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Fortress tourism: exploring dynamics of tourism, security and peace around the Virunga transboundary conservation area

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of tourism in promoting peace around transboundary protected areas (TBPA) in conflict-affected regions through a case study of the Virunga TBPA straddling the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. Also praised as 'peace parks', TBPAs embody the rationale that stimulating a tourism economy in shared conservation spaces will provide incentives for formerly antagonistic states and actors to cooperate. Virunga TBPA exemplifies this strategy by promoting high-end gorilla tourism in a region scarred by longstanding conflict. Drawing on twelve months of fieldwork, we found that these optimistic aspirations are contradicted by militarisation of the three National Parks constituting the TBPA, as well as prevalence of violence and political segregation among the countries. As park authorities sell 'feelings of security' by framing their neighbours as threats in order to attract visitors, intrastate competition and conflict intensifies. Peace tourism rhetoric and revenues allow the governments to justify and finance the militarisation as necessary to protect 'their' tourists while concealing their security interests in protecting national borders. This contradiction between tourism's ostensive 'peace dividend' and the violence it generates within transboundary conservation efforts poses the question: what kind of 'peace' can be generated through tourism, and for whom?

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Peace tourism; conservation; transboundary protected area; militarisation; human security

Introduction: 'peace tourism' to transboundary protected areas

Before the Corona pandemic abruptly halted international travel in 2020, tourism was the fastest growing industry in the world and thus increasingly promoted as 'peace tourism': a key strategy for peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions (UNWTO, 2016, WTTC, 2016). Given that natural sites, and particularly those containing charismatic wildlife, are popular travel destinations, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) advocates tourism promotion within protected areas as a substantial opportunity for low-income countries to achieve a "triple win" combining sustainable economic development, nature conservation and peacebuilding. Within this broader promotion, one proposed but deeply contested modality to pursue this triple win is the creation of Transboundary Protected Areas (TBPA). Since TBPAs straddle the borders of at least two countries, they also became praised under the compelling name of "Peace Parks" to

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encourage cooperation among states characterized by historical and/or current conflict. Proponents argue that the mutual interest to generate revenue from nature-based tourism within the parks incentivizes states to collaborate over conservation of the flora and fauna they share (Ali, 2007; Hanks, 2003). In this respect, TBPAs have been incorporated into broader environmental peacebuilding initiatives by the United Nations positing a relationship between overpopulation and exploitation of natural environments in stimulating violent conflict in low-income countries (UNEP, 2009, UNEP, 2016). This "recognition that environmental issues can contribute to violent conflict underscores [TBPAs'] potential significance as pathways for cooperation, transformation and the consolidation of peace in war-torn societies" (UNEP, 2009, p. 5). 'Peace parks' thus offer the potential to harness 'peace tourism' as a market-based, business-oriented solution to these challenges (D'Amore, 2009).

The prospects and pitfalls of peace tourism more generally have been subject to substantial scholarly analysis and discussion (see e.g. Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013; Kelly, 2006; Pizam, 1996). Yet research concerning promotion of tourism for peace within TBPAs in conflict-affected regions remains scarce. The few scholars engaging with tourism in protected areas in conflict contexts either focus on the negative impact of warfare in reduced economic revenues for conservation (Baral & Heinen, 2005; de Merode et al., 2007) or on tourists' concerns and travel choices (see e.g. Alluri, 2009), but rarely on socio-economic and political impacts of 'peace tourism' on local stakeholders in relation to this particular mode of conservation. This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing the role of tourism within a TBPA in relation to its triple-win framing as a simultaneous sustainable development, conservation and peacebuilding strategy.

We focus on the transboundary *Virunga Conservation Area* (VCA)[1] composed of *Virunga National Park* (PNVi) in the DRC, *Volcanoes National Park* (VNP) in Rwanda and *Mgahinga Gorilla National Park* (MGNP) in Uganda. VCA is an ideal case to interrogate the peace tourism narrative for two main reasons. First, the Virungas are the last remaining habitat of endangered mountain gorillas and are therefore deemed both a biodiversity hotspot by conservationists and a 'unique selling proposition' for one of the most expensive wildlife tourism attractions in the world. Secondly, VCA is situated within the Great Lakes Region, an area infamously described as the epicentre of "Africa's World War" (Prunier, 2011) due to its history of intra- and interstate warfare including the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath characterized by persistent violent conflict in the DRC. Since 2007, the Dutch government has financed the intergovernmental *Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration* (GVTC) to institutionalise transboundary conservation within VCA on the model of a 'Peace Park'. One focus of the trilateral GVTC Secretariat is to bring together protected area authorities, governmental representatives, researchers and conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote gorilla tourism as a peacebuilding strategy founded in socio-economic and political cooperation among the three countries.

Yet the promising official agreements among the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda are contradicted by the prevalence of various kinds of violence, from reported killings of mountain gorillas (Jenkins, 2008) to tourists (Maekawa et al., 2013) to park rangers (Marijnen & Verweijen, 2016). Other forms of violence, ranging from social exclusion to imprisonment and murder of civilians living adjacent to the TBPA, are also frequent but rarely documented by mass media, official reports or academic researchers. Despite these highly problematic developments, there has been no research on the effects of 'peace tourism' inspired measures within the Virungas in relation to this violence. In bringing together current debates over 'peace tourism' with critical conservation studies, this paper contributes to both discussions by offering a pioneering analysis of the role of tourism in peacebuilding efforts within TBPAs in conflict-affected regions.

In relation to these issues, we argue that the transboundary collaboration efforts centred on gorilla tourism development have paradoxically spurred increased economic competition among the three states that has in turn precipitated political distancing as well as militarisation within the three National Parks constituting the VCA. Focusing mainly on the relationship between the DRC and Rwanda, our analysis demonstrates how gorilla tourism has merged with the selling of 'security' as

a luxury, high-end tourism product in its own right. The revenue generated from these endeavours finances the militarisation of conservation actors, areas and national borders, thereby functioning as a geopolitical strategy to make the National Parks a military bulwark against the neighbouring countries. The resultant segregation among the three states undermines collaboration and trust among national conservation authorities and tourism actors and thereby contradicts the promoted 'peace tourism' narrative in the TBPA treaty. Hence, 'gorilla tourism for peace' seems to remain largely an appealing piece of rhetoric that attracts international funding for gorilla conservation, private investments into tourism-related businesses and tourists that is used to finance military expenditures in the name of securitising the great apes and their visitors.

After a brief description of our methods, we situate our study within the debate on 'peace tourism' intersecting with critical conservation studies. Thereafter, we explore the functional role of gorilla tourism in peacebuilding and collaboration efforts within the VCA by focussing specifically on narratives and practices used by different governmental and non-governmental conservation actors in Rwanda and the DRC on national and transnational levels. We then shift our attention to the local context to analyse the perceived impacts of gorilla tourism on 'peace' for local tourism stakeholders as well as people not directly involved in tourism living adjacent to the VCA. We conclude by advocating more critical engagement with the concealed pitfalls of high-end wildlife tourism in conflict-affected regions packaged within the 'Peace Parks' brand, particularly as we continue to struggle with the ongoing fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

This paper draws on twelve months of qualitative field research in communities adjacent to the the three National Parks that constitute the mountain gorilla habitat in the Virungas conducted by the first author from January to December 2018. These communities were chosen since they comprise the greatest part of the population evicted from the Parks and therefore are viewed as the main stakeholders to benefit from tourism interventions (GVTC, 2014; UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), 2015). Long-standing exploratory research within the area by the first author since 2015 provided the needed trust for beginning the formal participatory research period within the park-adjacent villages of Kinigi (Rwanda) and Ntebeko (Uganda) as well as access to key informants. Proceeding from these personal connections, snowball sampling enabled data collection with other local stakeholders ranging from owners and employees of the park-adjacent tourism facilities, tour and ranger guides as well as community members not directly engaged in tourism or conservation practices. With permission of local chiefs and park authorities, partaking in daily life as well as conservation and tourism related activities within the National Parks afforded the researcher insights into day-to-day events and conversations, which were then substantiated with 60 semi-structured interviews.

Due to the volatile political situation, the outbreak of Ebola and unpredictable violence and kidnappings in the region of the Congolese park in 2018, participatory methods with local communities in the Eastern Congo were restricted to an interactive collaboration with a Congolese NGO in the regional capital of Goma, which enabled 28 open and semi-structured interviews during field trips to seven park-adjacent villages. In this regard, we want to emphasize that all informants are anonymized to honour and protect those who agreed to participate despite the danger that the ongoing interregional conflict, mistrust and surveillance present for them. Additional participant observation was conducted with park authorities from the *Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN)*, the *Rwandan Development Board* (RDB) and the *Ugandan Wildlife Authority* (UWA) during overnight stays at the park's headquarters and patrol outposts, during which the researcher accompanied anti-poaching patrols, gorilla monitoring and touristic activities within the parks.

These insights concerning location-specific dynamics were complemented by 12 focus group interviews followed up by 75 semi-structured interviews with protected area authorities, 36 with representatives of (international) conservation NGOs working in the conservation-tourism sector and 47 with people directly working for the tourism sector to gain an overarching understanding of conservation and tourism management in the VCA generally.[2] In addition, frequent attendance of GVTC workshops, meetings and conferences throughout the year provided insight into discussions of 'peace tourism' among representatives of national research institutions, security services, government officials, the GVTC and the United Nations international development and peacebuilding initiatives in the Great Lakes Region.

The results of these interactive methods were recorded with extensive fieldwork notes in a two-journal design, one holding descriptive field notes and the other used for reflective notes in order to foster self-awareness concerning how the researcher's presence influenced the situation, interaction with and responses by informants. This primary data collection was triangulated by iterative "member-checking" discussing the accuracy of findings with participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 211) and a comprehensive review of policy briefs, treaties and reports discussing transboundary peace, tourism and conservation as well as popular media representations of the Virungas. Our analysis of these various data sources employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) in pursuit of a holistic understanding of the complex interrelations among different actors on multiple scales. This analysis relied on an iterative process of inductive pattern building from specific data points rather than formal content analysis in line with the qualitative, experiential focus of the overarching project.

Peace as security through the militarisation for tourism?

Since the establishment of *Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park* in 1932 to symbolize peace and friendship between the United States and Canada, the number of Transboundary Protected Areas (TBPA) in the model of "Parks for Peace" has increased steadily throughout the world (IUCN, 2020; Sandwith et al., 2001). Based on the assumption that environmental problems correlate with violent conflicts (see e.g. Ali, 2007), proponents argue that transboundary conservation offers a solution to these conflicts "to promote and strengthen peace and co-operation between neighboring countries [...] as a prerequisite for sustainable economic development and foreign investment" (Hanks, 2003, p. 136). In particular, scholars and practitioners focused on environmental governance promote TBPAs as an environmental peacebuilding strategy in its own right (UNEP, 2009).

In light of persistent environmental problems and social conflicts around conservation areas worldwide, the compelling concept of TBPAs has been questioned by a growing body of critics in the past decades. Some argue that TBPAs produce new conflicting interests among a multitude of actors as conservation strategies are aligned to the profit-maximising logic of capitalism (see e.g. Duffy, 2006). Fairhead (2005) pointed specifically to the creation of TBPAs as a covert tactic of neo-colonial governance by industrialised states to ensure the exploitation of resource-rich environments in sub-Sahara Africa. Büscher and Ratmusindela (2015) call attention to the increasingly violent methods that contradict the promoted intentions of 'Peace Parks' within the *Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park*. They refer to the wider debate in the critical conservation literature that scrutinizes the militarisation of all types of protected areas and actors (Duffy et al. 2019; Lunstrum, 2014, Ybarra, 2016) and the entanglement between violent and militaristic conservation practices and political violence, conflict or warfare within the larger surroundings (see e.g. Lombard & Tubiana, 2020; Minarchek, 2020). Others point to conservation violence and its destructive consequences for local residents (Bocajero & Ojeda, 2016; Büscher & Fletcher, 2017; Duffy, 2014). Specifically in the enclosure of protected areas, the forceful eviction, dispossession and exclusion of local residents from their means of survival, traditions and beliefs continues to

be problematized in reference to the persistence of "fortress conservation" as a central environmental protection strategy (Brockington, 2002; Neumann, 2004; Pemunta, 2019).

As one response to this increasing critique, international development institutions have praised 'eco-tourism' as a new panacea to fund conservation and simultaneously benefit communities in low-income countries in proximity to protected areas (Honey & Gilpin, 2009). The 'peace parks' narrative expanded this notion of eco-tourism into a triple-win scenario by promoting TBPAs as tourism destinations that can support both environments and people through the economic prosperity generated from tourism revenues that will ultimately also contribute to regional cooperation and peace (see e.g. Hanks, 2003; Mearns, 2012). While tourism was already promoted as a "passport to peace" in 1967,[3] it gained increasing attention as a peacebuilding approach after the "Amman Declaration on Peace through Tourism" was formally adopted by the UN in 2000 (UNWTO, 2016). In 1988, D'Amore proposed 'peace tourism' as 'the world's first global peace industry' in founding the *International Institute for Peace through Tourism* (IIPT, 2017). In outlining its approach, IIPT refers to traditional conflict studies defining 'negative' peace as the absence of the 'direct use of physical force' (WHO, 2002) and 'positive' peace as the absence of 'structural' violence reflected in the unequal socio-economic and political organization of society (Galtung, 1969, 1996). In relation to this distinction, IIPT and other 'peace tourism' proponents stress tourism's potential not only to reduce direct violence but also to enhance positive peace indicators, in particular intercultural understanding, ecological sustainability and human welfare through "attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies" (IEP, 2017, p. 4; see also Haessly, 2010).

Based on the widespread assumption that violent conflict correlates with a lack of development (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000; Nassani et al., 2017), the ostensible 'virtuous cycle' of peace tourism to TBPAs in particular is aligned with the conservative neoliberal paradigm asserting that economic growth contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a nation state, which ultimately 'trickles down' to create development amongst the local population (Williamson, 1989). In consequence it is argued that citizens depending on the tourism industry for their well-being have an incentive to remain or become peaceful to help create a positive image of their country and attract more tourists (Haessly, 2010). Tourism's contribution to economic growth is thus seen as key to a form of development within low-income societies that will bring 'liberal peace' after the Western model: expanding free markets, democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Doyle, 2005; Levy & Hawkins, 2009). An extensive literature emphasizes this putative causal relationship between tourism and peace (e.g. D'Amore, 2009, Honey & Gilpin, 2009; Kelly, 2006) and even stresses the potential for tourism to create a global 'culture of peace' (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010). By contrast, a growing body of critical tourism scholarship problematizes this posited relationship between tourism and peace (Litvin, 1998) as well as the focus on economic growth through neoliberal market engagement underlying this peace rhetoric (Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013).

Discussion of the potential for tourism to facilitate peacebuilding in conflict areas is nowadays complemented by attention to "human security". The UNWTO asserted in 1996 that "the success or failure of a tourism destination depends on being able to provide a safe and secure environment for visitors" (UNWTO, 1996). While the United Nations has more generally depicted 'human security' as an outcome of expanding military investments by the state (Haq, 1999), a significant shift to increased militarisation for ensuring security of 'the tourist' occurred in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, after which terrorism was declared a global threat influencing travel advisories (Hall et al., 2004). While tourism scholars have thereby increasingly incorporated 'human security' into the debate concerning tourism's peace-generating potential (e.g. Blanchard & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2013), a few have also pointed to the consequent problematic entanglement between the 'securitisation of travel' and the military-industrial complex in inventing counter-terror measures to protect wealthy consumers (Lisle, 2016). In the same vein, Weaver shows that tourism strategies become increasingly militarized to serve the tourists' demand for 'security' leading to a normalization of military presence in tourist

destinations, and thereby in the everyday reality of local people (2011, p. 674). Scholars have also highlighted the separation between locals and tourists through enclosed facilities and services in "enclave tourism" practiced in all-inclusive resorts in particularly remote areas (Mbaiwa, 2005; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016). Our study builds on all of this previous research to analyze "fortress tourism" (Fletcher, 2011) as a particular dynamic in which militarization is used to securitize tourism activities in (post-)conflict areas outside of enclave resorts.

Within critical conservation research, the relationship between tourism, peace and security in the context of conflict-affected conservation areas has been touched on in broader debates on violence within peace parks but has not yet been systematically investigated. While some conservation literature on tourism in conflict-affected contexts asserts tourism's potential to finance nature conservation in such areas (Hanks, 2003; Joras et al., 2011), others have questioned whether tourism's propensity to commodify natural and cultural 'products' may instead augment violence and conflicts among people (Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher & Fletcher, 2017), as well as among states in competing to attract more visitors within the global tourism market (Tripp, 2010). In addition, the eviction and dispossession of communities in the establishment of protected areas (Andersson et al., 2013), the lack of compensation and employment opportunities often attending these displacements (Adams & Infield, 2003) and the marginal revenue-sharing from tourism benefits such initiatives frequently entail (Sandbrook, 2010) speak to the presence of problematic, conflict-aggregating effects of tourism in conservation areas on the micro level.

Building on these initial explorations, the following analysis brings together discussions of peace tourism, peace parks, and the militarization of conservation to pursue a novel investigation of the implications of tourism as a peacebuilding strategy via a case study of the VCA. While the endangered mountain gorilla became the face of commercial tourism and led to increased international attention to the region, the impact on increased socio-economic development and peacefulness are expected to vary greatly among the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda. While acknowledging the undeniable ecological violence of stress, diseases and habitat destruction from tourism on mountain gorillas (Robbins, 2014) that problematizes the environmental component of 'peace tourism' narratives, we focus here on the socio-economic and political consequences for human stakeholders related to tourism. We argue that gorilla tracking became a form of 'fortress tourism' that sells a provision of security to wealthy visitors that simultaneously funds the military build-up of national borders within the three National Parks of the VCA, while excluding local residents. We begin by briefly outlining the historical context within which the regional tourism efforts originated.

Historical context of the Virungas - which 'conflict' should be brought to peace?

In violent quarrels over colonial boundaries between German East Africa and Belgium in 1902, two mountain gorillas shot by Robert von Beringe brought the great apes to the attention of Western scientists who assigned them their zoological name (*gorilla gorilla beringei*). In 1925, the Belgium king Albert I established *Parc National Albert* in the Eastern DR Congo. This space continues to constitute the main area of *Virunga National Park* (PNVi) today but previously incorporated Rwandan and Ugandan parts of the Virunga volcano chain to protect the broader mountain gorilla habitat. With independence attained by the DRC (then Zaire) [4] in 1960 and Rwanda and Uganda in 1962, management of the forests became separated into independent state-owned entities that gained international prominence through Dian Fossey's work in Rwanda from 1967 to 1985. PNVi in Zaire became a popular tourist destination in the economically vibrant first years of Mobutu Seso Seko's dictatorship (1969–1997). Inspired by neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programmes introduced by the *World Bank* and other international financial institutions (IFIs), Western conservationists promoted mountain gorilla tourism as an 'incentive' for the Rwandan government to commit to conservation beginning in 1979 (Nielsen & Spenceley, 2010; Vedder & Weber, 1990).

With regional conflict placing the Virungas at centre stage of the warfare in the 1990s, conservation and tourism came to an abrupt halt (Kanyamibwa, 1998). Supported by the Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni, the rebel group *Rwandan Patriotic Front* (RPF) under now-president Paul Kagame began to fight the Hutu regime invading Rwanda from Mgahinga forest through *Volcanoes National Park* (African Rights, 1998). The following years of Rwandan civil war cumulated in the genocide in 1994. Justified as a conservation measure, the Ugandan government declared Mgahinga forest a National Park, precipitating eviction of the local population and prohibition of any entrance to the gazetted area to erect a buffer zone between Uganda and Rwanda. Acknowledging the devastating impact of the genocide on the conservation area, PNVi was declared as 'UNESCO World Heritage site in danger' in 1994.

The aftermath of the genocide led to an estimated 1.2 million refugees into Zaire with the largest camps around PNVi (UNHCR, 2000). Factions of the former Rwandan army and the *Interahamwe*[5] that executed the genocide re-established a military stronghold in PNVi forming the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) in 2000. This armed group is held responsible for crimes against humanity and continued violent attacks both within Eastern Congo and in Rwanda via *Volcanoes National Park* (USNCC, 2009). Concerted counterstrike of Rwandan and Ugandan backed military to eliminate associated Rwandan Hutu refugees in the region of Eastern DRC have officially been labelled the two Congo Wars (1996–1997; 1998–2003). However, humanitarian organisations report ongoing interference by armed groups supported by the Rwandan and Ugandan governments, who are suspected to incite insecurity and chaos in Eastern Congo to facilitate the exploitation and trafficking of natural resources (HRW, 2005; Lopez et al., 2017; UNEP-MONUSCO-OSESG, 2015; UNSC, 2000, 2003). While conservation and tourism activities of PNVi have been revamped under a public-private partnership between ICCN and the *Virunga Foundation* with international funding since 2008, the park and its surrounding population are affected by the violent activities of more than approximately 140 armed groups within Eastern Congo (HRW, 2019).

Peace and security – through conservation and tourism?

Considering these complex entanglements and power struggles in the conflictual history between the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda, international peacebuilding and conservation actors stressed the unifying qualities of joint conservation and tourism measures to establish collaboration, understanding and trust between the three states during the United Nations Great Lakes conference for "Peace and security in Greater Virunga Landscape: silencing the guns" in 2018.[6] A representative of the GVTC asked:

> *„Can we create a peace haven in the Greater Virunga Landscape by collaborating over transboundary resources, including mountain gorillas, for benefitting all three countries?"*

What sounded like a committed agenda to work towards generating peace through gorilla conservation together was, in fact, an appeal to establish a partners coalition for the institutional sustainability of GVTC, to replace the in political and financial support withdrawn by the Dutch government following their termination of funding at the end of 2018. In the first formal Memorandum of Understanding in 2004, the three Protected Area authorities and respective Ministries of the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda agreed to "build trust, understanding and cooperation among wildlife authorities, nongovernmental organisations, users and other stakeholders to achieve sustainable conservation and thereby contribute to peace" (GVTC, 2006 [2015]: 6). The treaty emphasized specifically the role of 'gorilla eco-tourism' comprising over 80% of all visitors in the three countries to achieve the objectives in the same spirit as the 'peace through tourism' vision of IIPT. Moreover, governmental officials of each country declared that they would take over the financing of GVTC as a coordinating institution for the concerted efforts (GVTC, 2006 [2015]: 31).

In stark contrast to these written agreements and lip service proclamations, however, all transboundary meetings and projects by GVTC have expired, incapacitating the institution due to its

liquidation at the time of writing (November 2020). Witnessing the preceding developments in 2018, the questions arose for us what impact the 'peace tourism' rhetoric has on the region and for the Virunga Conservation Area? What are the practices and outcomes of implementing 'peace tourism' propositions in each country and in how far do they lead to more peaceful relations between the three states? And how do tourism-related state and non-state actors, conservation organisations as well as people living around the parks without direct involvement in gorilla tourism, perceive and experience the impact of tourism on 'peace'?

Transboundary gorillas offer no comparative advantage

Mountain gorilla tracking appears to be an ideal 'product' to advocate for the benefits of tourism for peace in the relationship between the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda. The most evident commonality between neoliberal development policies promoted by the UNWTO and World Bank and 'peace tourism' aspects of the GVTC treaties is the primary focus on gorilla tourism as a foreign exchange earner to stimulate economic growth in each country. In pursuit of this revenue, the protected area authorities and governmental representatives of DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda agreed to "[d]evelop a regional tourism plan that covers infrastructure development, marketing, visitor services and allows coordinated movement of tourists in the region" (GVTC, 2006 [2014]: 11). The mountain gorilla attraction indeed made tourism the most important export earner of both Uganda (contributing 7.7% to GDP in 2018) and Rwanda (14.9% to GDP in 2018). Yet in interviews with representatives of the main gorilla conservation NGOs in the region, many expressed concern about the deterioration of political and economic relations between the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda and the negative impact of this on transboundary conservation efforts. As a representative of the *International Gorilla Conservation Programme* (IGCP), a long-standing transnational conservation NGO, highlighted:

> "*We started to talk to all of them [park authorities] to create relationships between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC on the conservation level at least, while the governments had a tense relationship. We organized joint trainings and patrols between park officials and rangers from ORTPN,*[7] *UWA and ICCN since 1991. We were allowed to ignore the borders. But with GVTC everything became political and conservation NGOs have less to say. Now rangers cannot share conservation data or walk together across the borders anymore.*"

Another IGCP employee made the explicit link between increasing conflict and tourism:

> "*In my opinion, I think tourism has negative effects on the relations between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC because of increased competition over attracting tourists and in many cases it becomes more politicized. Gorillas are a golden asset and now each government wants to have an advantage over the other.*"

Based on Ricardo's (1817) well-rehearsed economic model of comparative advantage, international development organizations argue that due to lack of industrial capacity and/or 'valuable natural resources' to extract, many developing countries hold their only 'unique selling proposition' in the nature and wildlife they harbor, which they can vend as a competitive tourism product on the world market (UNEP, 2009). Since the forest habitat of mountain gorillas is split between the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, the three states embrace the same 'natural asset' in selling gorilla tracking as a high-end activity to international tourists. Hence, mountain gorillas framed as 'consumer products' confer no comparative advantage – no 'unique product' – to any one of the three countries involved in this activity. Due to the need to compete to attract the biggest share of the limited supply of visitors and tourism-related investors, therefore, the three countries are each encouraged to develop new consumer products to differentiate themselves from one another. As a result, GVTC's attempts to homogenize gorilla tourism across the VCA and share both costs and benefits regionally produced the opposite effect of increased political segregation and militarization of borders between the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda rather than the increased collaboration over management of the shared ecosystem the initiative envisioned. In

the next section we analyse the different strategies each country developed to maintain sovereignty and create a 'unique', competitive product to showcase on the global tourism market.

Regional dynamics triggered by Rwanda's gorilla price increase

Gorilla tracking in all three National Parks comprising the VCA includes a guided hike with a military escort through dense forest at 2,200 to 4,300 metres altitude to visit one of the habituated gorilla families for one hour of observation on site. The extreme variation between prices for gorilla tracking – from 350 USD in the DR Congo to 650 USD in Uganda to initially 750 USD in Rwanda – creates the impression that the three countries offer highly differentiated touristic experiences. This image is reproduced by park rangers of RDB who are trained to promote the 'uniqueness' of Rwanda's mountain gorillas compared to the Ugandan and Congolese specimens. Despite the fact that mountain gorillas move freely across political borders in direct accordance with the aims of the transboundary conservation approach, the rangers persistently emphasized the unique Rwandan identity and superiority of 'their' apes. In a focus group interview with park rangers at a patrol outpost, one ranger expressed:

> "*Uganda has less [sic] gorillas and they are not cute. Look at our new gorilla babies in Agashya,*[8] *they have much, much fur and look so cute.*"

Another ranger added:

> "*Tourists cannot see the gorillas in Congo because they hide from the war. When gorillas have fear they are not funny.*"

These statements represent a common sentiment among RDB rangers that the Congolese and Ugandan gorilla families are 'less': *'less visible', 'less funny', 'less cute'*.

In this context, GVTC presented its first substantial transboundary achievement in the "transfrontier gorilla tourism" agreement by declaring that when a gorilla group crosses borders from the country in which it has been habituated, the revenues generated from tracking this family has to be shared equally between the two countries (GVTC, 2006, p. 13). In response, every day from 6 in the morning to 6 at night, park rangers and their assistant trackers are assigned to locate each habituated gorilla family and follow them closely throughout the day until they build their nests to go to sleep in the evening, in order to ensure the animals do not leave the national park area. By taking part in monitoring patrols we witnessed these 'safeguarding' measures that are conducted similarly in Rwanda and Uganda, enabled by the small sizes of VNP (160 km^2) and MGNP (33,9 km^2) compared to PNVi in the DRC (7769 km^2). In contrast to the national commitments under GVTC, these measures exemplify the unwillingness by each state to collaborate over transnational revenue-sharing with respect to border-crossing gorillas.

As a second proposition to overcome regional differences in the 'gorilla tourism product', the three states added to the transboundary strategic plan in 2015 the intention to "[h]armonise visitor charges for common tourism products and visitor handling services standards" (GVTC, 2014, p. 11). Hence, RDB rangers and tourism operators claimed to be taken by surprise when Rwanda doubled its gorilla tracking fees to 1500 USD overnight on May 11, 2017 (personal interviews, Musanze, Goma, Kigali, 2018). The Chief Executive Officer of RDB, Claire Akamanzi, officially justified the unprecedented price spike on grounds of ecological sustainability as intended to decrease the number of tourists (and associated impact) without decreasing the foreign exchange Rwanda needs to finance development projects and "empower communities living near the park".[9] In response, an employee of a regional gorilla conservation organisations complained:

> "*The Rwandan government is always doing what it wants. We monitor and work with the gorilla families for four decades but we would not be consulted for any conservation-related advices.*"

In a meeting with the trilateral secretariat of GVTC, one representative admitted feeling subverted:

> "*We were not informed about the price increase. We did not get an official letter or call after the decision. We heard the information on public news.*"

The unilateral price change made a strong statement against the promoted transboundary collaboration and undermined any political mandate and authority the GVTC retained at that point. Rwanda's official explanation of the price increase was intended to please conservationists, international donors and further serves as part of Rwanda's image campaign to overcome persistent associations with the genocide in 1994 (Grosspietsch, 2006). The tourism management literature accordingly advices, "developing countries must constantly […] protect their image and maintain their position in the global tourism arena" (Avraham & Ketter, 2016, p. 3) by 'selling' their destination that faces "stereotypes of high risk, hostility and underdevelopment" (Avraham & Ketter, 2016, p. 110). This dominant conceit of the Western tourism literature already points to the imbalance of the global tourism market that is intended to please Western consumer demands.

Since gorilla tracking was initiated again in 1999, a growing group of Rwandan scholars has praised the Rwandan government for adapting to this 'world standard of tourism' to rapidly re-establish the devastated national image and economy creating 'wealth and peace in post-conflict Rwanda' (Maekawa et al., 2013; Spencer & Rurangwa, 2012). The World Bank reinforces this perception in framing Rwanda as the "African success story" pointing to the peace-generating link between mountain gorilla conservation and economic development as a key component of this success (Nielsen & Spenceley, 2010).

Selling security

Tourism exemplifies the capitalist principles of permanent (re-)invention of 'new' consumer goods for offer to the global market. Rwanda's gorilla tracking fee increase was intended to promote a novel, unique tourism product for the country combining the endangered gorillas with high-end security. It is this singular combination that underlines Rwanda's success in ostensibly providing a 'peace haven' for the great apes in the conflict-affected region. Moreover, since tourist arrivals are highly dependent on the stability and security of a destination region (Neumayer, 2004), globally fanned fears of terrorism led to new tourism marketing strategies offering 'security' for purchase more widely (Sönmez, 1998). Rwanda's strategy falls right in line with this approach. In accordance with Hochschild's argument that the 'management of emotions' became an 'instrument' of the capitalist system to invent new products turning 'feeling into a commodity' for sale (Hochschild, 1983 [2012], p. 186), Rwanda promotes an inimitable gorilla tourism experience combined with a luxurious feeling of security for the tourist in the otherwise 'war-torn' region (World Bank, 2013). Since the commercialisation of security is a fruitful strategy to overcome the distorted international crisis narratives surrounding African countries in general, the Rwandan government devotes a significant part of its marketing campaigns as well as national expenditures to the security sector. As the official website of VNP presents:

> "*Today the people of Rwanda are living in a very stable and peaceful country as the RPF*[10] *have continued to ensure the safety of all Rwandan borders to ensure that there are no external attacks from any rebel group that might be formed in one of the neighboring countries. The internal security within the country is also very tight with forces always moving around communities to ensure that all the citizens are safe.*" (VNP, 2018)

In this respect, Rwanda's 'unique selling proposition' in the tourism sector has never been solely the mountain gorilla but rather this combined with the "African success story" that seemingly transformed the country "from a land of zombies and misery to become an economic model on the African continent" (VNP, 2018). Given the importance of this differential framing for capturing tourism revenue, increasing the GVTC's interference within national policies and practices as part of its transboundary peace efforts appear to pose a particular threat to Rwanda's specific tourism asset. Hence, Rwanda's increase of gorilla tracking fees was partially a political measure to reclaim sovereignty and re-create a unique tourism product. Presenting

Rwanda as "more developed", "more progressive" and a "safe haven" (African Wildlife Fund, 2020) relative to its neighbours further justifies the high price as a necessary investment to provide security and high standards for visitors and investors. A Rwandan tour operator explained in the same spirit:

> "*Rwanda has no natural resources, the only thing we have is our security that attracts foreigners: investors and tourists. That is why our government invests everything into security. [. . .] I get concerned if I don't see a soldier somewhere.*"

Tourist 'security' to justify militarisation

This quote underscores how official promotion of Rwanda's tourism seems to be aligned to the security demands of the tourism sector to militarize the destination (Weaver, 2011). Yet Rwanda's government rather appears to make use of the normalised militarization for tourism in Rwanda's everyday reality in a reverse manner. In order to keep the current power structures under the authoritarian regime of Paul Kagame unchallenged, the deployment of military, security services and surveillance infiltrates and controls every space within the country's borders, *regardless* of the presence of tourists. The official explanation of focussing security on high-end tourism generates an internationally accepted and even appreciated legitimization of militarising Rwanda in the name of tourists' safety. More generally, tourism scholars have found a strong positive correlation between military expenditures and tourism growth, thus recommending states to create 'security' through the militarisation of tourism destinations. Such prescriptions offer states further legitimization to devote larger shares of the fiscal base to military expenditure and attract international funding and supply for the national armament (Nassani et al., 2017).

While international and national media commonly portrays Rwanda as an island of security in the conflict-ridden region, the frequent violent skirmishes between armed forces from the DRC and the Rwandan military within *Volcanoes National Park* on Rwandan territory are for the most part successfully concealed by Rwandan censorship of the media, under the imperative not to scare away potential tourists. On 4 October 2019 an exceptionally violent incident reached the international media, when militias entered Rwanda though VNP and killed 14 people in the adjacent communities of Kinigi district where the National Park headquarters are located. The British travel advice service stated in the same moment that **"**the Government of Rwanda reports that the area is now secure following the deployment of additional security forces and tourism services continue to operate as normal in the Park"[11] .

After the end of the genocide, the Rwandan government established a dense network of the national military, the *Rwanda Defence Force*[12], in and around VNP, to protect the national borders with the DRC from expected and actual attacks by fighters from the deposed former Hutu government and nowadays its remnants within the armed group of the FDLR. With the reintroduction of tourism in 1999, the paramilitary training and armament of park rangers added another militarised set of actors to the park and the national borders. In the name of conservation, the 'green' militarisation (Lunstrum, 2014) of the area is justified to the international public and visitors through two main narratives. First, the training and armament of rangers is justified as necessary for the protection of mountain gorillas against 'poachers'. The 'law enforcement' warden of VNP explained this in the following way:

> "*The biggest problem of the park are poachers, those Historically Marginalized People*[13] *who are addicted to hunting. First, we have routine patrols every day inside park to protect the animals. They report on illegal park activities. Second, we get information from the communities that there is a poacher who enters the park. We respond with an ambush patrol.*"

However, while partaking in patrols close to the Congolese border, park rangers explained that would-be 'poachers' are too poor to afford the fire weapons they would need to present a

substantial threat to the animals or to rangers themselves. The leading ranger of the patrol further explained:

> "*The forest is steep and has too many trees, that is why poachers can only use bamboo traps to catch small duikers.*[14] *But it is our duty to destroy all traps because a gorilla can step into it and get injured.*"

This conviction that local hunters could not use firearms in the dense forest on the steep volcano slopes calls into question whether militarization of park patrols for protection of wildlife is either effective or necessary.

The second narrative deployed by protected area authorities and ranger guides from RDB to justify militarization to gorilla tourists is that the military joining every tracking group is needed to protect visitors from wild buffalos. In contrast to the rifles carried by park rangers, RPF soldiers wear bullet-proof security vests and heavy arms, join tourist groups just before entering the National Park and leave again just after the group leaves the forest again to not compromise the welcoming atmosphere of the park headquarters. Yet even on routine patrols with rangers far away from any tourist activity, up to ten armed soldiers would join the armed RDB staff as well, calling into question explanations of their necessity for 'protection from buffalo'.

The Virunga National Park strategy – embracing security through militarization

Rwanda's price spike resulted in an increase of tourism flows from Rwanda to the DRC and Uganda. In 2018, *Volcanoes National Park* stated that they lost an estimated 60% of gorilla tourists to Uganda (VNP, 2018). In 2018, interviews with Rwandan tourism stakeholders and protected area authorities were increasingly coloured by derogatory anecdotes and a hostile attitude towards the neighbouring gorilla destinations. In particular, depictions of 'the Congo' as a place of barbarity, violence and war came through in conversations with park rangers, tourism workers and local residents throughout both Rwanda and Uganda (first author, forthcoming). Western media, international organisations and international travel advisories contribute to undifferentiated and distorted narratives of crisis throughout the Eastern DR Congo (see e.g. Autessere, 2012).

In contrast to Rwanda's reputation as the "most secure African country",[15] the Eastern Congo stands on the opposite end of the safety spectrum as the "world's deadliest spot"[16] and Western governments advice against all travel to Eastern Congo.[17] In an effort to transform this image from curse to blessing, marketing strategies implemented by the new management of PNVi comprising a public-private partnership between ICCN and the British charity *Virunga Foundation* established in 2008. This strategy aims to embrace the DRC's negative image in describing "the fight to save one of the world's most dangerous parks" (National Geographic, 2016). Funding by the Howard Buffet Foundation and the European Union enabled large-scale projects "to foster peace and prosperity through the responsible economic development of natural resources" (PNVi 2PNV020). A central aspect of this economic plan is PNVi's own peace tourism model. As a PNVi staff member explained in an interview:

> "*GVTC extracts money from our investors to finance projects that are completely inappropriate for the Congo. These people [from GVTC] have no understanding of our situation, they just give money to 'Water4Virungas'*[18] *and wonder that it disappears and nothing happens.*"

This statement reflects a common perception among PNVi staff and rangers that external institutions such as GVTC lack an understanding of the Congolese context and of PNVi as characterized by both severe corruption and extraordinary security requirements.

Consequently, PNVi representatives rarely attended transboundary meetings organized by GVTC in 2018, resulting in growing resentment on the part of protected area authorities from RDB and UWA, as exemplified in focus group interviews:

> "*De Merode*[19] *does not want to listen to other people. To be fair, he faces incredible challenges that most, not even Congolese, could manage. But he thinks he is a better leader and this arrogance makes him work on an island.*"

Such claims to autonomous sovereignty by conservation authorities have prompted researchers to argue that PNVi's adoption of securitization and militarization measures in the name of conservation that can be equated with the governance strategy under Belgium colonial rule to create 'a state within the state' (Marijnen, 2018, p. 2).

In interviews, the PNVi park management in the park headquarters in Rumangabo (DRC) gave two official reasons for their withdrawal from participation under GVTC. First, permanent intimidation and blackmailing by Congolese state authorities and armed groups would not allow managers to spend time and money on GVTC efforts that have no political mandate to create any positive change. Second, the ongoing exploitation of the Eastern Congo's natural resources by Rwanda would render any collaboration merely superficial window-dressing. These explanations point to a history of mistrust and anger against Rwanda's overt interventions and backing of armed militias in the Eastern DRC, as exemplified by this statement from one ICCN employee:

> *"Please stress when you go back to your country that it is Rwanda that keeps the insecurity in Eastern Congo. Rwanda controls our mines, our trade, our roads, our borders. Kagame has its own control even in the Congolese military. Our instability is created by Rwanda, they take advantage of our weakness. Rwanda has an interest to maintain the instability in North Kivu. For their own benefits."*

Parallel to Rwanda's self-portrayal as an island of security in sub-Sahara Africa, PNVi's park managers espouse negative narratives about the Eastern Congo in claiming to offer visitors a contrasting safe experience with military escorts in the dangerous environment. In the same vein, tour operators advertise PNVi for adventurous travellers as a reasonably safe, unique experience in "the heart of instability" on the internet. [20] In an interview, a Rwandan tour guide who presented himself as a the founder of a transboundary tourism agency aligned to Virunga's transnational travel sphere, emphasized a kind of 'dark touristic' interest in the Congo:

> "*These people would pay anything just to set one foot on Congolese soil to say they have been in the war zone.*"

In this respect, the kidnapping of tourists on the road between Goma and the park headquarters in Rumangabo in May 2018 was unprecedented in the park's history and caused a major shock to the park and tourism stakeholders within the DRC. In contrast to the frequent kidnappings of local people living in proximity to the park barely gaining media attention, the abduction of two British visitors attracted international publicity leading to the closure of all tourism activities in and around PNVi until February 2019. The incident further undermined the relationship between Congolese and Rwandan park authorities and brought all diplomatic discussions concerning transboundary conservation measures under GVTC to a halt. In reaction to Rwanda's sudden price increase, ICCN staff accused Rwanda of having initiated the kidnappings out of jealously that Rwanda would lose its tourists to PNVi. In a focus group interview, one employee of PNVi's tourist lodge at the park's headquarters in Rumangabo stated this clearly:

> "*Rwanda needed to stop it [tourism], to get more tourists. We know all the armed groups in and around the park, they have never kidnapped tourists.*"

Investigations from the United Nations mission *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (MONUSCO) corroborated other sources in explaining that the kidnappers were probably linked to the FDLR in response to the latest law enforcement activities of PNVI's park management entailing confiscation of large amounts of illegal charcoal from several FDLR cartels.

To respond to the panic of international tourism operators and Western travel advisories that discouraged any travel into the Eastern Congo, PNVi's management hired security service operators and risk analysts from France and the United States to restructure the National Park's whole security system, creating an electronic-fenced, highly protected stronghold out of the park's headquarters and the patrol outposts. While the park management stated that they cannot establish a Virunga specific army, the paramilitary training, equipment and salary of the 700

ICCN rangers extends the resources of the regular Congolese army, *Forces Armées de la Republique Democratique du Congo* (FARDC). As an attempt to overcome a history of violent collision between park rangers and military personnel in the past and to strengthen the regional security in the future, PNVi re-established joint patrols of park rangers and Congolese soldiers, called *Corps Protection Parque de Naturel* (CorPPN), in the aftermath of the kidnapping incident. Furthermore, an arrangement with the MONUSCO was made to safeguard the road from Goma to Rumangabo.

Based on the new security protocol, the park management promoted security for travellers, including warning that safety in relation to transport, accommodation and tourism activities in and around the park can only be guaranteed when provided by PNVi park authorities themselves. The access to a special visa for the DRC that can only be issued via *Virunga National Park* and the monopoly on military security asserted as a necessary tourism service undermines any potential for local tourism operators who are not able to compete with the 'security standards' demanded by international tourism operators and Western governments' travel advice. A number of Congolese tour operators and driver guides confirmed this; as one succinctly summarized:

> *"The park is de Merode's private business. He does not want to share."*

When discussing this perceived exclusion with the PNVi management, an employee explained in response:

> *"There is a political agenda behind all the negative rumours about the park. The Congolese government is blackmailing us because they cannot exploit the oil in Virunga: 'If you want to protect the park, pay us the revenue!' If not, they attack. We have the responsibility that our staff and visitors are safe, we cannot delegate that task to externals."*

This statement points to the complex entanglement of conservation practices with the violent conflict and warfare in the Eastern Congo that informed establishment of the tourism industry for decades. These measures aimed towards reopening the park for tourism illustrate how the understanding of 'peace' in tourism became increasingly linked to the concept of human security, yet the 'humans' deserving of (military) protection within this context appears to be primarily the tourists rather than local citizens. In the context of PNVi in the Eastern Congo and VNP in Rwandan, 'security' seems to be a luxurious privilege for the humans in transit through, not the humans actually inhabiting the destination region. Military escorts, fenced park headquarters and tourism lodges as well as the gazetted, patrolled borders of the National Park create strong boundaries between visitors and locals rather than the intercultural understanding proposed by 'peace tourism' visions.

Local perceptions of 'peace' through tourism

UNWTO proposes that local communities adjacent to protected areas should receive the greatest benefits from tourism as they comprise the greatest part of the population evicted in the establishment of National Parks and further need an incentive to support conservation efforts (UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), 2015, p. 22). In this spirit, the GVTC treaty between the three states emphasized "revenue-sharing schemes from tourism revenues with local communities to establish positive attitudes towards tourism and the TBPA" (GVTC, 2006 [2014]: 13). Yet, the 'peace tourism' agenda does not consider the violence done to local people and environments *by* tourists, private businesses and the nation states as among the biggest tourism providers. National reports still identify the highest poverty levels in all three countries in direct vicinity to the National Parks (Bush et al., 2010; Kalulu et al., 2016, Kujirakwinja et al., 2010; Twinamatsiko et al., 2014). In addition, and partly in consequence of this rampant poverty, illegal park activities such as logging and hunting in Rwanda[21] and the DRC, and charcoal production and fishing in PNVi specifically, persist (Marijnen & Verweijen, 2016; Sabuhoro et al.,

2020). In response, park managers have introduced stricter law enforcement measures by conservation staff, from imprisonment to the legalization of shoot-on-sight in Uganda and the DR Congo. Studies concerning local perceptions of gorilla tourism confirmed our interviews with park-adjacently living community members in all three countries reflecting the persistent conflict between park staff and local residents who complain about the loss of their harvests to animals exiting the park, the inequitable distribution of revenues, and labor exploitation by tourism businesses (Adams & Infield, 2003; Munanura et al., 2016; Nkurunungi & Ampumuza, 2013). In this regards the promotion of national revenue-sharing models appears to be largely a marketing strategy to appeal to tourists' conscience, enabling them to 'offset' their luxurious consumer footprint by offering them the conviction that their presence and money are serving "help ending poverty" (PNVi, 2020), "empower local communities" (VNP, 2018) and "contribute to improving the livelihoods of households in frontline villages" (UWA, 2020). GVTC's transboundary strategic plan further asserts that

> [*t*]*he tourism industry creates employment opportunities in both urban and rural areas, thereby reducing pressure on wildlife resources. At the current level of tourism, the available facilities, especially for the up market visitor seem to be adequate in some areas. Focus is therefore required for the lower market visitor in these places.* (GVTC, 2006 [2014]: 10-11)

In direct opposition to this mandate to improve the 'lower-end' market, however, Rwanda's 2017 increase of gorilla tracking fees led to a drastic decrease in the numbers of tourist arrivals with devastating impacts on small-scale tourism businesses including hostels and smaller hotels, local tour guides and restaurants. In order to keep the flow of tourism's foreign exchange for the Rwandan government, Rwanda implemented a range of new tourism rules and regulations to homogenise the tourism landscape around *Volcanoes National Park* to make it "one of the world's most remarkable luxury ecotourism destinations" (RDB, 2020).

Consequently, high-end hotels and services became the face of Rwanda's tourism marketing strategy to attract the wealthiest tourists and celebrities. Five-star hotel projects thus began to mushroom around VNP in 2018, offering helicopter flights to overcome the inaccessibility of stony dirt roads up the volcano slopes.

In the course of 2018, in reaction to this shift, we witnessed the closure of numerous tourist accommodations. While many smaller facilities simply lost out from the lack of international tourist arrivals, one particular narrative circulated around the main tourist areas of VNP, as a hostel owner described:

> *"The big hotels complain to the government of Rwanda that they see no guests anymore and demand to shut us down. Now the government makes up new law every day, to bring licenses and documents that cost a lot of money. We cannot speak to the government and we cannot pay. We obey the law and shut down."*

Many other small tourism businesses similarly claimed that the Rwandan government invented arbitrary policies demanding unfulfillable requirements to ostensibly improve business standards. For example, one day in 2018 an official note sent to local guesthouses that remained in business commanded them to provide a marquise covering the front 'porch' of each house or face prohibition of any tourism services until further notice. After three weeks, the resulting closure cut any possible profit leading to bankruptcy for most owners. In this politically legitimized way the government squeezed remaining competitors for the high-end tourism facilities out of the market.

The promises made by the public-private partnership managing PNVi to "deliver large-scale opportunities for the local community by reducing poverty rates, stabilizing security, and strengthening local infrastructure" (PNVi, 2020) leave many local people living in the vicinity feeling disappointment and rage. In focus group interviews in park-adjacent villages, many expressed their resentment against PNVi personified in the park director de Merode. Despite implementation of two hydroelectric power plants and numerous community development projects funded largely by the Buffet Foundation, many local communities complained that they are

not and have never been included in the benefits from these projects, particularly pointing at the electric wires running through their village to the city of Goma, without an electric connection to their houses (first author, forthcoming). Moreover, they explained how they mostly suffer from the persistent insecurity around PNVi, a situation that appears exceptionally unjust to them when large military convoys safeguard a few tourists in and out of the park. One local chief summarized this view:

> *"The park is for the communities, ICCN just manages it. But ICCN takes the crops and the land from our communities, so they [community members] turn against the park. Now the park is for white people and there is no peace between the park and the communities."*

Conclusion

This paper contributes to ongoing debates concerning the role of 'peace tourism' initiatives in the politics and lived realities around transboundary protected areas in conflict-affected settings through a case study of the *Virunga Conservation Area*. While the VCA is a single case study embedded in the complex historical context peculiar to the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, it serves to problematize dynamics of 'peace tourism' rhetoric and practice more generally that will hopefully inspire future interdisciplinary research at the intersection of tourism, conservation and conflict studies.

In particular, this paper questions the dominant conceptualizations of 'peace through tourism' in the context of transboundary protected areas drawing on neoliberal, macro-economic development theories. Protagonists of so-called peace parks suggest that augmenting the fiscal base of the national economy will improve the well-being of citizens as well as collaboration between governments in management of the shared ecosystem. In the case of the VCA, however, our analysis has demonstrated that intergovernmental 'peace tourism' propositions under the umbrella institutions GVTC have instead led to increased competition, mistrust and mutual 'defaming' among the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda to assert sovereignty and capture the lion's share of gorilla tourism revenue. In this context, the historical warfare between the three countries provides an opportunity to maintain and exacerbate accusations and threat discourses legitimizing militarization within the National Parks comprising the VCA.

Simultaneously, the national park authorities exploit this same militarization as an indicator of the 'security' that is sold to tourists as a luxurious (and lucrative) product in paradoxical combination with the opportunity to encounter *endangered* mountain gorilla. In a circular logic, these tourism revenues are used to justify and finance the militarisation of national and park borders to ultimately create a military bulwark against the neighbouring states under the cover of providing security for tourists. Our framing of this dynamic as 'fortress tourism' points to the contradictions that the 'peace tourism' label conceals in safeguarding wealthy visitors using military means that simultaneously exclude and alienate local residents. This provision of 'human security' for tourists thus underscores the structural violence and inequality local inhabitants experience in not being considered as 'human' and therefore barely profiting from the expanding infrastructure projects, risk assessments and security measures implemented around them. In this way, the association of peace with 'human security' promised within peace parks discourse becomes yet another consumer product for the people who can afford to pay for this 'peacefulness'. These dynamics suggest that the improvement of park-to-people relationships the peace park concept intended to facilitate reverses in the case of the Virungas as local people instead experience an increase in inequality and sense of abandonment by conservation, state and international agents due to the provision of security itself.

Ultimately, 'peace tourism' in the VCA thus seems to remain a largely rhetorical strategy intended to please international conservation and development donors and international tourists so as to secure funding for other stakeholders and projects having little or nothing to do with environmental peacebuilding itself. This contradiction between tourism's ostensive 'peace dividend' and

the different forms of violence it actually generates within the context of transboundary conservation efforts poses the question of what kind of 'peace' can actually be generated through this type of tourism, and for whom? Who defines what this 'peace' means and entails?

To address these questions became even more urgent since the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the international travel industry, in the process accentuating the highly volatile entanglement between tourism and conservation in relation to both local people's livelihoods *and* biodiversity protection (Fletcher et al., 2020). In VCA, dependency on gorilla tourism led to closure of the three National Parks, leaving local tourism stakeholders without business and diminishing the park's revenue-sharing with local communities even further. This has aggravated an already tense situation as further militaristic securitization of the protected areas confronts a growing number of people who enter the parks unauthorized in pursuit of basic resources for survival as other livelihood options recede. Yet COVID-19 also presents a moment of global uncertainty that could offer potential for new aspirations and innovations to alter these long-standing patterns of inequality entrenched by the flawed concept of tourism as a panacea for peace, conservation and economic development. This moment demands engaged, critical and constructive scholarship and activism to pursue transformative change, in the contexts of conservation, tourism and beyond.

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