

# Oil and gas exploration in Virunga National Park

Congo, the Democratic Republic of the

**Sectors:** Oil and Gas Extraction

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<b>Sector</b>	Oil and Gas Extraction
<b>Location</b>	
<b>Status</b>	<a href="#">Planning</a> <a href="#">Design</a> <a href="#">Agreement</a> <a href="#">Construction</a> <a href="#">Operation</a> <a href="#">Closure</a> <a href="#">Decommission</a>

## About Oil and gas exploration in Virunga National Park

Established in 1925, the [Virunga National Park](#) is the oldest protected area in Africa. The Park is located in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its outstanding biodiversity. For the last two decades, this fragile ecosystem has been facing repeated threats of oil exploration. In the DRC, oil is currently only extracted along the Atlantic coast, in the Province of Kongo Central. However, while [UNESCO](#) has consistently stated that oil exploration and exploitation was inconsistent with conservation in protected areas, the oil threat regularly resurfaces.

South-African based Efora Energy is looking to renew its exploration permit and is looking for a partner in the exploration activities. In addition, the DRC will launch a call for tenders for 16 oil and 3 gas blocks across the country in 2022. Three of the new blocks are expected to be located in Lake Kivu at the southern limit of the Virunga National Park. It is unclear how exploration in these new blocks will have an impact on the Park. Uganda's oil ambitions also endanger the Virunga National Park, with the [Ngaji oil block](#) located on the Ugandan side of Lake Edward. Two-thirds of Lake Edward, on the DRC side of the border, is part of the Virunga National Park. In May 2019, Uganda [announced](#) a second oil licensing project affecting the [Ngaji oil block](#).

### Why this profile?

Extraction of oil in the Virunga National Park would threaten the world's second-largest rainforest after the Amazon, impacting endangered species and biodiversity as well as the livelihood of more than 50,000 people, impacting health and bringing food insecurity.

### What must happen

Banks and other financial institutions should not provide financial services for oil and gas exploration or extraction in the park. Major companies and the DRC government cancel all permits granted for blocks located in Virunga and Salonga. To protect the Virunga National Park, new allocation of oil exploration licences in protected areas and licences allocated in these sensitive ecosystems should be avoided.

# Impacts

## Social and human rights impacts

**Socio-economic impacts:** Oil exploration and extraction in the Virunga National Park come with high risks. The fishermen of Lake Edward [urged](#) president Tshisekedi to prohibit oil extraction as any hydrocarbon pollution would seriously compromise the health and food security of the 50,000 families that rely on the lake's fishing resources. Water contamination would also negatively affect the Semliki River located upstream of the river basin. The development of oil infrastructures also conflicts with tourism activities and would impact the associated [revenues](#).

**Insecurity and conflicts:** Eastern DRC has been torn by violence for years and crisis experts fear that oil exploration could exacerbate [insecurity](#). Research has shown that the Virunga National Park was a [source of conflict](#) before the finding of oil. Those were related to lack of participatory processes in the management of the park, land demarcation and access to natural resources between others. The establishment of oil extraction would even further increase the already existing tension as the proportion of available land would be reduced.

**Rangers at high risk:** Together with environmental defenders, rangers are also in charge of protecting the park animals and biodiversity. Rodrigue Katembo was a ranger at the Virunga National Park when he was targeted by the Congolese authorities. He was arrested and imprisoned in Kinshasa because he advocated for the [protection of the park](#) against Soco International. In [another case](#), Emmanuel de Merode, at the time Chief Warden of the Virunga National Park, was shot and survived an ambush travelling to the national park headquarters.

## Environmental and climate impacts

**Biodiversity:** The Virunga National Park spreads over 790,000 hectares and comprises various ecosystems including a tropical forest, the northern Rwenzori Mountains, and several volcanoes. The Park is [home](#) to unique flora and fauna including okapis, large colonies of hippos and around two hundred critically endangered [mountain gorillas](#). The National Park has been on the list of World Heritage in danger since 1979 and exploration is expected to cause adverse impacts to wildlife and biodiversity. Oil exploration opponents also fear that drilling could affect [volcanic activity](#). Under [Congolese law](#) extraction of oil is illegal and therefore prohibited in protected areas. However, in 2018, the Congolese Minister of hydrocarbons disclosed that they are considering [declassifying](#) around 1720.75 square kilometers of the Virunga Park (representing 21.5% of its total surface) to allow oil exploration in protected areas.

**Climate impacts:** The Park is located at the eastern end of the Congo Basin, the world's second-largest rainforest after the Amazon. New oil projects are not only out of line with the International Energy Agency's [2050 net-zero roadmap](#) but also put this [critical carbon storage ecosystem](#) at risk.

## Other impacts

**Corruption and conflict of interest:** SOCO's [activities](#) have been linked to [corruption allegations](#) and [human rights abuses](#) against oil [projects opponents](#).

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# Governance

## Applicable norms and standards

Principles for Responsible Banking (PRB)

The Paris Agreement

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## Brief history

In 2007 and 2010, the Congolese government granted licences to SOCO International ([Block V](#)) and Total ([Block III](#)) to search for oil, without restrictions regarding the sanctuary. After [intense mobilisations](#), Total and SOCO successively gave up their drilling projects within the Park's borders in May [2013](#) and June [2014](#).

In November 2015, the Congolese government [confirmed the presence of oil](#) in the National Park and [expressed](#) its interest in

exploiting these resources. In 2017, Kinshasa [signed](#) an 'agreement in principle to reassign SOCO's block V in the DRC to another oil company, Oil Quest International, granting the geological, geochemical and geophysical data access form. The minister also [indicated](#) that the Congolese 2015 Oil Law allows the president to authorise oil exploration in the National Parks for the sake of public interest. The announcement led to a [petition](#) from local civil society organisations.

In 2016, the Ugandan government authorised [16 oil companies](#) to take part in a bid for oil exploration rights in, among others, the Ngaji oil block. Although Lake Edward was spared during the 2016 oil licensing round, Uganda [announced](#) in May 2019, a second oil licensing project affecting the [Ngaji oil block](#).

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## Updates

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## Financiers

As yet, there is no evidence of bank finance for oil and gas exploration in the Virunga National Park. BankTrack continues to monitor the situation.

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## Related companies