Rocket Propelled Grenade and machine guns"[33]. Also, they are trained by Belgian ex-military personnel[34] to acquire "military-style skills"[35] such as combat tactics.** This reformed training dates back to 2008 and the arrival of the Belgian De Merode at the head of the Virunga Foundation, a British NGO managing the Park through a Public Private Partnership (PPP) with the ICCN[36]. As a consequence of this PPP, De Merode became "the park's chief warden"[37] and fell within the **long lineage of Belgians involved in nature conservation in the DRC[38].**



Figure 1:
Aerial view of
the scope of
Virunga National
Park

Source:
BBC[31]

The involvement of Western actors in the protection of PAs across the African continent could be explained by the **belief in Western superiority in terms of knowledge and skills**[39], which seemingly gives Western countries the legitimacy to issue (violent) orders - a phenomenon that some authors call **white-authorized green violence**[40]. Arguably, this is a **consequence of postcolonialism**[41] that fails to take into account the fact that **local experts might be more aware of local dynamics, including conflict dynamics**.

This new military-like training programme, financed by the European Commission (EC), also includes the payment of a monthly fee to the Virunga park guards to discourage them from engaging in corruption[42]. Due to the numerous conflicts in the region and the urging context with regard to conservation[43], these financial supports would allow **conservation actors to often possess “superior means to wield violence”**[44] than any other actor on the territory.

Park guards may, however, also be targets[45] **of violence**[46], **as they aim, in close collaboration with the Congolese army**[47], **to prevent the illegal exploitation of the park’s natural resources**, which leads to a considerable loss of revenue, particularly for armed groups hiding in the park[48].

Still, their military-like training has accentuated the gap with the **local population**, which **perceives the rangers more as soldiers than as park guards**[49], a relationship that is deplored by some guards who would like to be considered more as conservationists[50].

Such militarization might also represent a risk for local and wildlife populations as rangers could use their skills and equipment against them[51], even if it is not in their best interest as it could lead to the alienation of “the very communities on which conservationists rely to conserve wildlife”[52], a statement that recognizes the crucial role of local populations in conserving biodiversity.

In spite of this recognition, *“farmers around the southern sector of the VNP] expressed fears about being arrested and beaten by park guards; women entering the park to search for fire and construction wood worried about being raped by armed actors; and those travelling certain roads next to the park were afraid to get ambushed or kidnapped for ransom”*[53].

These fears are exacerbated as abuses of power and **acts of violence committed by the rangers often go unreported, and consequently unpunished**. Possible explanations might be that local populations fear the National Park's management, that they do not trust their country's justice institutions and that local populations worry about the fact that they often find themselves in breach of the rules themselves, e.g. by exploiting resources or cultivating in the park[54]. Added to this, the establishment and maintenance of PAs depend on so many actors that it makes it difficult "to identify whom to engage over lost land and resources, and whom to hold to account"[55]. Eventually, if a punishable act is reported, rangers can use the advantageous argument of having acted against one or more people because of their ties - familial, social, economic - with rebel groups[56].

Beyond direct violence, **local communities also suffer from economic prejudices caused by militarized conservation**. Rangers do not hesitate to destroy harvests and charcoal as well as to dispossess farmers of their agricultural tools, thus crushing their means of subsistence[57].

This draws on the rangers' assumption that farmers and agriculture present a threat for the conservation of the area as "human presence and activity are damaging to ecosystems"[58]. This assumption is at the heart of the "**fortress conservation model**", with the stated goal of **keeping populations away from the park by enclosing it**. Despite Congolese laws stating that a Site Coordination Committee shall be put into place once a year "to coordinate with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, local authorities and national and international NGOs"[59], Virunga seems to never have organized such meetings[60]. **Local populations' wishes are rarely discussed at the international level and are often underrepresented in the park management[61] regardless of their great knowledge of local ecosystems and direct necessity of protecting them[62]**.

According to Marijnen & Verweijen[63], such 'green militarization' can be put into place through discursive techniques "that allow it to be seen as a 'normal' and 'legitimate' response" to the protection of biodiversity.

Among these **discursive techniques** stand **shedding light on the state of war and chaos in the park** as a way to render militarized interventions “a ‘self-evidentiary necessity’”[64], a process particularly used in Africa[65]. The very fact that the protection of the park has been given to rangers, who in some areas work jointly with the Congolese Army[66], proves that Virunga National Park is inscribed in a warlike situation to save biodiversity and endangered species, the war being represented as an “urgency” for which “the ends (saving species) justify the means (use of force, including deadly force)”[67].

Another way to legitimize green militarization is by **asking consumers to fund it** so as to make the war for biodiversity effective[68]. Virunga National Park’s communication relies on this marketing strategy with its “Fallen Rangers Fund” or the movie “Virunga” whereby the viewers are asked to donate money.

The Fund shapes the image of heroes dead in the name of nature conservation, without mentioning operations they conducted, such as the destruction of homes and fields[69], while the movie proposes to become part of ‘Virunga’s epic fight’ by donating money, to fund, among other things, patrols or dog-tracking teams without dwelling on the consequences of such actions on the ground[70].

Therefore, **legitimizing militarized conservation amounts to making acceptable and even necessary a state of war**. In this war, rangers are represented as heroes that anyone could finance at the expense of local communities who, in the shadow, see their livelihoods, fields, and traditional way of life destroyed as well as being potentially directly assaulted by the rangers.

However, Masse[71] notes that **rangers cannot be solely held responsible for acts of violence**. Rather, it is important to “look at the broader structures of which rangers are part, and through which their behavior is regulated”[72].

As an example of how violence is produced within armed organizations, Osiel[73] distinguishes between:

“1) *“atrocities from above”, which are explicitly ordered by commanders;*

2) *“atrocities by connivance”, where the hierarchy has not given explicit orders, but creates a permissive climate by not punishing acts of abuse; and*

3) *“atrocities from below”, which result from soldiers’ own volition, hence are neither ordered nor tolerated by the hierarchy”[74].*

CONCLUSION

As highlighted with the specific context of the Virunga National Park in the DRC, **local populations might suffer from the protection of nature** if policies are not well thought through. As Zaitchik[75] stated, **“the way these protected areas have been established and maintained has damaged the lives of the indigenous peoples who live within their borders”** although they are, in the words of Peter Veit, director of World Resource Institute’s Land and Resource Rights initiative, “the world’s secret weapon in the fight against climate change and deforestation”[76].

By the means of significant resources, as evidenced by their armament which aims to dissuade poachers and local populations, including armed groups, from venturing into the park to extract its resources, **the role of the rangers is to protect a unique ecosystem**. As a result, **a conflictual atmosphere prevails** inside as well as on the outskirts of the park **between the rangers and the locals**.

This observation illustrates the **relevance of the study of biodiversity conservation through the theme of security**, whether it is environmental security in the name of which PAs are created or human security, an issue arising from the drift towards militarization of biodiversity conservation.

In a context of global biodiversity loss, PAs are bound to multiply and with them the negative consequences described in this article. To remedy this, environmental groups argue that any new increase in PAs must first be preceded by an independent study on the social impacts and effectiveness of nature conservation in existing PAs[77], a proposal which constitutes, among others, the core of an open-letter[78] dedicated to CBD Parties and the CBD Secretariat that further aims at expressing fears and proposing actions before increasing the number of PAs worldwide[79].

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