

Virunga National Park

USFWS support to conservation, in and around Virunga, since 2006: 25 projects totaling more than \$2.6 million leveraged by more than \$7.8 million in additional funds. In 2013, USFWS signed a 5-year cooperative agreement with the Virunga Fund Inc., which will invest more than \$1,250,000 and leverage \$3.35 million in additional funds.



Africa's oldest national park was established in 1925 as the Prince Albert National Park and renamed Virunga National Park in 1969. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 and a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 1996.

Virunga National Park is located in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), bordering Uganda and Rwanda. It covers just over 3,000 square miles and is the most biologically diverse park in Africa. Virunga's variety of landscapes include Africa's two most active volcanoes, located in the network of the Rwenzori and Virunga Mountains. These mountains have permanent glaciers and snowfields at their summits and diverse forested slopes. In addition, Virunga National Park hosts savannas, steppes, forests, and swamps.

Approximately half of the nearly 700 of the world's remaining critically endangered mountain gorillas live in Virunga. In addition, Virunga provides important habitat to other species of global conservation concern, including the forest elephant and hippopotamus. It is also home to 218 mammal species, including 22 primate species of which 3 are great ape species, and 706 bird species. Other wildlife species include 109 reptiles, 78 amphibians, and over 2,000 different plants. Virunga National Park is managed by the Congolese Wildlife Authority (*Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature*, or ICCN).

Threats to Biodiversity in Virunga National Park

Habitat Degradation caused by Illegal Charcoal Production

Limited access to electricity has led to a demand for charcoal. 1,355,000 sacks are produced each year using the



Above: The mountain gorilla silverback, Bageni, resting with his family in Virunga National Park. Credit: Dr. Martin Kabuyaya

equivalent of nearly 16,000 cubic feet of wood per year. Not only are trees destroyed, this practice also had a destabilizing impact. Charcoal-making from Virunga's protected forests funnels an estimated \$30 million per year to illegal armed groups and the charcoal cartels.

Habitat Disturbance from Oil Exploration

In 2010, an oil and gas exploration company based in the United Kingdom began to explore for oil within Virunga National Park's boundaries. If oil exploration is allowed, it will have a negative impact on Virunga's ecosystem and species.

Poaching of gorilla and elephant populations

Although elephant meat is targeted by some bushmeat hunters, hunting for ivory is the single most important threat to the survival of elephants in Virunga National Park. Great apes are also under great threat from poaching. They are valued not only as bushmeat, but also for the live animal trade. Primates, duikers, and other large-

bodied species tend to be the most heavily exploited "bushmeat species". In Virunga National Park, some of these have included large numbers of hippopotamus and buffalo.

Challenges & Drivers of Threats

With insufficient communication between Virunga National Park and the surrounding communities, local stakeholders do not have full appreciation of Virunga's role and objectives as a protected area and the value of conserving it. Ecotourism revenue is hampered by political instability, leaving the local communities with few tangible benefits from Virunga's protection. Poverty is widespread and agricultural land is in direct competition with the wildlife habitat. National park staff suffer from the lack of resources and are subjected to dangerous conditions. More than 150 Virunga rangers have been killed in the line of duty in the last 20 years, the risks the rangers take also pose a threat to their families.

USFWS is a long-time partner and supporter of Virunga National Park. It began with a \$50,000 grant awarded more than a decade ago to assist the process of rebuilding following a complete collapse due to civil war. Since then, Virunga has raised more than \$20 million from a wide range of public and private donors.



Left: A fellow ranger mourns the death of his fallen comrade in Virunga National Park. Credit: Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature. **Right:** A dead mountain gorilla is transported out of Virunga National Park by community members. Credit: © Brent Stirton/Getty Images

Heroes of the Forest

The Heroes of the Forest program was established by USFWS as a signature initiative to reinforce the capacity and the morale of rangers worldwide. This program is being piloted with Virunga National Park rangers. Monthly stipends support the widows and dependents of rangers killed in the line of duty. The toll on park rangers and their dependents has been devastating, since 150 rangers have made the ultimate sacrifice to protect Virunga National Park and its threatened wildlife. USFWS has committed \$132,762 to the Heroes of the Forest program, leveraging \$130,040 in matching contributions.

In 2013, the USFWS and the Virunga Fund Inc. signed a 5-year cooperative

agreement to support the operational capacity of Virunga's rangers while strengthening the park's long-term conservation strategy and financial sustainability.

Alternative Energy Efforts

USFWS was the first organization to support Virunga's efforts to develop alternative energy sources to reduce the demand for charcoal. USFWS funded a briquette pilot project, which has shown considerable success. As a result, USFWS and other donors, provided support for a full-scale briquette project.

Improved Aerial Surveillance of Virunga National Park

USFWS provided nearly half of the financing to Virunga National Park to purchase an aircraft to conduct aerial surveillance. This aircraft has been invaluable because rangers are now able to move more quickly around the park and identify illegal activities much faster. Furthermore, this new aerial capacity has led to improved safety and response to injured rangers.

K-9 Law Enforcement Units

USFWS is supporting the establishment of bloodhound canine units in Virunga National Park. The dogs are trained to detect and trail poachers in an effort to reduce poaching activities within the park.

Tourism Activities

USFWS is working with Virunga National Park to re-establish chimpanzee viewing tourism activities. Once tourism is successfully re-established, local communities surrounding Virunga will be able to obtain increased benefits generated from tourism.

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September 2014



A Virunga National Park ranger stands with a detector dog, part of the K-9 law enforcement units in Virunga. Credit: USFWS