

The coloniality of “crisis conservation” : The transnationalization and militarization of Virunga National Park from an historical perspective

The violence of conservation in Africa

Marijnen, Esther

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800885615.00014>

This publication is made publicly available in the institutional repository of Wageningen University and Research, under the terms of article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, also known as the Amendment Taverne. This has been done with explicit consent by the author.

Article 25fa states that the author of a short scientific work funded either wholly or partially by Dutch public funds is entitled to make that work publicly available for no consideration following a reasonable period of time after the work was first published, provided that clear reference is made to the source of the first publication of the work.

This publication is distributed under The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) 'Article 25fa implementation' project. In this project research outputs of researchers employed by Dutch Universities that comply with the legal requirements of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act are distributed online and free of cost or other barriers in institutional repositories. Research outputs are distributed six months after their first online publication in the original published version and with proper attribution to the source of the original publication.

You are permitted to download and use the publication for personal purposes. All rights remain with the author(s) and / or copyright owner(s) of this work. Any use of the publication or parts of it other than authorised under article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright act is prohibited. Wageningen University & Research and the author(s) of this publication shall not be held responsible or liable for any damages resulting from your (re)use of this publication.

For questions regarding the public availability of this publication please contact openscience.library@wur.nl

4. The coloniality of “crisis conservation”: the transnationalization and militarization of Virunga National Park from an historical perspective

Esther Marijnen

INTRODUCTION: INTERROGATING “CRISIS CONSERVATION”

Virunga National Park is a vast protected area located in the conflict-ridden province of North Kivu in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that speaks to the imagination: it is the oldest park on the African continent, home to the endangered mountain gorilla, and is located at the epicentre of a turbulent history of colonization, civil and full-blown regional wars – as the borders of the park overlap in part with the borders between the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda. Moreover, in 2014 the British oil company SOCO started to explore for oil within the borders of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, which has been officially classified as being “in danger” since 1994. Indeed, efforts to protect Virunga National Park resemble a struggle against all odds.

The difficulty to protect Virunga is also reflected in the existing literature about the park, which emphasizes the disastrous impact the violent conflict of the last two decades has had on the park and its biodiversity (Biswas and Tortajada-Quiros 1996; Werikhe et al. 1998; Kalpers et al. 2003; de Merode and Languy 2006; Glew and Hudson 2007; Hammill and Crawford 2008). Yet this literature on the park generally overlooks that Virunga National Park is not only a *site in conflict*, but also a *site of conflict*. Ever since King Albert of Belgium established the park in 1925, land and resource-related violent conflicts occurred between the park authorities and adjacent communities (Nzabandora 2006; Van Schuylenberg 2009; Vikanza 2011). These conflicts are not only driven by economic motivations, as often portrayed, but encompass larger political and decolonization struggles.

The case of Virunga National Park is indicative of a growing concern for the protection of nature and sites of world heritage caught in the crossfire of war and violent conflict (Eckersley 2007). In these cases, the “international community” is consequentially called upon to act, to prevent the complete destruction of World Heritage Sites, and to halt the depletion of wildlife in the case of protected areas. These international actors and interventions, such as UNESCO and large international environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as WWF, WCS, and African Parks, are perceived as “external” and “independent”; however by taking up management responsibilities they become an integral part of the complex figuration of conflict and authority in the areas of intervention. In previous publications I discussed Virunga National Park beyond its appeal as a unique site of extraordinary biodiversity, and as a site that is socially and politically embedded within the volatile landscape of conflict and violence in North Kivu (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). To understand how Virunga National Park is embedded in – and forms an integral part of – the dynamics of violent conflict in the east of the DRC it is important to focus on the multi-scalar politics of conservation in Virunga, as it is the extensive support of transnational actors, and the allocation of development aid to the park, that enables the management of Virunga to protect the park daily (Marijnen 2018).

In the case of Virunga, it is the Virunga Foundation, a British NGO with extensive links to the Belgian government as well, that has taken over the main responsibility of the management of the park. In 2006 the European Commission (EC), as the main long-term financial supporter of the park, instigated the Public Private Partnership (PPP) that was negotiated between the Virunga Foundation and the *l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN). A renegotiated PPP in 2010 transferred the entire responsibility for the management of the park to the British NGO. The most recent PPP was renegotiated in 2015 and will last until 2040 (Management Agreement ICCN-VF, March 2015). This increasing transnationalization coincided with an increasing militarization of conservation efforts in Virunga; armed park guards received intensified paramilitary training, law enforcement initiatives were heightened, and mixed battalions of ICCN park guards together with the Congolese national army, *Les Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) started to be deployed in various areas of the park. This amounted to the green militarization of the Virunga National Park, defined by Lunstrum as ‘the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation’ (2014, p.817). I refer to these coinciding processes of the transnationalization and militarization of the park management as a mode of “crisis conservation”, which is being legitimized by referring to the context of violent conflict in eastern Congo, which endangers the park.

While it is important to focus on these contemporary processes, as I have done together with colleagues in earlier work, I aim in this chapter to place this form of "crisis conservation" in its historical and colonial context. By doing so, I question to what extent this crisis mode of conservation is different from earlier periods in the park's history. The notion of "crisis" is currently being provoked with the aim to legitimize the fact that Virunga National Park continues to be approached as a "space of exception", which is heavily imprinted by various colonial continuities, such as the dominance and continuous influence of "Europe" over the management of the park, and the reliance on the "gun" as the main way to protect the park. Hence, despite the often seemingly turbulent politics and conflicts around the park, and in the east of the DRC more broadly, various structures initiated during the colonial period, from even before the park was officially created, are strikingly resilient. I argue in this chapter that the lack of change in these colonial structures surrounding Virunga National Park continuously strains the relationship between park authorities and people living around the park.

I first discuss the (pre-)colonial history of the area that became known as Virunga National Park, focusing on processes of militarization, and the arrival and influence of "white men" in the area. Second, I describe the politics surrounding the creation of Virunga National Park, and its management structures from 1925 to 2020. The focus is on the *longue durée* of the transnationalization and militarization of Virunga's management. Third, I discuss how these historically embedded processes are continued and legitimized through a discourse of "crisis" – contributing to a mode of "crisis conservation" – which continues to allow the management of Virunga National Park to manoeuvre within a historically constructed colonial "space of exception".

HISTORY OF THE GUN AND WHITE MEN

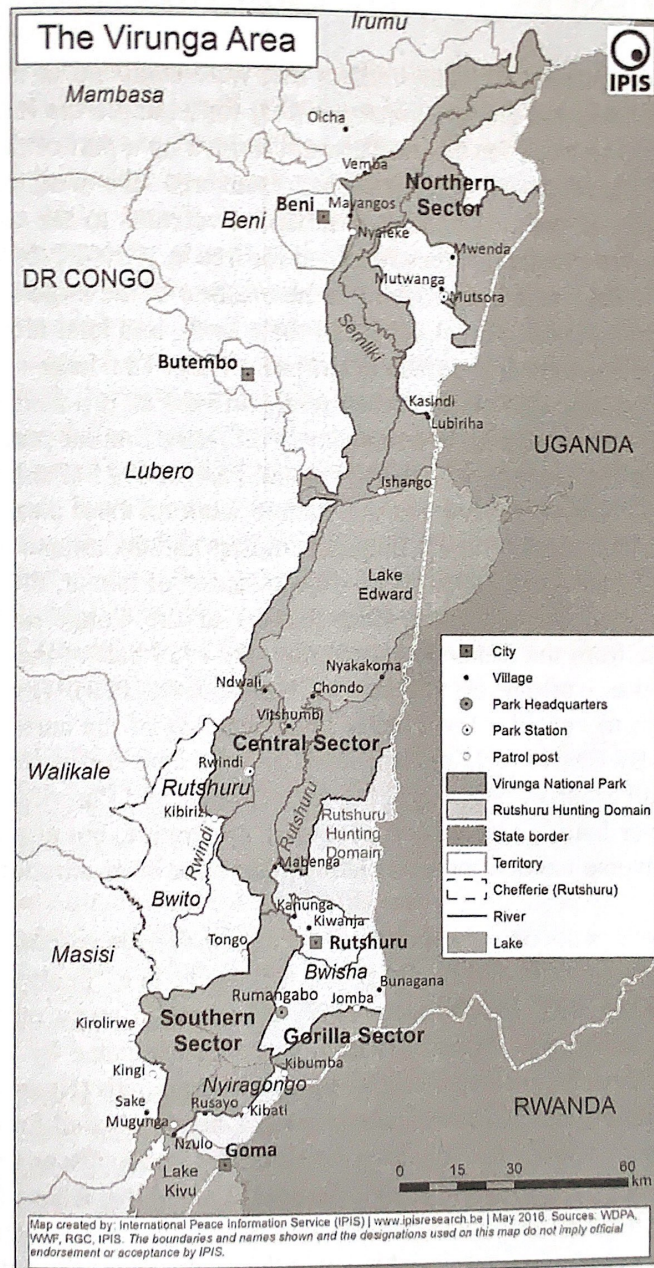
[T]he natives of this region have disturbed the gorillas very little, nor have the gorillas disturbed the natives. Certain[ly] it is that the gorillas got along very well till the white men came along with guns. (Carl Akeley, cited in Jones 2006, p.332)

Before the area became part of Leopold II "private property", the Congo Free State in 1885, the current Virunga area was already contested territory, especially around the Gorilla sector of the park (Vansina 2004). The neighbouring Rwandan Kingdom tried multiple times to expand their influence over the area, currently known as the chefferie of Bwisha (Figure 4.1). The population in Bwisha, the *Banyabawisha*, included herdsmen, which is a noble profession in Rwanda and the language Kinyabwisha is very similar to Kinyarwanda, the language spoken in Rwanda. People needed to pay tributes to the Rwandan king, but they were only fully integrated under the rule of King Rwabugiri

after 1875. Historian Jan Vansina argues that 'it is difficult to know when the first tributes from Bwisha were sent to the central kingdom of Rwanda, but over time the farmers in the region started to recognize the authority of the central kingdom' (Vansina 2004, p.160). This expansion of rule was facilitated through the militarization of the area. Under the rule of Rwabugiri the Rwandan Kingdom was expanded in search for resources and positions of authority through obtaining cattle and new territories and aimed to consolidate a centralized state (Vansina 2004; Des Forges 2011). Hence, when the Belgians arrived in the area, they found a population paying tribute to the Rwandan king. From 1895 until 1908 the area fell under the Congo Free State, and from 1908 until 1960 it became a Belgium colony.

Yet, the borders were not clear between Congo Free State and German east-Africa, as the Germans arrived in Rwanda in 1897, who sought the "collaboration" of Musinga, the Rwandan king at that time. In 1910 the "final" borders were established. But people in Bwisha continued to pay tribute to Musinga, and in reaction Belgian colonizers expelled Rwandan notables present in the area once the delimitation of the borders was finished (Des Forges 2011). The Belgians wanted to integrate the territory under their area of influence and installed a "new" customary chief to whom the people needed to pay their tributes. They appointed Daniel Ndeze as the local chief (*Mwami*) of the area, who served as an interpreter of the Belgians and received this position due to his loyalty to the Belgians. The Ndeze family has since remained the customary authority in Bwisha.

As mentioned earlier, the borders between the Belgian, German, and British colonies (currently Uganda) were disputed as they were not clear. As a result, this border area, especially where the three territories "meet", became increasingly militarized. Yet, it is exactly in this area where the mountain gorillas are present. The border dispute lasted from 1904 until 1911, and the British, German, and Belgian armies all established a military base in this part of the central Albertine rift. Moreover, a few years later the area became again a theatre of foreign armed forces: during the First World War, 1914–18, Bwisha became one of the most strategic areas for the *Force Publique Congo Belge*. In 1914 the German forces, working together with the Rwandan king Musinga, tried to expand into Bwisha, but the English forces joined the Belgians, and were able to stop the invasion in Kibati. The battle in Kibati left deep marks on the landscape, and when currently passing down the road from Goma to Kibati, graves of European soldiers can be found along the road. This was not the last time Kibati became a frontline between warring factions, and the consequences of repeated rounds of violence and militarization left deep marks on society and the landscape.



Source: International Peace Information Services (2016).

Figure 4.1 The Virunga area

CONSEQUENCES OF MILITARIZATION

The over two thousand Belgian soldiers that were stationed in the area had numerous social and economic consequences, for example the local population was forced to work for the soldiers and to give up a part of their harvest (Fairhead 1992). As the Belgian soldiers “discovered” the area, they noticed the extreme fertile land, and many returned as veterans to the area to start large-scale coffee plantations they obtained for free in 1920–22 (Nzanbandora 2011). Chief Ndeze was instrumental in the creation of the large-scale coffee plantations, and alienated local people of their lands, and later also restricted them from cultivating any coffee (Fairhead 1992). The large-scale coffee plantation “Domaine de Katale” that currently still exists, just next to the park headquarters in Rumangabo, is a remnant of this past. Similar practices were applied during the creation of Albert National Park in 1925 (Fairhead 1992). Yet, the population of Bwisha was reluctant to work on these plantations due to their bad experiences with the Belgium soldiers and the trauma of the First World War (Nzabandora 2006, pp.15–16). In search of labour, the plantation owners “imported labour” from other regions of the Congo and engaged mostly people from the Banande community. By 1939 half of the population of Rutshuru was working on plantations (Nzabandora 2006). This history is also important to consider for a better understanding of the current struggle of people in Bwisha to reclaim their land, as large land concessions are still held by a small group of politicians, big businessmen, and Europeans. To have ownership over land is not only an economic imperative, but also a political struggle to inverse unequal power relations that have been introduced during colonization.

Foreign soldiers not only “discovered” the extreme fertile volcanic soil in the region, but also its flora and fauna, and as a consequence, ‘hunting increased drastically in the area’ (Nzabandora 2006, p.14). As in many other African colonies, the imperative for conservation was first instigated by the wish of colonizers to have the exclusive “right” to hunt wild animals (Neumann 1998). The mountain gorilla, *Gorilla beringei beringei*, has fascinated European scientists and conservationists ever since the German Captain Oscar von Beringe killed a gorilla in 1902 for “scientific purposes”, and after whom the animal was named. Historical accounts indicate that people living in the area did not hunt gorillas; as remarked by Carl Akeley in the quote above, the gorillas fared well until the Europeans started to hunt gorillas in the region. The Belgium colonial state issued numerous permits that allowed people to hunt a gorilla. In the period 1920–30 Europeans and Americans hunted at least 56 gorillas, a number that may be higher (Van Schuylenberg 2006, p.599). This intensive

and commercialized hunting paradoxically contributed to the imperative to conserve the gorillas.

King Albert I of Belgium was inspired after a visit to Yellowstone Park to make his "own" national park in Belgian Congo based on the US model. His personal interest was encouraged by a group of transnational conservationists, including Carl Akeley, an American biologist (de Bont 2017). While Akeley also shot an entire family of mountain gorillas for the American Museum of Natural History, he started to lobby the Belgium government for their protection. Akeley's lobbying marked the start of an active role for American and European biologists and conservationists in the region, contributing to the transnational characteristic of the park's management from its inception (de Bont 2017). Jones describes 'the transatlantic connections involving the pursuit of gorilla; in the misty mountains of Belgian Congo, particularly as those international links reflected and reinforced the politics of empire' (2006, p.322). Belgian Royals were driven by a desire to portray themselves and their involvement in Belgian Congo as 'benevolent imperialists in the eyes of the Western world' (Jones 2006, p.330). Public opinion outside of the colony was seen as politically more important than the domestic public opinion. De Bont (2017, p.407) describes in detail how the creation of the park in 1925 was also spurred by a transnational elite and "scientific objectives":

While the foundation of the park cannot be ascribed to Albert I alone, it can be brought back to a very small network consisting of only a few dozen internationally well-connected naturalists, diplomats, and royals. This group was responsible for conceptualizing and managing the ANP, even as it grew in importance (until, in the 1930s, it boasted a size of 856,790 hectares). The people involved hailed from a variety of institutions but nevertheless shared a common discourse about the park, its nature, and its purpose. Their discursive strategies would tie the park's presumed wilderness to ideals of scientific universalism and internationalism. It enabled a small cosmopolitan group – acting from Brussels, New York, and London – to gain and maintain control over the park's destiny.

Currently the park continues to be controlled by a small cosmopolitan group of people, focusing mainly on the mobilization of international public opinion in favour of conserving Virunga (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Marijnen 2018). Before the park was created European hunters were clearly the main threat to Virunga's gorillas, yet after the park was established discourses on poaching and hunting completely changed, framing "natives" as the destroyers of "well governed nature". As Van Schuylenbergh (2009, p.45) states:

Any form of hunting that does not conform to European norms and ethics immediately and unequivocally falls into illegality without any historical or social consideration. Hunting laws are deeply entrenched in colonial land and natural resources

management, including wildlife ... Soon, the local Congolese population was seen as the destroyer of the 'well-governed' environment under colonial power.

The idea of the park as a "well-governed environment" also has a lingering influence on contemporary perceptions of Virunga National Park. To understand this continuity, it is important to discuss the history of how the park has been managed over time.

HISTORY OF A TRANSNATIONAL AND MILITARIZED PARK MANAGEMENT

Since the park's creation its management structures have been complex, and heavily influenced by international actors. While the park officially was created in 1925, its management still needed to be set up, and during the first years this was hampered by various personal rivalries and different perspectives among Belgian conservationists and authorities. At first, the management was transferred to *le Comité National du Kivu* (CNKI) by a decree in 1928, which was surprising, as this was a parastatal organization with the objective to promote the commercial interests of colonizers in the area, including those of the plantation owners discussed above. At the same time Carl Akely and Derscheid, linked to the colonial museum of Congo Belgium in Tervuren, had the mission to delimit and to enlarge the territory of the park. They came in direct opposition to the interest of CNKI, as it would prohibit parts of land from economic development (Van Schuylenberg 2006). As a result, the Ministry of Colonies decided that a public institution was needed to manage the park instead of a private one. By a decree in 1929 it was decided to extend the park substantially, and a special committee was appointed to manage the park directly from the metropole Brussels.

The committee was first led by Derscheid and Prince Eugene de Ligne, a Belgian noble, who owned a large company and plantation of the island of Idjwi in Lake Kivu (and who is great-great maternal grandfather of the current chief warden of the park, Prince Emmanuel de Merode) (Van Schuylenberg 2006, p.611). Hence the park management continued to have a parastatal character, and the local colonial administration of Belgian Congo had little influence. This management period was characterized by many conflicts and internal tensions between prominent Belgian conservationists. In 1931 de Brabant (Leopold III, son of former King Albert) and Victor van Straelen took over the control of the park. As people killed seven gorillas that same year, Derscheid was accused of not acting fiercely enough against poaching. It was believed that the killing was a political act and message instead of poaching. Victor van Straelen, the director of the Brussels Museum of Natural History, created the Institute of the National Parks of Belgian Congo (INPBC) in 1934

to manage Albert National Park, and the other parks that were envisioned. In the meantime, the wife of Carl Akeley, Mary Akeley, established an American committee for Albert National Park, to honour her husband who died during a mission in the region from illness, but also to keep the park in the public eye in the US (de Bont 2017). The current management of Virunga, the UK-based Virunga Foundation, opted for a similar strategy and created various foundations in the US and Belgium, which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter.

Many of the people appointed to work in the park had a colonial military background, and under Van Straelen it was believed the management became stricter and more repressive, extending the limits of the park without any consideration for the rights and lives of people living in these areas. It was believed that the park authorities, who answered to the INPBC with its headquarters in Brussels, increasingly started to operate as a "state within a state". In 1948 the Swiss biologist Heini Hediger said to a group of scientists about to enter Albert National Park, 'Not only are you going to visit a biological paradise but – even if it is a bit of a state within a state – you will see the organization that functions the best in Belgian Congo' (cited in Verschuren and Ma Mbaelele 2006, p.89). Meanwhile, the local colonial authorities were not happy with this as they felt their authority was being undermined. They were also concerned that by disposing of a large part of the population from their land without offering any alternatives this would create a seedbed of resistance against the colonial state. During the Second World War the park was cut off from Brussels, and the authority was for a short period delegated to the governor of the colony, Pierre Ryckmans. After conducting multiple enquiries in the area Ryckmans recommended that people should be compensated and that some should regain access to the park. The management became less strict, and some Congolese, but also Europeans, were able to resume activities within the park. Van Straelen objected, but this had no impact; he was only able to return to the park from 1945 onwards. To this day, people continue to refer to the enquiries and agreements they made with the colonial administration in this period to claim compensation, or to gain access to certain parts of the park. They still hold on to the documents from this period.

After the Second World War the strict conservation approach resumed and resulted in growing numbers of contestations between people and the park. The park guards were increasingly trained to implement a more repressive form of conservation, and they were expected to act fiercely against infiltrations to the park. The training instilled a strict discipline, but was accompanied by an increase in salary, food rations, and medical care for the guards and their families. More people were recruited as park guards and houses were constructed where the park guards could live with their families. In 1958,

the INPBC started a national corps of park guards (414 in total) that worked between the different parks in the colony.

Yet despite more strict measures, poaching continued. Van Schuylenberg (2009) describes how while the park started to conduct more patrols, poaching also became more aggressive, especially by people from Uganda. In the mid-1950s the animosity of people around the park also grew, and park guards started to be directly attacked as well. Towards the end of the colonial period, the park management started to rely more on collaborating with the local and customary authorities, such as Mwami Ndeze, to implement more strict punishments. Van Schuylenberg (2009) argued that these measures resulted in better protection of the park, especially in the southern sector of the park. Yet, in 1959 the park became a hotbed of anti-colonial resistance. In reaction, the park management created an organization of "friends of the national parks" and implemented some small projects for the benefit of the population to counter the opposition (Van Schuylenberg 2006, p.645). Similar dynamics explain the emergence of the organization "Virunga Yetu" (our Virunga) created in 2014 after youngsters organized a demonstration in front of the headquarters of the park in Rumangabo. During the demonstration, park guards started to shoot at the demonstrators, injuring four people and resulting in one death from injuries. The park took care of the victims, and in negotiations with one of the organizers of the demonstration, it was decided to create a local NGO Virunga Yetu, which would receive some money from the park for community outreach activities.

FROM BRUSSELS TO BRUSSELS: THE DECOLONIZATION OF CONSERVATION?

Anticipating that independence would negatively affect the park, Van Straelen argued in 1959 in the *New York Times* that

The only solution was to set up a form of 'international control'. Huxley, in the meantime, was thinking of a surveillance system under the coordination of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) that would force African park administrations to report on their management in return for advice and financial support. (de Bont 2017, p.18)

On 30 June 1960, Congo became independent, which was followed by a turbulent period that became internationally known as the "Congo Crisis". De Bont describes in detail how conservationists aimed to be strategic and kept contacts

with all the different political actors in the country, and internationally. They claimed to not do politics, but that is exactly what they were doing,

Osborn and others deployed such language in requests to perpetuate the existing park infrastructure and, most urgently, to find a solution for the problem that the guards of the ANP had not been paid for months. The new government in Leopoldville refused to accept money from former colonial powers but was open to the option that UNESCO, or preferably an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), would temporarily take care of the guards' wages. Coolidge eventually collected money through the American Conservation Foundation, and Belgian philanthropists and the German zoologist and filmmaker Grzimek offered donations. UNESCO officials were in constant contact with Leopoldville on the matter. Because of the chaotic situation in eastern Congo, Nigerian and Indonesian UN troops eventually brought the funds to the ANP in armored cars. (de Bont 2017, p.19)

In his memoirs the former director of the park before independence in 1960, Jacques Verschuren, wrote proudly that in the turbulent period after independence Albert National Park continued to work well. He decided to stay at his post and did not leave for neighbouring Rwanda like many other Europeans. He wrote that 'Congo is confronted with numerous unending problems, but without any doubt [it is one of] the national parks that continue to function best in the east of the country' (Verschuren 1970, p.102). He also was able to maintain his influence through the numerous guards he trained and mentored.

Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in 1968 and renamed the country Zaire. Mobutu took a particular interest in nature conservation, and a year later he created the current ICCN and appointed Verschuren as its first director. This appointment demonstrates the continuous influence of Belgians in the management of protected areas after independence. Moreover, Mobutu was particularly interested in Virunga. The location of the park far from the centre of power in Kinshasa offered him the possibility of symbolically demonstrating his vision and power to the neighbouring population. Currently, some people around the park still vividly remember his strict approach to conservation. He renamed the park, Virunga National Park. Some applauded Mobutu's initially strict approach to conservation, including the "quasi-dictatorial power" given to the new park management. According to Verschuren and Ma Mbaelele, 'a severe military discipline ruled [and] surveillance contained some policing aspects. In 2006 it was politically correct to criticize these rigorous elements, but everything functioned really well' (2006, p.87). This strict approach was visible in the practices of the park guards, who stepped up patrolling activity in the park, and there was a "shoot to kill" policy against anyone trespassing in the park (Marijnen 2018). Yet, when the power of Mobutu started to crumble this also affected the ICCN from the mid-1970s onwards, which created a difficult situation. Used to applying brutal methods, but subject to less control

by the state and only irregular payment, the park guards started to engage in a range of "illegal activities": poaching, illegal fishing, and charcoal production (Kujirakwinja 2010; Vikanza 2011). As Fairhead (1992, p.20) noted, 'the institution of the state in Zaire may be terrifying and strong for the local population, but its control from the centre is actually very weak'.

In the 1980s, international organizations and NGOs started to be more involved in the management of the park. For example, the IUCN and WWF took up various functions that the state failed to fulfil in and around the park. In 1988 the EC started to become one of the main funders of the park through the Kivu programme (Fairhead 1992). This support was officially halted in 1992 when the EC suspended all its financial aid to the Congolese state due to growing concerns about Mobutu's economic and political orientation. This also stopped official support to Virunga. Two years later, in 1994 the park was impacted by internal unrest and the cross-border consequences of the Rwandan genocide. By being in a "state of crisis" the European Union (EU), together with a continuing network of Belgian conservationists, found new ways to continue to support the "endangered" park through a Belgian NGO, Nature Plus, from Willy Delvinght (Marijnen 2018).

TRANSNATIONALIZATION AND MILITARIZATION OF CONSERVATION DURING WAR AND IN "CRISIS"

Since the moment the EU found ways to continue to support the park management, it avoided working through the official Congolese state institution responsible for its management. It considered the ICCN a corrupt and inefficient organization. The EU lobbied the Congolese government to sign a PPP after the signing of a peace agreement in 2002 that followed the Second Congo War. A first PPP was signed in 2005 between the ICCN and the African Conservation Fund, an NGO that was established in the UK the very same year. This NGO was created by the person who served as the coordinator for EU projects in Goma at the time, the Belgian prince Emmanuel de Merode.

In 2007 there was a political killing of six mountain gorillas. This event not only shocked the entire world, but also reinforced the idea among Western supporters of the park that the management was not in capable hands with the ICCN. Confronted with this disaster, the Congolese government felt pressured by international supporters of the park to make further changes in how the park is managed. In 2008 the Congolese government appointed de Merode as the official chief warden of the park. From that moment, he had dual responsibilities: a Congolese state official and the director of the NGO. Negotiations also started for a reformulation of the PPP, and in 2010 the ICCN transferred the entire responsibility for the management of the park to ACF, which later changed its name to the Virunga Foundation (Hatchwell 2014). The most

recent PPP signed in 2015 runs until 2040. This PPP structure, which was politically supported by the EC, continues to rely on EC development funds for its day-to-day management. In an interview de Merode stated that 'the management structure is completely financed by the European Commission, which allows us to leverage other funds' (Interview, Rumangabo, 2014). As such the EC positioned itself as a *de facto* guardian of the park, which makes it very difficult for them to accept any critical and independent appraisals of the practices of the current park management (Marijnen 2017). Just in the period 2016–20, it invested over 80 million Euro in the park (European Commission 2020).

More recently to leverage a more diverse range of funds the Virunga Foundation also created a Virunga Foundation in Belgium and a Virunga Fund in the US, which mimics how international support for the park was created during the colonial period. There is no single Congolese national or even a person with a Congolese background represented in the management bodies of these foundations. Instead, we find Belgian aristocrats, former ministers, and diplomats among its members. This transnational control over the park management is a striking coloniality. While the wardens and guards working in the park are all ICCN state agents and Congolese citizens, the management of the park is in hands of the Virunga Foundation. Yet, the guards are the first to implement policies and execute orders, which at times puts them in dangerous situations – as they are increasingly being directly attacked by rebel groups residing in and around the park (Verweijen 2020).

The continuing influence of Europe, and mostly of white men, over the park management is not the only historical continuity. It is also how the park is being managed – through a heavy reliance on the gun as a response to the general distrust by the people living close to the park. It is acknowledged by the park management that people living close to the park are often disgruntled by the park as they are being cut off from the land and other resources enclosed within the park. Instead of attending to these grievances by forging genuine collaboration, the park adopts a top-down approach with the aim to change the attitudes of local people. By implementing large-scale pro-profit business projects, the park aims to create economic opportunities for people outside the park, with the hope that this will discourage people from wanting to enter the park for livelihoods or to align themselves with rebel groups (Marijnen and Schouten 2019). By doing so, the park neglects the fact that it is also the exclusion from Virunga's management that is contributing to many of the grievances (Kujirakwinja 2010).

Before the park started to focus on large-scale business projects with the aim to create off-farm employment opportunities for people around the park, de Merode embarked on an internal reform process of park management with the aim to create a "new security service" in North Kivu. Elsewhere, together with

colleagues, I describe in detail how this process influenced the daily encounters between the park guards and the population living in and around the park (Verweijen et al. 2020). From the 1,000 guards, 770 park guards were fired or retired with pension. Subsequently, the focus shifted to new recruitments and a training programme intended to develop military skills taught by Belgian and French ex-para commandos. The goal was to professionalize the ranger corps. It was believed that many previous park guards were engaged in illegal activities in the park, human rights violations, and corruption. The management wanted to counter these bad practices by training the new ranger corps supported by a stable monthly income, combined with food rations, health care, and proper equipment. It was thought that under these conditions the rangers would not have any "incentive" to act outside of the law and in contradiction with the park's interest. A guard who is at the beginning of their career receives US\$60 from the ICCN in Kinshasa and US\$165 from the Virunga Foundation each month (a total of US\$225). By comparison, a FARDC soldier earns around US\$85 a month and a police officer US\$60. According to de Merode himself,

The EU is at the basis of internal reform process; startup of a strict command and control structure. We have a service for operations where all intelligence comes together, a restricted area. We collect intelligence from communities, also incidences that are involving our staff. We need to be realistic about it. There is a history of lack of accountability and the ability to monitor the guards. So, with the reform process, we started with most difficult steps, as we went from 1000 to 230 guards. It was expensive, fired many old guards of the park, with pension, the EU helped with that. Also, some people went to prison. Which was sensitive as there was always a risk of mutiny, it is difficult, and the process is still ongoing, not yet finished. We started the reform in 2009–2010. (Interview, Rumangabo, 2014)

While these measures are well understandable and applaudable, they did not automatically improve the perception people have of the park guards, as these have been shaped over longer periods of time. Moreover, despite the park's zero-tolerance for any form of corruption, or human rights violations on the part of the park guards, people continue to find it difficult to hold the park to account. Moreover, people started to question if the park was really committed to improve the conduct of the park guards, as they started to organize mixed patrols together with the Congolese army, which has a deplorable track record in protecting civilians and respecting human rights.

By bringing a part of the Congolese army stationed in the Virunga area under the control of the park management, it was believed that the soldiers would be discouraged from being involved in illegal fishing, poaching, producing charcoal, and allowing people to access the park to cultivate land. Moreover, they also started to conduct joint operations to destroy entire illegal fishing

villages along the and to conduct joint. However, these operations were uprooted a fertile base for a Chondo for example protection of armed against rebel groups direct deadly attacks.

The increasing training is unavoidable training at all. However deterioration of the while initially the increase accountability rights violations led a climate of distrust (al. 2020).

COSMOPOLITAN CONSERVATION

For me, but with

As the historical conservation processes of military before the park with "crisis conservation" with "rupture" and. The concept of "crisis" advanced by this narrative distance itself – first preceding the crisis the daily practice: structures implemented. As such it does not institutions and structures.

This understanding of "crisis" is a moment that (2011). She goes further of knowledge

villages along the coast of Lake Edward, destroy illegal fields in the park, and to conduct joint patrols mainly in the problematic central area of the park. However, these operations fuelled violent conflict instead of addressing it; as people were uprooted from their livelihoods, rebel groups in the areas found a fertile base for armed mobilization. In many fishing villages, in Ndwali and Chondo for example, fishermen returned to the villages but this time with the protection of armed groups. These military operations pitted the park guards against rebel groups claiming to protect the fishing families, leading to more direct deadly attacks against the park guards (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018).

The increasing deadly attacks against park guards means that military training is unavoidable, and that it would even be irresponsible not to give any training at all. However, a vicious circle of militarization ensued, leading to the deterioration of the relations between civilians and park guards. For example, while initially the restructuring of the park management was designed to increase accountability and to eliminate instances of corruption and human rights violations by the park guards, the militarization of the park created a climate of distrust between the local population and the park (Verweijen et al. 2020).

COSMOPOLITANISM AND COLONIALITY IN "CRISIS CONSERVATION"

For me, but without me, is against me. (Congolese proverb)

As the historical overview has shown, the Virunga area was characterized by processes of militarization and transnationalization under colonial rule even before the park was created. This historical perspective questions whether "crisis conservation" is a useful concept, as "crisis" is commonly associated with "rupture" and radical transformation of social and economic structures. The concept of "crisis conservation" provokes the idea that the daily practices advanced by this mode of conservation would differ significantly – and actively distance itself – from the practices and underlying structures of conservation preceding the crisis. Yet, this is exactly the paradox of "crisis conservation": the daily practices it generates are informed and based on experiences and structures implemented during colonization that became solidified over time. As such it does not allow for any structural changes in the historically shaped institutions and structures that manage protected areas.

This understanding of "crisis conservation" is based on Roitman's conceptualization of "crisis", which she defines as an object of knowledge, as a crisis is a moment that 'called for decisive judgment between alternatives' (Roitman 2011). She goes further to say crisis is an 'enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge', and thus makes certain things visible and others invisible.

Consequently, the invocation of crisis opens up certain responses and interventions while foreclosing others (Roitman 2013). It is thus very important to analyse who holds power and who profits from labelling something a “crisis”, because the associated knowledge processes are often self-referential, facilitating the status quo and reinforcing existing structures of inequality (Roitman 2011, 2013).

By presenting and acting upon Virunga National Park as a protected area “in crisis”, a moral demand is evoked, as the situation does not correspond to the norm and “universal” ideas about how nature should be managed and protected. According to Tsing (2005, p.1), the protection of nature, and environmental politics more broadly, is a field par excellence where ideas of universality are ‘enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters’. Moreover, in addition to these encounters Tsing (2005, p.1) argues that it is important to analyse ideas of universality and their origins, because ‘the history of the universal is also produced in the colonial encounter’, as is the case in “crisis conservation”.

Moreover, the situation of a “crisis” creates blind spots among the park management, but also its international supporters such as the EC, which made them foreclose alternative management strategies to protect the Virunga National Park. Instead, they fall back on traditional approaches of conservation conducted since the (colonial) past in the area; furthering militarization and transnationalization. This default option is instigated by the moral demand to protect nature that is threatened by war, chaos, plunder, and violence. By capitalizing on the actual protracted violent conflict in the east of the DRC, also defined as a situation of “no-war-no-peace” (Raeymaekers et al. 2008), transnational actors reinforce their influence over the management, and as such significantly influence structures of public authority in the wider Virunga area (Marijnen 2018). This is justified by referencing the park as being in a “crisis” situation. As such, the wider context of protracted violent conflict continues to serve as legitimation for an approach to conservation that was introduced in the colonial period, pointing at various forms of ongoing coloniality. Most importantly, the current management of the park invokes memories of the colonial past among the inhabitants of the Virunga area, who continue to refer to the park as “white men’s land” (Verweijen et al. 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the Congo Basin, Virunga National Park receives a disproportionate amount of political attention and development aid, compared to other protected areas in the area (Wilkie et al. 2001). This is due to the presence of the endangered mountain gorilla, a charismatic mega-species, but it is especially the circulation of images of gorillas caught in the crossfire of war that provokes a sense

of urgency and generates the resources and political support needed to protect Virunga National Park. It is not surprising that the outcry and support is triggered when iconic species in protected areas and wildlife populations are in peril, provoking the notion of "crisis".

The conceptualization of "crisis conservation" assisted me to understand the paradox that I encountered during my research in and around Virunga; while the multiple actors that are engaged in the management of the park genuinely aim to "save" it, they perpetuate and reinforce pre-existing structures of inequality and coloniality around the management of the park. These structures negatively affect community-park relations, resulting in ongoing encroachments, violent encounters, and even direct violent attacks against the park guards. This approach to conservation thus essentially undermines the actual goal of restoring the integrity of Virunga National Park in the long run.

Moreover, "crisis conservation" interventions are often not questioned in public because to do so may be considered immoral due to the state of emergency in which these parks in-peril find themselves, and which in turn demand a swift, satisfactory, and urgent response. Nor are these interventions elaborated upon in consultation with people living around these parks and implemented in a transparent manner. As such, "crisis conservation" is often characterized by the unaccountability of the actors involved, and especially of those who enable these practices. Within the critical development literature, the concerns about the influence of NGOs on accountability and wider structures of public authority have been widely questioned, as 'the reporting and other requirements imposed by donors reorient NGOs to be more concerned with accountability from above, not from below' (Schuller 2012, p.176), which also holds true for many conservation interventions – especially those implemented in violent environments (Marijnen et al. 2020).

In sum, I argue that "crisis conservation" reflects a "doxa" or "universal", a truth claim that is constructed and advanced by a network of connected individuals, mainly from the Global North, who make strategic alliances across the globe. "Crisis conservation" is advanced through various securitized narratives, declaring emergencies, calling for exceptional measures and other discursive techniques. Yet, the daily practices of conservation, and park-population relations, remain remarkably unchanged from before the trope of "crisis" was employed. Indeed, as Tsing (2005) argued, through ethnographies of global connection, it is possible to analyse how "universals" and truth claims are implicated in the entrenchment of European (neo)colonial power, and how these are not politically neutral. Universalism and cosmopolitanism are double-edged swords which, while claiming to pursue philanthropic and humane goals, continue to (re)structure global asymmetries and inequality (Tsing 2005).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, W.M., 2003. Nature and the colonial mind. In Adams, W.M. and Mulligan, M. eds. *Decolonizing nature: Strategies for conservation in a post-colonial era*, pp.16–50. London: Earthscan.
- Anderson, D. and Grove, R., 1987. The scramble for Eden: Past, present and future in African conservation. In Anderson, D. and Grove, R. eds. *Conservation in Africa: People, policies and practice*, pp.1–12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biswas, A.K. and Tortajada-Quiros, H.C., 1996. Environmental impact of refugees: A case study. *Impact Assessment*, 14(1), pp.21–38.
- Büscher, B., 2011. The neoliberalisation of nature in Africa. In Dietz, T., Havnevik, K., Kaag, M. and Oestigaard, T. eds. *New topographies of power? Africa negotiating an emerging multi-polar world*, pp.84–109. Leiden: Brill.
- Büscher, B., 2016. Reassessing fortress conservation? New media and the politics of distinction in Kruger National Park. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 106(1), pp.114–129.
- Büscher, B. and Ramutsindela, M., 2016. Green violence: Rhino poaching and the war to save southern Africa's peace parks. *African Affairs*, 115(458), pp.1–22.
- De Bont, R., 2017. A world laboratory: Framing the Albert National Park. *Environmental History*, 22(3), pp.404–432.
- De Merode, E. and Languy, M. eds., 2006. *Virunga: Survie du premier parc d'Afrique*. Tiel: Lannoo.
- Des Forges, A., (2011). *Defeat is the only bad news: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896–1931*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Dunn, K.C., 2003. *Imagining the Congo: The international relations of identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eckersley, R., 2007. Ecological intervention: Prospects and limits. *Ethics and International Affairs*, 21(3), pp.293–316.
- Eriksson Baaz, M., Gondola, D., Marijnen, E., Verweijen, J., Vikanza, P.K., Vlassenroot, K., Carayannis, T., Dunn, K., Fairhead, J., Hochleithner, S., Mvano, C., Mwamba, E. and Muhire, B., 2015. Virunga's white savior complex: How the film distorts the politics and people of Congo, accessed 24 September 2016 at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2015-03-05/virungas-white-savior-complex?cid=rss-africa-virungas_white_savior_complex-000000
- European Commission, 2020. The EU, Leonardo DiCaprio and global wildlife conservation team-up to protect biodiversity, press release, Brussels, 16 December.
- Fairhead, J., 1992. Paths of authority: Roads, the state and the market in eastern Zaire. *European Journal of Development Research*, 4(2), pp.17–35.
- Fairhead, J., 2005. Transnational dimensions to environmental resource dynamics: Modes of governance and local resource management in eastern DRC. In Gausset, Q., Whyte, M.A. and Birch-Thomsen, T. eds. *Beyond territory and scarcity: Exploring conflicts over natural resource management*, pp.195–215. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Garland, E., 2008. The elephant in the room: Confronting the colonial character of wildlife conservation in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 51(3), pp.51–74.
- Glew, L. and Hudson, M.D., 2007. Gorillas in the midst: The impact of armed conflict on the conservation of protected areas in sub-Saharan Africa. *Oryx*, 41(2), pp.140–150.

- Hammill, A. and Crawford, A., 2008. *Gorillas in the midst: Assessing the peace and conflict impacts of International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) activities*. Winnipeg, Canada: International Institute for Sustainable Development.
- Hatchwell, M., 2014. Public-private partnerships as a management option for protected areas. *Animal Conservation*, 17, pp.3–4.
- Igoe, J. 2004. *Conservation and globalization: A study of national parks and indigenous communities from East Africa to South Dakota*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Jones, J.E., 2006. 'Gorilla Trails in Paradise': Carl Akeley, Mary Bradley, and the American search for the missing link. *The Journal of American Culture*, 29(3), pp.321–336.
- Kalpers, J., Williamson, E.A., Robbins, M.M., McNeilage, A., Nzamurambaho, A., Lola, N. and Mugiri, G., 2003. Gorillas in the crossfire: Population dynamics of the Virunga mountain gorillas over the past three decades. *Oryx*, 37(3), pp.326–337.
- Kujirakwinja, D., Shamavu, P.A., Hammill, A., Crawford, A., Bamba A. and Plumptre, A.J., 2010. *Healing the rift: Peacebuilding in and around the protected areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Albertine Rift*. Unpublished report, USAID.
- Lombard, L., 2012. *Raiding sovereignty in central African borderlands*. PhD Thesis, Duke University.
- Lombard, L., 2015. The autonomous zone conundrum: Armed conservation and rebellion north-eastern CAR. In Carayannis, T. and Lombard, L. eds. *Making sense of the Central African Republic*, pp.142–165. London: Zed Books.
- Lombard, L., 2016. Threat economies and armed conservation in north eastern Central African Republic. *Geoforum*, 69, pp.218–226.
- Lunstrum, E., 2014. Green militarization: Anti-poaching efforts and the spatial contours of Kruger National Park. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 104(4), pp.816–832.
- Mackenzie, J., 1988. *The empire of nature: Hunting, conservation, and British imperialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marijnen, E., 2017. The 'green militarisation' of development aid: The European Commission and the Virunga National Park. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(7), pp.1566–1582.
- Marijnen, E., 2018. Public authority and conservation in areas of armed conflict: Virunga National Park as a 'state in a state' in the DR Congo. *Development and Change*, 49(3), pp.790–814.
- Marijnen, E. and Schouten P., 2019. Electrifying the green peace? Electrification, conservation and conflict in Eastern Congo. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(1), pp.15–34.
- Marijnen, E. and Verweijen J., 2016. Selling green militarization: The discursive (re) production of militarized conservation in the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Geoforum*, 75, pp.274–285.
- Marijnen, E., De Vries, L. and Duffy, R., 2020. Conservation in violent environments: Introduction to a special issue on the political ecology of conservation amidst violent conflict. *Political Geography*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102253>
- Neumann, R.P., 1998. *Imposing wilderness. Struggles over livelihood and nature preservation in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nzabandora, N.M.J., 2006. Plantations Europeennes, Parc National et Mouvements des Populations dans le Territoire de Rutshuru au Nord-Kivu (1920–1996), accessed 20 July 2015 at <http://www.pole-institute.org/sites/default/files/regards16.pdf>
- Nzabandora, N.M.J., 2011. Les leçons des conflits entre communautés locales, administration coloniale et conservateurs au sujet du parc national albert, actuel parc des

- volcans virunga (1925–1947), accessed 25 August 2015 at http://www.ulk-kigali.net/IMG/pdf/ISSUE_21.pdf
- Ojeda, D., 2012. Green pretexts: Ecotourism, neoliberal conservation and land grabbing in Tayrona National Natural Park, Colombia. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(2), pp.357–375.
- Raeymaekers, T., Menkhaus, K., and Vlassenroot, K., 2008. State and non-state regulation in African protracted crises: Governance without government? *Afrika focus*, 21(2), pp.7–21.
- Roitman, J., 2011. Crisis. *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 1, accessed 20 July 2015 at <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/crisis>
- Roitman, J., 2013. *Anti-crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schuller, M., 2012. *Killing with kindness: Haiti, international aid, and NGOs*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Singh, J. and Van Houtum, H., 2002. Post-colonial nature conservation in Southern Africa: Same emperors, new clothes? *GeoJournal*, 58(4), pp.253–263.
- Tsing, A.L., 2005. *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Van Schuylenbergh, P., 2006. *De l'appropriation à la conservation de la faune sauvage: pratiques d'une colonisation: le cas du Congo Belge (1885–1960)*. PhD Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain.
- Van Schuylenbergh, P., 2009. Entre délinquance et résistance au Congo Belge: l'interprétation coloniale du braconnage. *Afrique & histoire*, 7, pp.25–48.
- Vansina, J., 2004. *Antecedents to modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya kingdom*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Verschuren, J., 1970. *Mourir pour les Éléphants*. Bruxelles: L Cuypers.
- Verschuren, J. and Mankoto Ma Mbaelele, S., 2006. La renaissance du Parc National (1960–1991). In Languy, M. and de Merode, E. eds. *Virunga Survie du Premier Parc d'Afrique*, pp. 85–95. Tiel: Lannoo.
- Verweijen, J., 2020. A microdynamics approach to geographies of violence: Mapping the kill chain in militarized conservation areas. *Political Geography*, 79, 102–153.
- Verweijen, J. and Marijnen, E., 2018. The counterinsurgency/conservation nexus: Guerrilla livelihoods and the dynamics of conflict and violence in the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(2), pp.300–320.
- Verweijen, J., Kubuya, S., Mahamba, E., Marijnen, E., Murairi, J. and Mvano, C., 2020. *Conflicts around Virunga National Park: Grassroots perspectives*. The Hague: Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law.
- Vikanza, P.K., 2011. Aires protégées, espaces disputés et développement au Nord-est de la RD Congo. PhD Thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain Faculté des Sciences Politiques et Sociales.
- Werkhe, E., Mushenzi, N. and Bizimana, J., 1998. L'impact de la guerre sur les aires protégées dans la région des Grands Lacs. *Cahiers d'Ethnologie*, 18, pp.175–186.
- White, N., 2014. The 'white gold of jihad': Violence, legitimization and contestation in anti-poaching strategies. *Political Ecology*, 21, pp.452–474.
- Wilkie, D.S., Carpenter, J.F. and Zhang, Q., 2001. The under-financing of protected areas in the Congo Basin: So many parks and so little willingness-to-pay. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 10, pp.691–709.