

Drillers in the Midst Is SOCO withdrawing from Virunga National Park?¹

Daniel Stiles



Began in anthropology with a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley, Dan Stiles has studied natural resource management and wildlife trade from the level of hunter-gatherer up to senior government and international organization official. He has worked in academia, for the United Nations as staff

and consultant and for various NGOs such as IUCN, TRAFFIC, Save the Elephants and many more. He has lived in Kenya almost continuously since 1977.

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Headlines last June reported an agreement between SOCO International, a British oil company, and WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature), to end to oil exploration in Virunga National Park, one of the most biodiverse landscapes on the planet.

When King Albert I of Belgium founded Virunga National Park in 1925,

Africa's first such protected area, little did he know what was in store. The king created the park in then-Belgian Congo to protect mountain gorillas in what is today the Mikeno southern sector and the Parc des Volcans in Rwanda, but since 1925 the park has expanded as far north as the Ruwenzori Mountains, over 150 km away. Now at 7,800 km² it encompasses one of the most diverse and spectacular landscapes in Africa, including active volcanoes, tropical forest, savannas, swamps, glacier-capped mountains, Rift Valley lakes and rivers.

Besides mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*), the park is also home to the eastern lowland Grauer's gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) and the chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*),

making Virunga the only park in the world to host three varieties of great apes. In addition, both forest and savanna elephants, the rare okapi-- which looks like a collision between a zebra and a giraffe--lions, hippos and various monkeys roam within the park's boundaries. Virunga is one of the most biologically diverse places on the planet--containing more mammal, bird and reptile species than any other protected area on the African continent.

In recognition of the park's biodiversity importance, it was made a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 1979. As such, under the terms of the World Heritage Convention, the government of the Democratic

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Republic of the Congo (DRC) agrees to do all it can do to ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the "...protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage situated on its territory."

But in 2006 SOCO International arrived. SOCO, which also operates in Congo-Brazzaville, Angola and Viet Nam, was attracted to what is termed the Albertine Graben, a geologic depression along the western arm of the Great Rift Valley, because oil has been found on the Ugandan side. Since grabens do not respect man-made borders, it follows that oil should be on the DRC side as well.

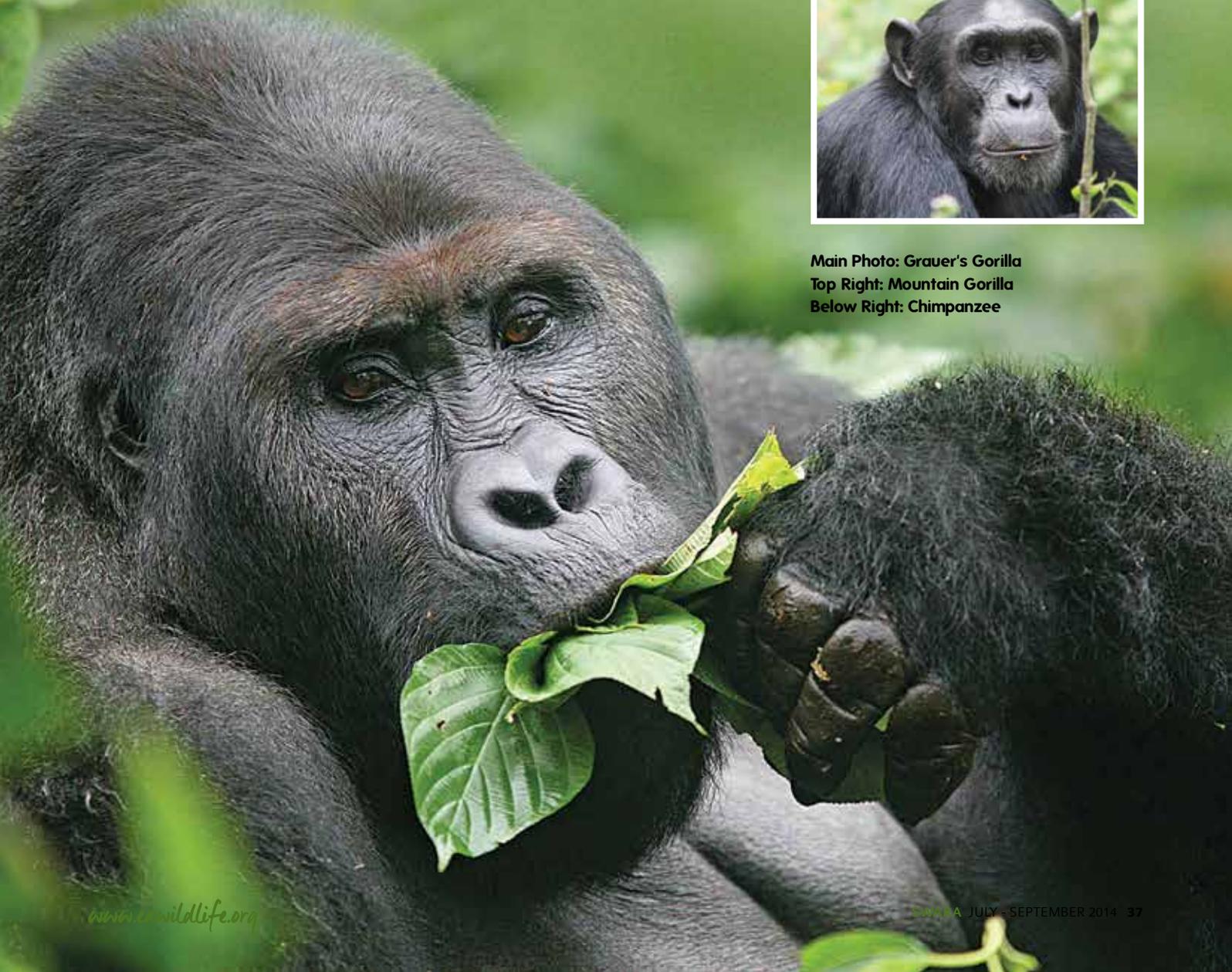
The DRC government awarded SOCO a huge exploration area, called Block

V, in June 2006. The 7,500 square kilometer block runs along the Ugandan border starting at the northern shore of Lake Edward and moving south right through Virunga National Park to just north of the Mikeno-Rwanda volcano highlands, where Dian Fossey studied her famous mountain "Gorillas in the Mist." A small population of Grauer's gorilla lives on Mt. Tshiaberimu, north of Block V, and chimpanzees are scattered in various places within the block.

Ever since word got out that an oil company had started exploration in Virunga, conservationists protested the oilmen's presence. Even billionaires Richard Branson and Howard Buffett, bolstered by the moral authority of



Main Photo: Grauer's Gorilla
Top Right: Mountain Gorilla
Below Right: Chimpanzee



Nobel Peace prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu, concluded in a joint op-ed in the Huffington Post, "It is ... difficult to understand how oil exploration in a fragile region like Virunga is a plan that is in the Congolese people's best interests."

WWF International has led a coalition of conservation groups with an energetic campaign: "Virunga: Africa's most beautiful and diverse oil field? Help draw the line." An online petition garnered 750,000 signatures opposing SOCO's intervention. Belgium, Germany and the EU Parliament are also opposed to any oil exploration in the park, and UNESCO, which oversees the World Heritage sites, has called for cancellation of SOCO's concession.

WWF filed a complaint against SOCO with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Paris-based body grouping the world's richest countries, claiming that the company was violating good-practice business guidelines, as well as DRC law. Congolese legislation governing national parks, passed in 1969, prohibits "excavations, earthworks, surveys, sampling of materials and all other work liable to alter the appearance of the terrain or vegetation," except in the context of scientific research. In this case, SOCO calls its seismic surveys "scientific research."

SOCO finally gave in to international pressure and on 11 June made a joint announcement with WWF that an agreement had been reached. WWF would drop its OECD complaint and SOCO would suspend operations.

"Today is a victory for our planet and for good practices in business... This is the moment for the international community to support DRC and help us bring lasting change that will ensure Africa's first national park remains the mother park of Africa," said Marco Lambertini, Director General of WWF International.

SOCO's statement, however, suggested that the victory may be short-lived. Not only will SOCO continue its "...operational programme of work in Virunga which we anticipate will conclude within approximately 30 days of the date of this statement," but "the company commits not to undertake or commission any exploratory or other drilling within Virunga National Park unless UNESCO and the DRC government agree that such activities are not incompatible with its World Heritage status."

The door is still open for SOCO to continue work if the DRC and UNESCO agree. The DRC government has shown its commitment to SOCO's exploitation of the petroleum resources in the Albertine Graben in numerous statements and signed agreements, particularly an eight-page memorandum of understanding between the Congolese wildlife authority (ICCN) and SOCO, signed in November 2013.



PHOTO BY: SOCO INTERNATIONAL

Seismic surveys in Virunga

The memorandum puts SOCO's activities and results directly under the personal control of Pasteur Cosma Wilungula Balongelwa, ICCN's Director General, including the \$15,000 a month that SOCO is paying ICCN for the right to access the park.

"Our agreement with WWF focuses the need for the DRC Government and UNESCO to also reach an agreement on the best way to combine development and the environment," said Rui de Sousa, Chairman of SOCO.

This appears to put the final decision on whether SOCO can continue to work inside Virunga on UNESCO, since the DRC government has already agreed that "such activities are not incompatible with its World Heritage status."

In any case, approximately half of Block V is outside the boundaries of Virunga National Park. Nothing in the agreement with WWF is stopping SOCO from continuing work there, across an imaginary green line.

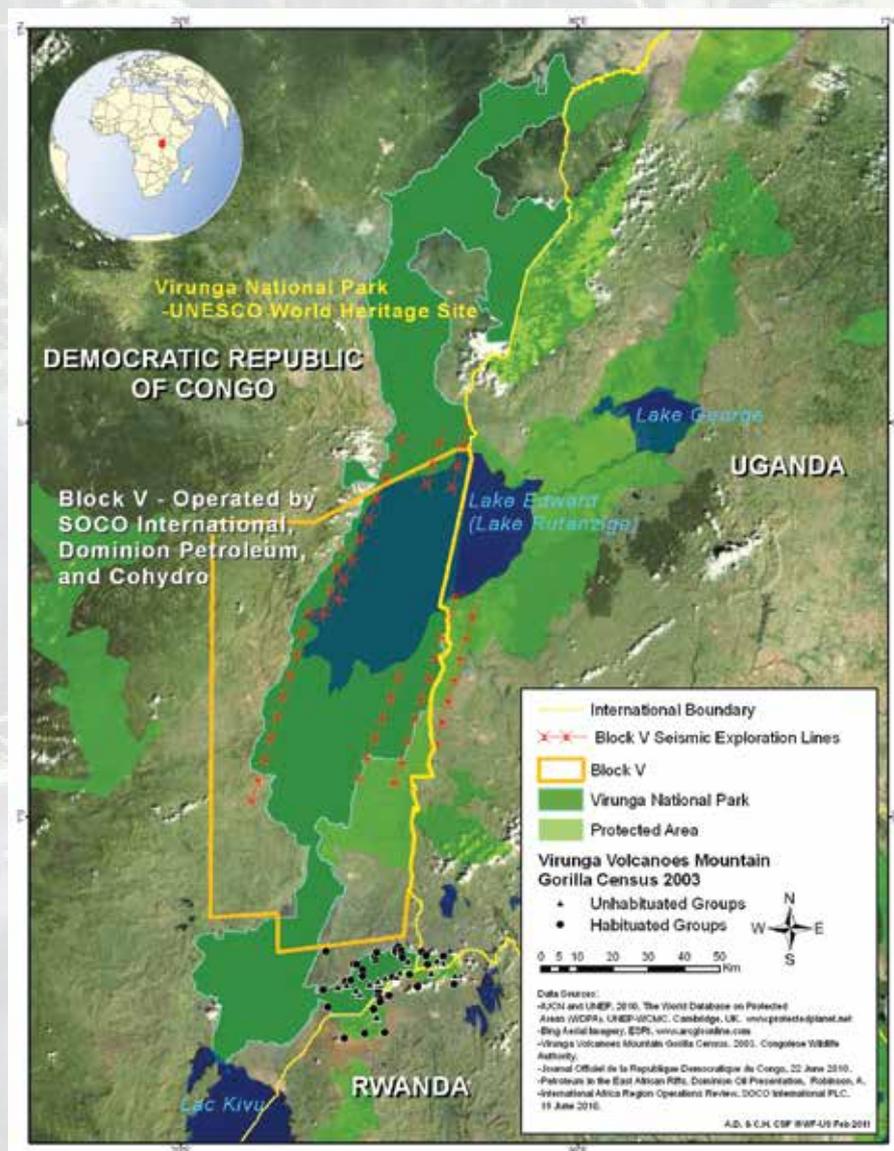
When I asked if they planned to continue work outside the park, a SOCO spokesperson said, "...there will be contractual obligations associated with the Production Sharing Contract—such as social projects for the local communities..."

Thus far, SOCO's work has done little environmental damage. Most of the oil prospecting, which wound up 13 June 2014, was carried out in the waters of Lake Edward using compressed air releases, detecting the seismic waves with hydrophones. They avoided known fish-spawning areas. SOCO claims no aquatic life was harmed by its activities. They are now evaluating the data, which SOCO told me could take up to a year.

Following the winding up of their work on 31 July, SOCO's Roger Cagle, Deputy Chief Executive, stated, "We realise that a successful project can transform the economic and social wellbeing of a host country. We have demonstrated our value of local involvement and commitment to sustainable development though the successful social programs SOCO fulfilled between 2009 and 2014 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Congo-Brazzaville and in Angola. We are focused on engaging with local communities where we operate to better understand their needs, for guidance on what social projects to take on."

These words do not seem to suggest that SOCO has plans to leave Virunga any time soon. SOCO's strategy to remain seems to have adapted to take on its critics on their own turf.

An integral part of WWF's campaign, and the arguments of the Buffet, Branson and Tutu op-ed, was that there



Virunga's block V Oil Map

was an alternative to SOCO's vision of development in the Virunga park area.

When I asked WWF what their response would be if the DRC government decided to go ahead with oil exploration in Virunga, in spite of WWF's agreement with SOCO (which did not include the DRC government's agreement), a spokesperson replied, "...we hope we can work together with the government to promote investment in sustainable industries such as fisheries, hydropower and ecotourism that could help the park reach is potential to create 28,000 permanent jobs and serve as an economic engine for the entire country..."

There is a Virunga Alliance Plan that is financed mainly by the Howard T. Buffet Foundation. It has supported the construction of three clean, carbon-neutral hydropower facilities. The electricity is aimed to attract investments in agribusiness. The Huffington Post op-ed by Buffet et al. boasted: "Already one of these ventures has attracted a palm nut oil processing plant and a papaya enzyme extraction facility."

Palm nut oil extracting plant? To function, it needs nuts, which require oil palm plantations. Many conservationists think that oil palm is the greatest single threat to the future of

African tropical forests and biodiversity. Oil palm plantations in South East Asia have devastated vast areas of forest and led to huge losses of Asian elephant, orang-utan, rhino and tiger populations. Promoting oil palm plantations in eastern DRC near Virunga would seem to many as bad as or worse than drilling for oil.

What does the DRC government say? It is their territory, after all. UNESCO, which is responsible for World Heritage Sites, has reported with concern that the DRC Minister for Hydrocarbons has announced that if economically viable oil reserves are found inside the property, exploitation will go ahead.

The minister's announcement is reinforced by the ICCN-SOCO agreement from November 2013, which states in Article 8 that if the oil exploration yielded positive results then SOCO would negotiate the formulation of a program with ICCN for drilling, whether it be for further testing and evaluation, or actual exploitation.

ICCN, the Congolese government agency with the responsibility for conserving Virunga, has already agreed in effect to oil drilling in the park.

The next round between conservationists, SOCO, and the DRC government could escalate. The eastern region of the DRC has experienced instability, lawlessness and armed militias for almost two decades. A recent UNESCO assessment of the Virunga World Heritage Site noted that nine armed militias operate in the area. Illegal mining, logging, charcoal-making and poaching are endemic in the poverty-stricken region.

In May this year, WWF announced that staff members based in Goma, near Virunga, had received death threats. Angered by a WWF staff member's public statements about the negative impacts of SOCO's oil exploration, one caller said, "We want his head." Another caller said that they had "missed killing de Merode," but they would not miss the WWF employee.

Emmanuel de Merode, the highly respected chief warden of Virunga National Park, was shot four times by attackers as he drove from Goma

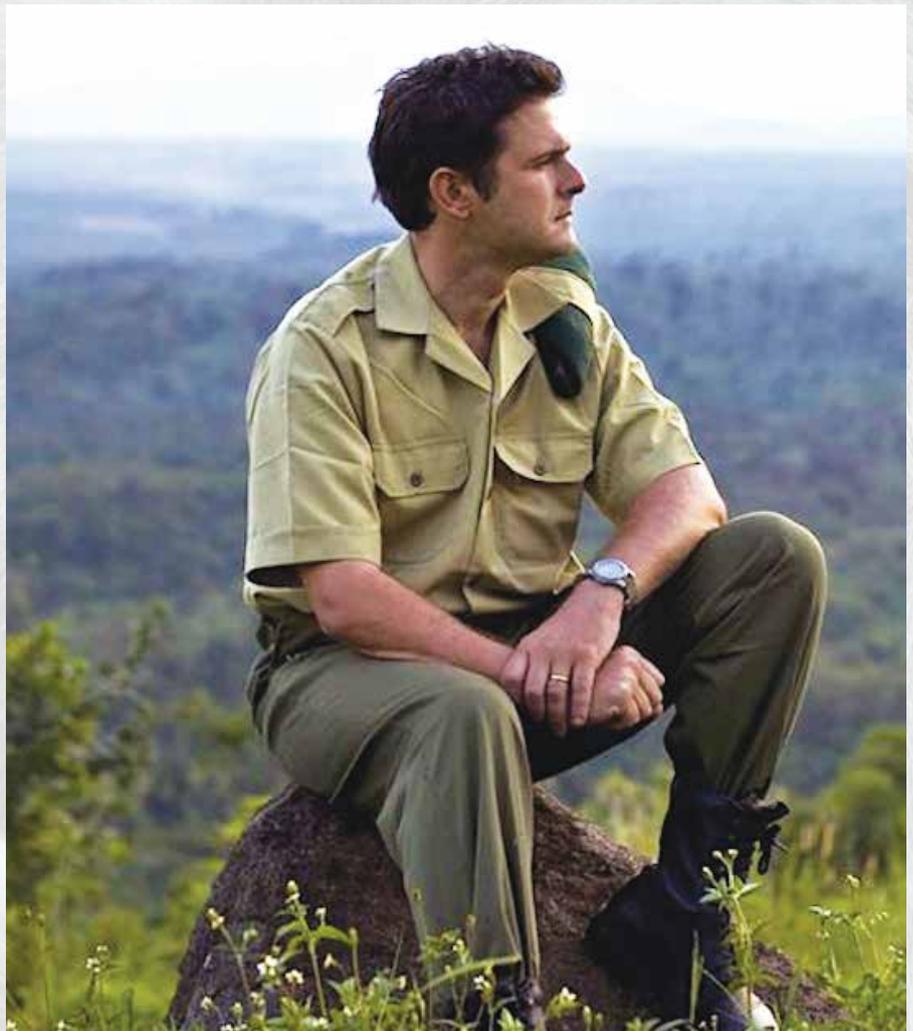


PHOTO CREDIT BY: ROSEANDTIZGERALD.COM

Emmanuel de Merode, chief warden of Virunga National Park

to Virunga in April. De Merode has voiced his opposition to drilling for oil in Virunga and is on record stating, "any oil related activities are illegal" and contribute to the instability in the region. He survived that attack and returned to work in late May.

In September, Global Witness (Drillers in the Mist), The Telegraph and The Ecologist all published serious charges of bribery, intimidation and even murder committed against local opposition in Virunga by those associated with SOCO who want the oil exploitation to go ahead.

The oil company, of course, denied the allegations in the Global Witness report, saying that it "does not condone, partake in or tolerate corrupt or illegal activity whatsoever" and that bribes to park rangers "have never been nor will ever be sanctioned by SOCO". The

company also said that it is committed to the protection of human rights and that it would investigate if there was evidence of wrongdoing.

SOCO, backed by the DRC government, claim that exploiting oil in an environmentally sound manner will benefit the local people and not harm the environment, if done properly. Conservationists and others maintain that SOCO is wrong, and that there are better ways of achieving social and economic development for the people in the region.

What happens in the high-stakes Virunga case may herald the future for all protected areas in Africa. If the most biodiverse and oldest park on the continent cannot be protected, in spite of numerous laws and agreements, then no national park is safe. ●