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TO THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE AND STATE PARTIES

Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of
Congo: World Heritage Property in Danger

From June 24th till July 6th, you will be gathering in St Petersburg for the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee. The conservation status of our most precious places on earth will be discussed and decisions will be made to safeguard those places for future generations.

As non-governmental organisations that share the values of the Convention and are dedicated to protecting the environment, we would like to draw your attention to a World Heritage Site in severe danger: Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Oil concessions have been designated covering 85% of the park, despite the fact that oil development in the Park is incompatible with its World Heritage status and forbidden under Congolese law. Oil companies based in Convention State Parties France (Total), South Africa

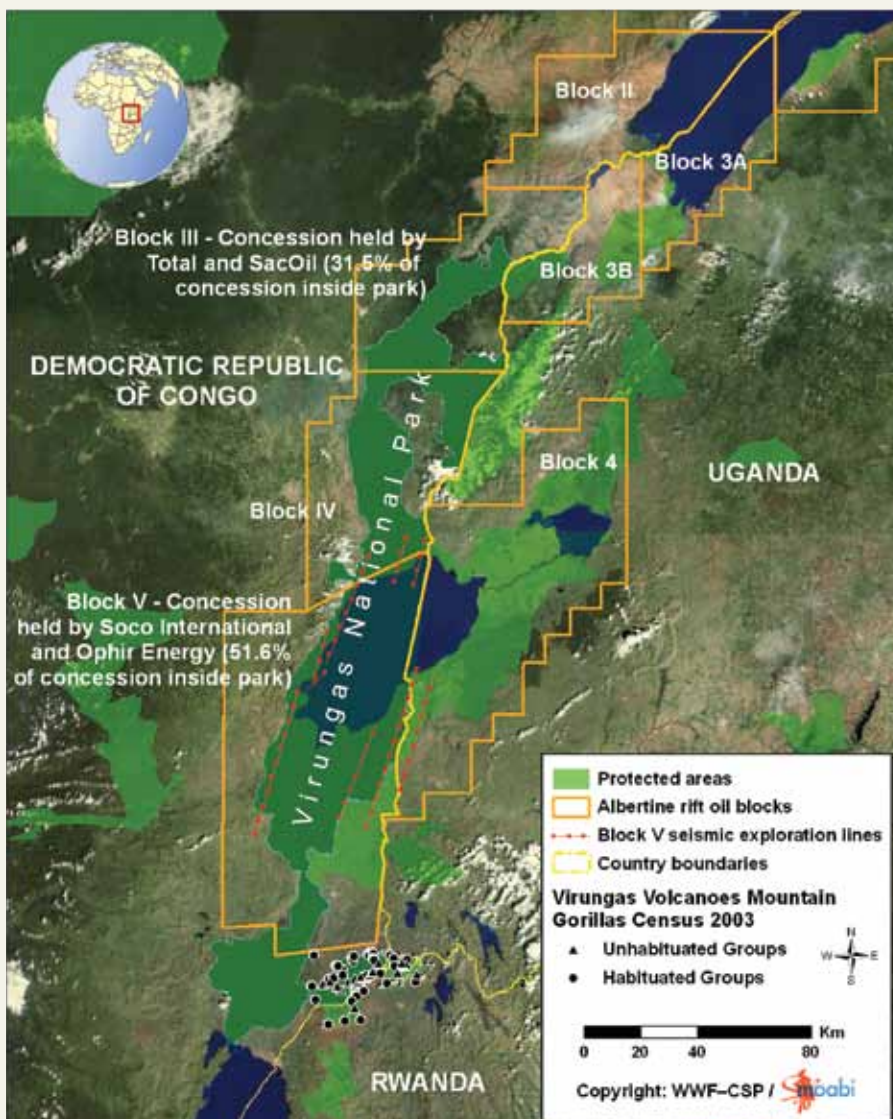
(SacOil) and the United Kingdom (SOCO International and Ophir Energy) have been granted concessions overlapping the park. To date, none of these companies have stated publicly that they will refrain from operating in the Park and thereby respecting the park's World Heritage status. Neither have they indicated that they will respect the provisions of the Congolese constitution, which recognises the supremacy of international treaty obligations (in this instance the World Heritage Convention) over its own national legislation.

We are deeply concerned that Africa's oldest national park, established in 1925 and protected since then by the efforts of multiple organisations and mechanisms, including those associated with the World Heritage Convention, is threatened by oil development. This contravenes its protected area status and poses an overwhelming risk to the integrity of the Park.

Drilling in Lake Edward, where most of the oil reserves are believed to be located, would bring a huge influx of workers and equipment as well as infrastructure development into the Park. This increases human pressure through illegal hunting, farming, fishing, and charcoal production. Contamination of the lake, which is a vital source of fresh water and protein for local human populations, as well as one of the sources of the great Nile River, would have a huge impact on food- and water security for millions of people.

The most famous residents of Virunga National Park are the critically endangered mountain gorillas, of which only 786 individuals remain in Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. While the habitat of Virunga National Park's 200 mountain gorillas does not currently fall within an oil concession, development in the park could negatively affect their security. In addition, development in the buffer zones outside the Park will likely have a direct effect on the World Heritage values of the Park.

Allowing illegal activities, such as oil operations, to be conducted in the park fundamentally undermines the authority of park managers, and will make it difficult for them to guard against intrusion by others seeking to exploit its land, trees and animals.





A Hippopotamus about to plunge into a mudbath at the banks of the Rutshuru River, Virunga National Park.

Oil companies

SOCO International and Total – the main operators in the key oil blocs – have failed so far not only to declare Virunga National Park a “no go” area for oil development, but also to respect the decision by the DRC Government (a State Party to the WHC) to suspend petroleum exploration activities pending a Strategic Environmental Assessment. This was outlined in the Kinshasa Declaration between the DRC Government Prime Minister Mr Adolphe Muzito and the UNESCO Director General, Mrs Irina Bokova, announced in March 2011. This assessment is in process, with the initial scoping study completed but will not be finalised for several months to come.

If SOCO follows through on its repeated intention to explore for oil on the ground within the park, the company will be breaching national laws and as well as resulting in the potential breach by the DRC of the provisions of the World Heritage Convention.

It is deplorable to see a protected area that has survived years of armed conflict threatened by the activities of commercial companies. Increased economic activity as well as new vested interests and power holders in the area, are likely to lead to increased conflict both with local community members and with the Park’s wildlife.

Responsibilities as Committee Members and States Parties to the World Heritage Convention

We recognise that, pursuant to Article 4 of the Convention, the government of the DRC is primarily responsible for the protection and maintenance of the Outstanding Universal Value of Virunga National Park. However, in your capacity as members of the World Heritage Committee and as nominated representatives of States Parties, it is your responsibility not to countenance the taking of ‘any deliberate measures which might damage directly or

indirectly the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 situated on the territory of other State Parties to this Convention’ (as per Article 6 (3)). Member States in which oil companies like Total, SacOil, SOCO International and Ophir Energy are based, also have an international legal duty to ensure respect of the Convention and hold these companies to account. If the oil companies are to proceed with exploration activities within the current boundaries of the Park, we would argue that the governments of the countries where those companies are based will be just as culpable for the failure to respect the terms of the Convention and for whatever consequences might follow in terms of social and environmental damage.

100%
RECYCLED

National Park, Virunga Mountains, Rwanda

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 We urge the World Heritage Committee to vote in favour of the draft Decisions 36 com 7A.36 and 36 COM 7A.4.
- 2 We urge the DRC Government to ensure that the provisions of the World Heritage Convention are upheld, and to explore alternative development models for Virunga area which do not rely on oil exploration and development inside the current boundaries of Virunga National Park.
- 3 We urge the State Parties of France, the United Kingdom and South Africa to commit to upholding their treaty obligations under the World Heritage Convention and to take all possible measures to ensure that companies headquartered in their territories do not conduct oil exploration or extraction activities inside the current boundaries of Virunga National Park nor inflict any indirect or direct damage to the cultural and natural heritage of the park.
- 4 We urge all States Parties to the Convention, to impress this responsibility upon the State Parties of France, the United Kingdom and South Africa.

For further information, please contact Ms. Anneke Galama, Campaign Coordinator Virunga, WWF and present at the World Heritage Committee Meeting.
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