

Why fighting fire with fire in DRC's Virunga Park isn't helping conservation

By [Judith Verweijen](#) and [Esther Marijnen](#)

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Conserving nature in areas immersed in prolonged violent conflict is challenging. One such area is the Virunga National Park, located in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The park management tries to face these challenges head-on with the aim of protecting Virunga's rich biodiversity. In particular, the survival of the well-known endangered mountain gorilla is at stake.



A patrol post in Virunga. Using the army to fight illegal resource exploitation aggravates conflict. Author supplied

It would be wrong to question the objectives, dedication, and sacrifices made by the park management and staff. Many rangers have lost their lives in the line of duty. But based on [our research](#) in the region, we have doubts about the effects of the park's current policies on conflict and violence in the wider Virunga area.

As we show certain conservation practices – like strict law enforcement to combat illegal resources exploitation by armed groups – can inadvertently aggravate violent conflict. They may, for example, reinforce the links between populations and the armed groups on whom they depend for their livelihoods. This undermines conservation efforts in the long-term.

Devising alternative policies for addressing armed groups is no easy task. But as we discuss in [a recent article](#), there's remarkably little debate on this issue. The media and policymakers pay limited attention to the effects of the park's policies on the dynamics of violent conflict. In fact, the [dominant story line](#) is that the Virunga National Park contributes to peace building. But the reality on the ground is much more complex, as we discovered talking to people who live in the area.

Battling armed groups

A plethora of armed groups operates in and around the Virunga National Park. Their presence isn't specific to the park: [tens of dozens of armed groups](#) roam the eastern Congo, reflecting a militarisation that has become [self-sustaining](#). But there's a particularly high concentration of such groups in the park.

It provides cover and access to populations and natural resources needed to generate revenue. For instance armed groups are engaged in facilitating charcoal production, poaching, illegal fishing, and "[guerilla agriculture](#)", or cultivation where it's forbidden.

The effects of these activities on Virunga's biodiversity are devastating. Illegal fishing contributes to the [rapid depletion of fish stock](#), not least as it often takes place in the waters where fish breed. Charcoal production, for its part, is at the root of intense deforestation, which has grave consequences for the entire ecosystem.

But while depleting the park's resources, thousands of people living in the Virunga area depend on illegal resources exploitation for their livelihoods. They pay armed groups to access the park and protect such revenue generating activities. The resulting links between people and armed groups complicate efforts to tackle illegal resources exploitation.

As we discuss in [recent work](#), the park management tries to address armed groups by collaborating with the Congolese army. So park rangers conduct joint operations with army soldiers to push armed groups out of the park. As a result, conservation has come to merge with counter-insurgency. But this approach is counterproductive.



Clashes in the park

First, the operations are not part of wider political and socio-economic measures to deal with armed groups. Thus far the Congolese government has failed to develop such measures. This means that the armed groups are temporarily dislocated, rather than dissolved. The result is a vicious cycle of attacks and counter-attacks between armed groups and the mixed units of park guards and army soldiers. This rising violence doesn't only increase the insecurity of inhabitants, but also puts the lives of the park guards further at risk.

Second, the tensions sparked by the operations seem to drive people closer to armed groups, causing the park guards in turn to develop growing animosity towards them. Because populations depend on illegal revenue generation activities in the park, and no alternative livelihood activities are offered after the operations, people feel they have little choice but to solicit the protection of armed groups to re-access the park.

Third, the operations feed into conflicts over land, local authority and between different communities. In the Rutshuru area, for instance, [tensions between Hutu and Nande populations](#) have intensified over the past months. This is partly due to military operations by the Congolese army against a Hutu armed group that operates in the park.

Any attack against an armed group alters the fragile power equilibrium between armed groups, allied elite networks, and associated civilian communities which often have the same ethnic background as armed group leaderships. So efforts to push armed groups out of the park risk setting in motion a chain of reactions that may spiral out of control.

Dominant stories

It's widely reported that the Virunga Park is plagued by armed conflict. But this reporting often echoes [heart of darkness clichés](#) or simple storylines pitting bad guys (savage rebels) against good guys (usually the park guards and staff). These narratives are rarely accompanied by indepth reflections on the causes of the violence, which tend to be simply ascribed to [resources plunder](#).

Also, by stressing that Virunga is the [most dangerous park in the world to work](#), it becomes [taken for granted](#) that conservation has merged with counter-insurgency.

Attention to spectacular figures like the heroic park guards and evil rebels overshadows attention to the people living in or along the borders of the park. Their [voices](#) are [rarely heard](#). But their accounts give a different picture than mainstream representations and show how people are suffering under the rising insecurity.

Another reason why the park's current policies aren't questioned is that donors and the park management have institutional interests in diffusing a seductive [“triple-win rhetoric.”](#) They emphasise that the park promotes at once conservation and development as well as peace building. This would prove that Virunga is an area that works compared with the rest of the DRC, which is viewed as a “failed state”. Such narratives of success ensure that aid, mainly coming from the [European Commission](#), and donations continue to flow.

The current park management is based on a [public private partnership \(PPP\)](#) between the Congolese state agency for nature conservation and a British NGO, the Virunga Foundation. The NGO has assumed full responsibility for the park's management. As it's a European NGO who supervises the park guards — who moreover have received [military training by former Belgian commandos](#) — western audiences appear to ask less questions about the ways in which violent force is employed and how this affects conflict dynamics and people's security.

So the blind spots in the complex interplay between conservation and violent conflict stem to a large extent from deeply rooted unequal power relations between the North and the South. These inequalities cause certain narratives, policy options and voices to be heard, and others to be excluded. This means that the decolonisation of nature conservation is a precondition for its demilitarisation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Verweijen is a research fellow, Conflict Research Group, Ghent University. Esther Marijnen is a postdoctoral research fellow, University of Sheffield.

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