Article

Eco-war tourism: Affective geographies, colonial durabilities and the militarization of conservation

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Abstract

This article introduces 'eco-war tourism', a growing niche in which tourists venture into war zones to seek adventure and 'save' nature from its violent surroundings. In Virunga National Park in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, such tourists can experience the 'threat of mortality' while visiting mountain gorillas, contribute to the survival of the park and supposedly participate in regional peacebuilding. This article considers how the amalgamated commodification of war and gorillas leads to the bunkerization of tourism, the reconfiguration of space into 'safe' and 'dangerous' areas and the militarization of conservation. It links critical security studies and political ecology to theorize how eco-war tourism intensifies green militarization and how militarized conservation itself becomes a spectacularized tourist attraction. Eco-war tourism is informed by, and productive of, various affective geographies, entrenched in colonial durabilities that produce Eurocentric ideas about how and by whom nature should be protected. I call for critical security studies to examine how diverse security interventions – e.g. military, tourism, humanitarianism and conservation – are entangled in and reconfigure inherently political nature–society relations and underscore the futility of approaching 'society' and 'the environment' as separate fields of security.

Introduction

One might be surprised to learn that eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which is commonly associated with images of human suffering and war, is also a tourist destination. Tourists venture to the area to gaze upon charismatic, endangered mountain gorillas, but also to experience 'Congo's troubles' while keeping a 'safe distance'. This article explores this specific form of 'eco-war tourism' and analyses the coloniality of affective geographies it (re-)produces. While tourism to Virunga National Park is said to contribute to peacebuilding and saving nature in eastern DRC,

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it mainly contributes to the militarization of conservation spaces: firstly, it constructs 'safe' tourist enclaves and infrastructures and second, it generates resources for and legitimises the park's long history of militarized conservation (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016).

Political ecology has examined how eco-tourism can serve as a pretext for intensified militarized conservation through 'counterinsurgency ecotourism' (Devine, 2014). Yet, as the case of Virunga shows, militarized conservation itself can also become a tourist attraction. Such eco-war tourism commodifies Virunga's epic struggle into an experience that allows tourists to feel included in the struggle. To understand these intertwined processes, this article joins political ecology literature on green militarization (Duffy et al., 2019; Lunstrum, 2014) with critical security studies (CSS) work on war-zone tourism and the security–development nexus (Duffield, 2012; Lisle, 2000, 2013, 2016; Smirl, 2015). It responds to calls to forge connections between the two fields through the extended conservation–security–development nexus (Massé, Lunstrum and Holterman, 2018). 'Eco-war tourism' brings these fields even closer. It highlights the colonial underpinnings of discourses legitimizing and advancing securitization and militarization (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen, 2018; Marijnen, 2022b) and how they co-constitute affect and affective geographies (Anderson and Adey, 2011; Büscher, 2016; de Goede, 2008; Lunstrum, 2017).

This paper calls for CSS to consider how diverse security interventions – e.g. military, tourism, humanitarianism and conservation – are intertwined and reconfigure inherently political nature–society relations. I also note the futility of approaching 'society' and 'the environment' as separate fields of security (Mitchell, 2014). CSS can potentially undertake critical analysis of racialized understandings of nature–society relations and their security effects as a central feature of coloniality.

The colonial underpinnings of eco-war tourism in eastern DRC are shaped by people of the Global North's long fascination with the region's mountain gorillas. Robert von Beringe shot two mountain gorillas in 1902 during a military expedition in, at that time, Belgian Congo. This so-called 'scientific discovery' resulted in the mountain gorilla being named after its first European aggressor, *Gorilla beringei beringei.* Since that fatal encounter, white people's gendered and racialized accounts of mountain gorillas have silenced other discourses and dominated the narrative in the Global North (Haraway, 1989). These dynamics remain unchanged, and are even reified by the contemporary gorilla tourism merged with war-zone tourism in eastern DRC.

In Western popular culture, gorillas are no longer considered dangerous savages that attack women (e.g. in 1933's *King Kong* and its remakes in 1976 and 2005). Gorillas are now gentle giants. Danger is no longer embodied within the gorilla but lurking in the gorilla's dangerous environment. As an endangered species, there is a constant need to identify 'who' and 'what' threatens the gorillas. As such, the proximity of violence has become an intrinsic part of the Global North's associations with them. This is epitomized by Weber and Vedder's (2001) book about their experiences working with gorillas in Rwanda titled, *In the Kingdom of Gorillas: Fragile Species in a Dangerous Land* and on the film poster of the 2013 documentary *Virunga, The Movie*, which includes the subtitle *conservation is war* and depicts a mountain gorilla protected by a heavily armed park guard.

People's encounters with gorillas are not only influenced by popular media representations and 'celebrity conservationists' ('people who win fame from their conservation work' [Brockington, 2008: 554]), but also by imaginative geographies of the *space* gorillas inhabit (Gregory, 1995; Said, 1979). Journalists and tourists often frame gorillas as 'civil' and 'innocent' in an area characterized as 'violent', 'plagued by greed and rebels', or as 'blood-soaked land' (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016: 278). These imaginative geographies mobilize diverse forms of affect, resulting in particular 'affective landscapes' or 'how people define themselves and their relation to the world' (Berberich et al., 2013: 313). Affect describes something that moves, provokes reactions, has an intensity and passes from body to body (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010), including between

humans and non-human bodies. In particular, war and violence provoke and mobilize strong affective experiences (Butler, 2004), most notably for those directly involved and targeted by violence, but also among bystanders and, increasingly, tourists who visit war zones (Buda et al., 2014; Lisle, 2016). As such, this article explores how affective geographies are mobilized and reinforced by eco-war zone tourism in Virunga National Park. It discusses how these affective geographies contribute to the long history of militarized conservation in the region and how green militarization is commodified into an inclusive tourist experience.

This article is structured as follows. First, it discusses the intersecting literature on war tourism, militarized conservation, and affective geographies. Next, I outline the research methodology and briefly discuss the (colonial) history of gorilla conservation, tourism, and war in the Great Lakes region. I then examine how gorilla tourism in Virunga National Park emerged alongside a specific form of war tourism and how this reinforced colonial understandings of how and by whom gorillas should be protected, shaped by particular affective geographies. I conclude by highlighting the material effects of eco-war tourism and how they contribute to the militarization of conservation spaces.

War-zone tourism, green militarization and their affective geographies

Virunga's management argues that tourism not only protects nature, but also fosters peace in the area – it supposedly generates economic revenues, offering people an alternative to joining rebel groups. Such discourse falls within the seductive win-win rhetoric of neoliberal conservation and 'green peace' (Marijnen and Schouten, 2019: 20). War and tourism are often positioned as opposing forces since tourists generally prefer to visit safe places. Yet, as Lisle (2000) explains, through the increasing privatization of security, dangerous places for some can be thrilling and exciting for others: the 'tourist gaze is so adaptable that it now seeks out and colonizes dangerous places' (2000: 106).

Few empirical grounded studies have analysed tourism in active war zones (cf. Buda et al. 2014; Stein, 2008). However, much research exists on tourism in 'post-conflict' contexts, or in relation to the war on terror's securitization of tourism, risk-management and pre-emption (Lisle, 2016; Hyndman, 2015). In ongoing war zones, some areas are secured for tourists through modes of transport, infrastructures and armed protection, while these same areas remain insecure for the resident population. This extreme form of boundary making through tourism in war zones is facilitated by and reinforces structured colonial hierarchies between privileged white and underprivileged black bodies (Mahrouse, 2016).

As Fletcher (2010) argues, adventure tourism (and arguably war-zone tourism) is built on an inherent paradox of simultaneously selling risk, adventure and security. As such, war-zone tourism, 'promote[s] a culture of comfort with militarization and privatization of security services, as well as the demarcation practices between Global North tourists and Global South "locals" that are naturalized and perpetuated through them' (Mahrouse, 2016: 330). War-zone tourism is often thought to be motivated by thrill-seeking and voyeurism, not necessarily a desire to help (Mahrouse, 2016). However, eco-war tourism is motivated both by thrills and the noble objective to protect nature from its violent surroundings. It recalls voluntourism's 'white saviour complex' (Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 327), which, in the case of Virunga, is aimed at 'saving' endangered gorillas.

Much literature interrogating the link between eco-tourism and militarization frames the construction of spaces as 'unspoiled' or 'safe', as an erasure of violent histories (Duffy, 2002: *passim;* Ojeda, 2012: *passim*). Devine (2014: 987) argues that 'counterinsurgency eco-tourism' is legitimated because tourists will not visit places perceived to be unsafe. However, this is only partly true

in eco-war tourism. The privileged bodies of tourists need to be secured but danger in the surrounding environment is part of the attraction. The entire area need not be secured, only the conservation and tourist enclaves and their critical infrastructures. The material infrastructures of the tourism industry become 'sites of political intervention', transforming localised places into '"secure" enclaves' (Lisle, 2013: 128).

These secure enclaves resemble the development and humanitarian sector's presence in conflict areas. Material pieces of interventions like cars, compounds and hotels propagate a culture of distance by allowing aid workers to remain physically remote from the people they are supposed to help (Smirl, 2015). Duffield (2012: 483) dubs this the 'bunkerization of the aid industry'. Similar processes unfold in (eco-)war tourism – the bunkerization of tourism influences and actively reproduces tourists' affective imaginaries about the area they are visiting, and contributes to an uneven topography of 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces. As I discuss below, tourists experience familiarity and innocence in Virunga National Park's securitized enclaves. This contrasts with feelings of danger and excitement when gazing upon Congo's 'troubles' as they pass through villages with armed escorts.

The distance between residents and tourists leaves little room or agency for 'local actors' to influence or challenge the affective geographies tourists hold and reproduce about the area. The highly mediated experiences of eco-war tourism resemble various colonial durabilities reinforce racial stereotypes, and silence 'local' voices and experiences (Mertens et al., 2022). As Stroler notes, the colonial past continues through 'the narratives recounted about them, the unspoken distinctions they continue to "cue", and the affective charges they reactivate' (2016: 5). As such, it is important to analyse how the bunkerization of tourists influences the (re)production of affective geographies, and how these are rooted in colonial durabilities and unequal power relations.

Affective relations, as bodily experiences, are co-constituted by the spaces where interactions occur. People experience different emotions in different spaces vis-à-vis humans, non-humans and in relation to different social-economic realities (Berberich et al., 2013). Affects are deeply political, 'infused with power, grounded in place and located bodies' (Davidson et al., 2011: 5). As such, affective landscapes 'consider space and place beyond their material properties', including the emotional (2011: 6). CSS has focused on how affect influences processes of securitization – 'securing liberal life' (Anderson and Adey, 2011: 1107) – often focusing on the war on terror, and how feelings of fear, anxiety and alertness influence societies and politics (de Goede, 2008). In contrast, political ecology rarely explicitly links affect and the need to secure liberal life (cf. Büscher, 2016; Trogisch, 2021). This article joins these fields by analysing how eco-war tourism presents itself as a way to save imperilled nature and, in doing so, shapes and is shaped by affective geographies of violence, suffering and danger.

Imaginative and affective geographies are partly (re-)produced through the 'conservation spectacle', multi-media marketing productions that 'become their own evidence, continuously referring back to themselves in affirmation of the realness of the worlds(s) that they show their viewers' (Igoe, 2010: 389). In the case of Virunga National Park, extensive media and fundraising campaigns have contributed to the commodification of militarized conservation (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016). In this approach to the conservation spectacle, the audience is rather a passive consumer of multi-media productions. However, consumers construct and reproduce spectacle and interact with creators (Brockington 2008: 564). In eco-tourism, consumers become active participants in the co-constitution of narratives and images through the travel reports they publish and the photos they share online (Büscher et al., 2017). Tourists narrate their own positionality and their understandings of wildlife and 'wilderness'. Moreover, in the case of eco-war tourism, these narratives also reflect how tourists perceive (and position themselves) vis-à-vis the violent environment they are visiting. Therefore, in this article, I focus on the specific affective geographies being

(re)produced by war-gorilla tourism and how tourism is repackaged to support the park's epic struggle against poachers and rebel groups. But first, I discuss the research methodology.

Methodology

This article forms part of a larger research project on militarized conservation in eastern DRC. In total, more than 12 months of intermittent field research was conducted in and around Virunga National Park between 2015 and 2019. In this period, I witnessed the intensification of tourism in Virunga National Park, which pushed my research towards analysing how tourism was promoted, financed and made possible through a range of infrastructural and developmental interventions, financed by the European Commission and others (Marijnen, 2022a).

I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with foreign tourists I encountered during fieldwork (2015–2018). Following a purposeful sampling strategy, I approached tourists at the border between Rwanda and the DRC, on the road and in restaurants and hotels. All tourists specifically travelled to the DRC to visit the park, and most came from the US, the UK and Belgium. Additionally, I conducted 110 interviews with residents – people working in the tourism industry, park employees and people living around the park – about their experiences with tourism among other topics. I also stayed at the park headquarters in Rumangabo for a few days to make observations of tourists at the luxury Mikeno lodge. Insights and arguments based on many interviews and field observations are attributed to my fieldnotes, while direct quotes are attributed to a specific interview.

In addition to interviews, I conducted a textual analysis of online travel reports by foreign tourists and journalists, including the forum section (from 2015 to 2019) of the widely used Lonely Planet website. Texts were identified using search terms like 'Virunga', 'Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo' and 'Eastern Congo'. I also analysed social media posts on Instagram and Facebook, where tourists reported on their experiences in the park and tagged the account, or the location, of Virunga National Park. I systematically collected and analysed all the entries and identified the central themes of security, logistics, experience and excitement. Like in other research on Nature 2.0, the topics and concerns raised 'off' and 'on' line were similar and fed into one another (Büscher et al., 2017).

My own positionality is also relevant, being a white foreign tourist myself, contributing to an increasing and problematic 'research tourism industry' in eastern DRC. Although most tourists who venture in and out of Congo travel through highly secured enclaves that limit their contact with Congolese people and context, as a researcher I could access both the secured enclaves and the places beyond them. For example, during my visit to the park headquarters, where the Mikeno tourist lodge is located, I walked into the village of Rumangabo to buy some water. Soon an armed park guard was running behind me, asking why I went into the village, telling me that people normally do not leave the compound, and that 'this is not safe to do for white people'. Yet, in my experience and that of other researchers working in eastern DRC, if one establishes good relationships and bonds of trust with multiple people, it is possible to safely travel and conduct research.

It is important to underscore that the affective geographies of eco-war tourism outlined in this article do not correspond nor do justice to the lived experiences of people living in the wider Virunga area. I do not aim to negate or make these realities 'invisible' (indeed, I have focused on these realities in other publications with colleagues (Verweijen et al., 2021)). However, this article deliberately focuses on the experiences and narratives disseminated by foreign tourists visiting Virunga, how journalists report on tourism, how it is represented online and how the park management organizes tourism. The next section places present-day eco-war tourism within its historical trajectory to situate how a long history of colonialism and green militarization is perpetuated in the region.

The colonial history of gorillas, violence and tourism

[T]he natives of this region have disturbed the gorillas very little, nor have the gorillas disturbed the natives. Certain it is that the gorillas got along very well till the white men came along with guns. (Carl Akeley, to Robert Yerkes, April 31, 1922 in Jones, 2006: 332)

Europeans and Americans have been fascinated with gorillas ever since they started to hear stories about lowland gorillas in western equatorial Africa in the 16th century (Newman, 2006). While stories about the gorillas were shared by local populations for many years, white men, mainly missionaries and colonial administrators, wanted to see the animal for themselves to claim 'discovery' and produce authoritative knowledge (Haraway, 1989).

At first, gorillas were considered dangerous animals – especially inclined to harm women – that needed to be 'conquered'. This belief was exacerbated in the case of mountain gorillas, the largest of its sub-species. These stories gave impetus to a colonial hunting economy and propped up the image of the brave hunter (Newman, 2006: 45). Between 1920 and 1930, the colonial government in 'Belgian Congo' allowed Europeans and Americans to hunt at least 56 mountain gorillas (van Schuylenberg, 2006: 599). In response, Carl Ackley, an American taxidermist, set out to show the world that these giants were not as dangerous as the stories suggested. While Akeley also shot ten mountain gorillas for the American Museum of Natural History, he lobbied King Albert of Belgium to create a 'gorilla sanctuary', which led to the creation of Albert National Park (now Virunga) in 1925 (de Bont, 2017).

The 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: 330). Although the park received international praise, its implementation contributed to a hostile relationship between the park management and populations previously living in the area (Nzabandora, 2006). Van Schuylenbergh describes how, 'soon, the local Congolese population was seen as the destroyer of the "well-governed" environment under colonial power' (2009: 45). This imaginative geography of the Virunga area as 'well-governed nature' amidst unruly populations continues to be reproduced through contemporary eco-war tourism.

Albert National Park's main objective was scientific research. The park management only reluctantly accepted tourist activities in 1934 (de Bont, 2017), which were pushed by a colonial government that viewed tourism as an opportunity to spread colonial propaganda (van Schuylenberg, 2006). However, the area where the gorillas are located, currently known as the Mikeno sector, was exempted from tourism since biologists were afraid habituation would render gorillas vulnerable to poachers and diseases. From the 1960s, starting with the work of George Schaller, mountain gorilla conservation and research work was communicated to a larger audience through books and multi-media outlets. By the late 1970s, this international attention helped launch gorilla tourism.

The well-known primatologist Dian Fossey, who studied gorilla behaviour in Rwanda from 1968 to 1985, was fiercely opposed to tourism. As the director of the Kisoko research centre, she secured gorilla habitat using anti-poaching patrols to instil fear among local populations and government officials and warned them not to intervene in 'her territory' (Fossey, 1983; Weber and Vedder, 2001). Fossey's book, *Gorillas in the Mist*, and her numerous documentary features, reinforced the idea that the 'magical encounter between human and animal can only take place between white humans and gorillas. Black humans are too much of a threat' (LeBihan, 1992: 146). For example, Fossey explains that she did not allow Rwandans to be close to the gorillas while she habituated them, since poachers are also black men and gorillas should not get used to their presence (Fossey, 1983). This racist affective geography of the Virunga area was popularized through Fossey's book and its film adaptation after her death. As Shaffer notes, these images are consumed by voyeurs:

> From the film's logic, the American devotion to saving the gorillas is undone by African savagery, ineptitude, and corruption facilitated by European profiteers, and American film viewers are left to internalize and enact their commitment to gorilla conservation and sustain Fossey's work as consumer voyeurs. (2015: 317)

These colonial underpinnings of gorilla conservation in the region are actively reproduced through present-day eco-war tourism in Virunga. Contributing and witnessing militarized conservation – like Fossey's 'direct conservation' approach – is inherent to eco-war tourism. The next section outlines how violence and war collide with gorilla tourism not only in the DRC, but also in Rwanda and Uganda.

War, gorillas and tourism in the Great Lakes region

War and violence not only affect gorilla tourism in Virunga National Park but also in the Ugandan and Rwandan parks in the Greater Virunga Landscape. Parc National des Volcans (PNV) in Rwanda was closed in 1990 when the Rwandan Patriotic Army attacked a border post and began using the park as a base from which to retake control of Rwanda, a goal they achieved after the 1994 genocide (Dunn, 2009). The park was officially closed to tourists until 1999, and tourism only recovered fully in 2002. During and after the genocide, millions of mostly Hutu Rwandan refugees fled to the DRC and settled in camps near Virunga's border. People responsible for the genocide hid among the refugees to reorganize into the rebel group, Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda or FDLR. Subsequently, eastern DRC became a theatre for more than two decades of civil and regionalized war and violent conflict.

The war also affected the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda. In 1999, four Ugandans and eight tourists were killed by the FDLR from Congo. They specifically targeted US and British tourists, as these countries supported the Tutsi regime in Kigali, not the 'ethnic Hutu majority' (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The attack in Uganda was also deliberate, since the Ugandan government was also allied with Kigali at that time and treated many Hutu refugees in the area poorly (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The FDLR knew that the attack would block the Ugandan government's revenues from gorilla tourism. Hence, the rebels used the park as a theatre to communicate their political message to the outside world. In response to the killings, Ugandan president Museveni guaranteed the safety of future tourists and announced that he would permanently deploy soldiers to patrol the park, with the explicit mission of protecting foreign tourists (Dunn, 2009). Tourism was briefly halted but recovered remarkably quickly (Maekawa et al., 2013). However, the deployment of the soldiers had a negative effect on community–park relations because the security of tourists was seen as more important than that of the residents (Dunn, 2009). The symbolic and visual presence of the army contributed to the resumption of tourism. It also reproduced the foreign visitors' images of gorilla tourism: the innocent vulnerable gorilla living in a violent and hostile setting, protected only by tourism.

Tourism's economic contribution is often cited as a source of Rwanda's post-genocide recovery (Maekawa et al., 2013). Most tourism in Rwanda is based on gorillas and the genocide, both of which have dark tourism elements. Some tourists visiting the gorillas decide to stay an extra night to walk a separate trail to visit Dian Fossey's grave (she is buried next to Digit, a gorilla she studied). As Whitlock (2010) argues, violence and mourning are embedded in our iconography of Fossey. While she became a symbol for inter-species relations, this unique familiarity and closeness between humans and gorillas is 'haunted by "violent death"'. Moreover, animal and human subjects are intersubjectively constituted in the Fossey story, and both are victims of indiscriminate slaughter in

a **region** where violence and suffering drive apocalyptic fears for the degeneration of humanity' (Whitlock, 2010: 480; emphasis added). The next section explores how, in eastern Congo, tourism encounters with gorillas continue to be influenced by the proximity of violence; it remains firmly embedded in tourists' imaginative and affective geography of the wider Virunga area.

The allure of eco-war tourism: 'I felt like an eco-warrior for a day'

During the Congo wars, Virunga National Park was mostly closed to tourists. It opened for short periods in times of relative stability but mainly attracted NGO and UN staff working in Goma (Maekawa et al., 2013). Tourism officially recommenced in 2010, but international tourists only began to visit eastern DRC and Virunga in 2014 after the M23 rebel group was defeated.

Like tourists in the 1980s and 1990s who were drawn to see gorillas in Rwanda after having read Fossey's work in *National Geographic* (Shaffer, 2015), most tourists I interviewed in 2016–2018 had watched *Virunga, The Movie*, which received an Oscar nomination and is distributed by Netflix. As one journalist concludes, the film 'has become the best advertisement possible for [Vigunga chief warden Emmanuel] de Merode's great hope for the Park's future: tourism' (Squire, 2016). As de Merode explains,

> For us, tourism is fundamental. We're absolutely not going to succeed in Virunga without it. It's a funny situation, because it's a film that everyone said would deter people from coming, but in reality it's had the opposite effect. There is that segment of people who want to do something completely different that can truly be defined as an experience, where any apprehension is overruled by the level of interest. (Squire, 2016)

The movie's producer, who is also a PR manager and board member for the park, published an article in *The Guardian* to promote Virunga as a tourist attraction. After citing the prices of the park's luxury accommodation, she argues,

> It may be luxurious, but visiting Virunga will help save the gorillas, and is a statement of support for the honourable rangers who have lost many of their colleagues in recent times, fighting on the front line of conservation to protect an asset, not only for their country, but for the rest of humanity. (Natasegara, 2014)

Indeed, the tourists I interviewed believed they were helping Virunga by visiting and spending money in the park, an objective as important as actually encountering gorillas. Many tourists staying in the Mikeno lodge even hoped to catch a glimpse of de Merode, now a celebrity conservationist and a tourist attraction himself. As Brockington explains, 'the alienation from nature that characterizes capitalist urban living' contributes to 'the demand for, and construction of, celebrity conservationists' (2008: 558). This alienation from nature also inspired some tourists to 'offer their services' to the park management. Such 'services' included financial contributions, volunteering or even offering to take up arms and 'fight' for the park (Interviews with tourists and park staff 2016–2018). As one tourist recalls,

> Spending time with the rangers really motivated me to do something for the park. I nearly did not want to leave, and told them, just give me a gun and I will join you fighting these bad guys. (Interview 3)

Some tourists want to join the 'epic fight' that rangers face every day, but without assuming the rangers' tremendous physical risk. In an interview with de Merode, a journalist explains,

> Guests are invited to wholeheartedly participate in the Park's daily activities, patrolling with rangers and undertaking ecological monitoring. It's this inclusivity that de Merode believes is pivotal to Virunga's

tourism success. 'It's a bit rougher and more rustic than the equivalent you find in Rwanda or Uganda, but you don't feel like a visitor – it's the people who make it really interesting . . . It's an understanding that it really isn't just about tourism: it's about a complete landscape of activities of which tourism is one, and when you engage in that you can get involved in everything else, including conservation, social development and peace-building. It all feeds into itself.' (Squire, 2016)

The claim that tourists can join park guards during patrols is exaggerated. However, other moments of contact between park guards and tourists are possible and highly valued by tourists. The feeling of personal contact and inclusiveness makes people proud to travel to eastern DRC (interviews with tourists 2016–2018). The tourists' desires to be rangers align with voluntourism in development and humanitarian programmes and its associated 'white men's burden' (Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 327), which, in the case of eco-war tourism, is extended to regions of protracted violent conflict.

The 'inclusiveness' of eco-war tourism also reflects the commodification of militarized conservation. For example, tourists produce memorabilia reflecting their feelings of 'closeness' to the park's troubles. Alongside pictures of gorillas and the Nyiragongo volcano, tourists also take selfies and group pictures with the heavily armed park guards who accompany them. On social media, these photos are accompanied by slogans such as 'try these!'. Tourists also take photos of the military-style green park vehicles or the two remaining – but completely bullet-ridden –colonial placards reading 'Albert National Park'.

Virunga offers people a true adventure, an opportunity to experience the 'mystical' and troubled Congo. However, its location on the border with Rwanda and Uganda makes it much more accessible than other parks in the DRC, which receive almost no tourists at all (with the exception of Kahuzi-Biega in South Kivu). As one journalist asks in his travel report, 'Is this the world's most life-affirming destination?', arguing that Congo brings home that 'threat of mortality', stating that 'everything in Congo is edgy, this is part of its allure' (Calkin, 2017). Through this inclusive aspect of eco-war tourism, Virunga's complicated landscape of conflict and violence is reconfigured into a clear narrative and tourism is presented as the solution.

Tourism reproduces tourists' affective geographies of the area, its people and the gorillas. Civilized, gentle and innocent gorillas are directly juxtaposed to uncivilized people, chaos, corruption, danger and untrustworthiness in the environment (interviews with tourists 2016–2018). As one tourist recalls,

> After returning to Bukima we were transported to park HQ. Again, the road is unbelievably bad, but scenery and villages – amazing. The children were again exhausting . . . chasing our vehicle while yelling, 'give me money'. . . our driver stopped multiple times to chase them away. Sadly, I would actually consider giving some money or gifts if they were civil . . . Unfortunately, the gorillas were far more civil than most of the children. (Tourist posting on travel forum, Lonely Planet, n.d.)

Another tourist stressed that,

> These gorillas are the true victims of the war in eastern Congo. They do not deserve to live here, as people in this place will continue to fight each other and destroy the environment, for like a little bit of money? (Interview 4)

The innocent gorilla image is often accentuated by placing them against the backdrop of uncivil local populations, dangerous land, and greedy violent rebels. This also contributes to the unique character of gorilla tourism in the DRC, where the commodification of war and the gorillas are amalgamated. The commodification of Virunga as a war-zone is epitomized by a US couple's wedding photoshoot in which they asked Virunga guards to pose as rebels with their guns pointed at the

couple. The photos garnered international outcry over their use of the devastating violent conflict in eastern DRC for edgy wedding pictures.[1]

One common theme in the interviews was the bad state of the road from Goma to Virunga National Park. The difficulty of the journey was seen as something to be overcome, but that made the natural beauty of Virunga more 'rewarding'. This feeds into tourists' beliefs that they are adventurous people after having visited the park. Their narrated accounts are often self-centred, with little reflection about how rampant insecurity impacts the everyday lives of Congolese people (interviews with tourists 2016–2018). This disconnect is reinforced by the infrastructures of access, barriers and security put in place by the park management to keep tourists 'safe'.

The bunkerization of tourism

One of the main topics in travel forums, news articles and interviews with tourists is how Virunga's management ensures the safety of tourists within the volatile security situation of eastern DRC. This juxtaposition is identified in a forum post:

> Of course, the DRC is volatile, that's part of what makes it so exciting. I've been there, met the park management and have followed events closely since then. Nothing is guaranteed in the DRC, but Virunga National Park is extremely well managed and security is their #1 priority. If the security situation endangers guests, warden Emmanuel de Merode will close the park for tourists and refund all payments. (Tourist posting on travel forum, Lonely Planet, n.d.)

Indeed, the park takes the security of tourists seriously, as a single incident could paralyse the entire tourism business for years (Interview 2). To do so, the Virunga Foundation invested heavily in the securitization of transport, the tourist lodges and the visa process. Such infrastructural interventions transformed Virunga into a site of 'fortress tourism' (Trogisch and Fletcher, 2020: 352).

In 2008, de Merode was appointed as chief warden as part of an internal reorganization of the park management structure. Plans were made to reopen the park for tourists after being closed off for (official) external visitors for 15 years due to ongoing war and violent conflict. A public–private partnership, l'institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature, transferred the management of the park to the Virunga Foundation, a British-registered NGO created by de Merode. To relaunch tourist activities, the European Commission (EC) provided aid to the NGO to invest in tourist infrastructures like access to water, electricity and visas, and also financed the luxury Mikeno lodge. Moreover, the EC contributed additional paramilitary training for park guards with the explicit goal of enhancing the security of tourists (Marijnen, 2017). Paradoxically, one ranger who took part in this training later joined the M23 rebel group, which forced the park to halt its tourism activities (Interview 5). Tourism played a critical role in justifying the militarization of conservation space (Devine, 2014: 986) and legitimizing the use of development aid to finance these practices.

To enhance security, the park management actively tries to change the topographies of 'safe' and 'dangerous' places in the region. For example, they tried to convince one diplomat to change travel security warnings for Virunga, while leaving the rest of eastern DRC in a red zone (Interview 7). The park management 'strongly' advises tourists to travel directly from the Rwanda–DRC border post to the park and to book this transport directly with the park's tourism manager (Interview 1). These transports are accompanied by numerous armed park guards. This 'guaranteed' security comes at a price; roundtrip transport from Goma to Bukima (the starting point for gorilla tracking) costs 188 US dollars per person. Accommodation in Bukima and Rumangabo, the park headquarters (where Mikeno lodge is located), is only provided by the park as well. Congolese tourism operators I spoke with expressed disappointment that the park discourages visitors from extending their stays in the DRC, which would benefit Congolese businesses (Interviews 2017–2019).

The park constructed a separate road to the luxury Mikeno lodge that bypasses the village of Rumangabo (unlike the road that leads to park headquarters). People in the village considered this a deliberate move to keep tourists away from the village. However, some residents did suggest that seeing the tourists provides 'hope' for future tourism opportunities. Although residents complain that the park is not transparent about how the income generated by tourism is redistributed, people do not feel hostile towards the tourists (Interviews 2016–2019).

Logistics limit contact between the tourists and nearby populations. One man in Kibumba, where the park recently opened a new tourist lodge, criticized this bunkerization of tourists:

> Do you call those people tourists? To me they are more prisoners! They are being transported in a car by armed park guards, and they cannot even leave the car. They do not even touch Congolese soil! To me, they are prisoners. (Interview 6)

The park also arranges tourist visas for people who go for a gorilla trekking or to climb the Nyiragongo volcano. This visa is valid for two weeks and costs 105 US dollars. A one-month visa at Congolese embassies only costs 65 US dollars. The park deemed this special service necessary due to the cumbersome process to obtain a visa through the normal avenues. At first, border officials at the Goma–Giseney border post were not thrilled by this exception. However, Howard Buffet, a US multi-millionaire and long-term supporter of the Virunga Foundation, financed a new border post between the DRC and Rwanda. Now, when entering the Congolese border office, a sign reads 'Welcome in [*sic.*] Virunga National Park'. In sum, all current logistics and future ideas are designed to limit tourists' time in the DRC but extend their time in Virunga's secured tourist enclaves. As I have described elsewhere, the park management aims to be 'a state in the state' (Marijnen, 2018: 790).

This approach is understandable considering the risks if something were to happen to a tourist. However, risk can never be completely eliminated when organizing tourism in a conflict zone. In May 2018, the FDLR attacked one of the park's convoys from Goma, killed a female park guard and kidnapped the driver and two British tourists. They were released after a few days when the park paid a steep ransom to the rebels (Interview 8). Such insecurity is regularly experienced by Congolese people living in the area: between May 2017 and 2018, 535 people were kidnapped in North and South Kivu (Sawyer, 2018). Despite the declared military 'state of siege' in North Kivu in May 2021, insecurity is reportedly increasing throughout the region.[2]

Nevertheless, before the kidnapping incident, both the park management and tourists themselves considered the park to be a 'safe zone' in a volatile area. Visitors often commented on how well the park is managed or their trust in the management's security predictions. This was presented as 'unusual' and 'unique' in Congo's 'heart of darkness' (Interviews 2016–2018). As in the colonial period, the park is seen as a 'well-governed area' in a hostile environment. Through armed transport, tourist visas and roads that bypass villages, eco-war tourism entrenches uneven topographies of dangerous and safe space.

The kidnapping of two British tourists in Virunga disturbed the carefully constructed geographies presenting Virunga as a 'safe space' and halted tourism. The incident revealed that tourism in Virunga is interlinked with local, national and regional dynamics of violent conflict, despite the park's insistence that it was immune to the deteriorating political and security situation in the country. The park management decided to temporarily close the park for tourism and restructure the park's entire security system, with the help of French and US security experts (Trogisch and Fletcher, 2020). In February 2019, the park re-opened for tourists. Surprisingly, the park quickly recovered and maintained its image as an organization that takes security seriously. Even one of the tourists who was kidnapped stated,

> . . . if anyone understands the dynamics of the area it's de Merode and I would trust him implicitly if he thinks it's safe. I feel unbelievably sad not just at what happened to us, but that when someone is trying to do something so great, this had to happen to his project. (Lamb, 2019)

However, the overall security situation in the region did not improve, and the park guards tasked with protecting tourists remain at high risk. Reportedly, tourists are now protected by 23 armed park guards when visiting the park (Lamb, 2019).

These measures, amounting to the 'bunkerization of tourism', make it difficult for tourists to engage in a meaningful way with Congolese civilians. Tourists do not venture out into the villages to talk with survivors of the multiple violent episodes of the protracted conflict in eastern Congo and are only presented with the park's narrative of and experiences during the war. Rather, the tourists staying at the Mikeno lodge visit the nearby gorilla graveyard, which centres the gorilla victims of war; the only human victims remembered are the fallen park guards. As one tourist writes after visiting Virunga, 'these gorillas were and are the forgotten refugees of both recent conflict and the perils of uncontrolled human and urban development' (Austin, 2014).

This opinion is contrary to journalists' beliefs that they must hook readers into regional conflict by including the fate of the gorillas in news reporting (cf. Whitlock, 2010). Moreover, as a Congolese argued,

> For them [white people] the park is a paradise, it is about the gorillas, but for me it is one large graveyard where many people lost their lives in the park during the wars, especially many Rwandan refugees. But their graves are not recognized. (Interview 9)

As Whitlock reiterates, 'an empathic engagement with this endangered species [the mountain gorillas] overshadows the pursuit of human rights and social justice by and on behalf of African people' (2010: 427).

It is beyond the scope of this article to address the everyday realities of people living near the park or the widespread violence impacting daily life in eastern DRC. However, it is important to underscore that the humanitarian and security situation in eastern DRC is extremely dire. Insecurity is rampant due to a continuing proliferation of armed groups and increasing banditry and kidnapping (Stearns and Vogel, 2018). Yet, the bunkerization of tourism allows visitors to gaze upon the rampant poverty, insecurity and overall 'edginess' without any meaningful interactions. The 'war' merely serves as a backdrop to make the magical human–gorilla encounter more memorable and foster feelings of pride among tourists who took 'a risk' to 'help' the park. The bunkerization of tourism, the limited possibilities for inter-cultural exchange and a partial presentation of the complex violent conflict in the area all influence the images and affective geographies that tourists co-construct during their encounter with both the mountain gorillas and with the broader political and social context. As the interviews with tourists revealed, these affective geographies are not shaped by a single visit to eastern Congo, but through various (neo-)colonial registers about the region and human–gorilla relations circulated in mainstream media and popular culture. Eco-war tourism reinforces Eurocentric and colonial ideas about who threatens and endangers the gorillas and their habitat, how they should be protected and by whom.

Concluding remarks

It is a unique experience to visit the mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park and, for some tourists, eastern DRC's political volatility makes it an alluring, edgy and extra-rewarding tourist destination. Due to widespread insecurity, few tourists would normally venture into eastern DRC, yet

Virunga offers this opportunity while ensuring a certain level of security. While the privileged bodies of tourists are secured, the proximity of violence surrounding the mountain gorillas continues to shape how foreign tourists value their encounter with the animals. This reveals strong historical continuity, from the colonial period to Dian Fossey's mission to 'save' the gorillas from their 'dangerous surroundings'.

Eco-war tourism in Virunga is produced by, and productive of, people of the Global North's affective geographies of eastern DRC. These affective geographies frame eco-war tourism as a contribution to conservation and essential to building peace in the area. Yet, this discourse relies on the spectacle of militarized conservation and adheres to a specific economy of desire, which mainly offers a sense of purpose and belonging for the tourists. For now, eco-war tourism does not contribute to conflict transformation in the region (Trogisch and Fletcher, 2020), but rather to the commodification of war. It transforms green militarization into a tourist experience.

The militarization surrounding tourism in Virunga is perhaps unavoidable in the context of eastern Congo, but is it desirable? This article does not argue against tourism in eastern DRC per se. Indeed, tourism has many positive aspects, including helping the park secure much-needed resources and giving people around the park a sign of 'hope' for the future. Yet, as it is currently organized, tourism directly contributes to the park's long history of militarized conservation, which has multiple counter-productive effects for both biodiversity and people in the area (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018).

Although tourism in Virunga may appear to be an exceptional case, and eco-war tourism may represent a relatively small tourism niche, it showcases how larger political economic structures contribute to the colonization of space. Conflict areas and war zones are rendered safe for some, while remaining dangerous for others. Eco-war tourism can also be found outside of official 'war zones'. For example, in intensely militarized areas with increasing levels of rhino or elephant poaching, tourist contributions are also framed and mobilized as contributing to a war against poaching (Massé, 2019).

This article defines eco-war tourism as a specific form of voyeuristic tourism that hinges on the amalgamated commodification of war and nature and contributes to an unequal racialized topography of safe and unsafe spaces, while presenting itself as a way to 'save nature' from its violent surroundings. Eco-war tourism brings critical security studies (CCS) literature on war-zone tourism and aligned processes of securitization and militarization into dialogue with political ecology research on green militarization. This dialogue reveals how, in the case of Virunga, eco-war tourism renders green militarization 'inclusive' for tourists, and becomes a tourist attraction in and of itself. It illustrates how different fields of security, humanitarianism, tourism, military and conservation are difficult to disentangle and ultimately reinforce one another. While CSS literature on green militarization is sparse, the phenomenon is interwoven with a range of other security interventions such as humanitarianism, tourism and military operations. All these interventions have a profound impact on nature–society relations. Further dialogue between CSS and political ecology could critically deconstruct ongoing racialized understandings of who and what is threatening nature in times of war and who is able to present itself as its saviour.

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Interview 1. Former park employee, communication by telephone, November 2017.

Interview 2. Representative park management, Goma, June 2015.

Interview 3. US tourist, Goma, January 2018.

Interview 4. British tourist, online interview, February 2018.

Interview 5. Former park guard, Goma, January 2018.

Interview 6. Farmer, Kibumba, February 2017.

Interview 7. Diplomat, Brussels, May 2017.

Interview 8. Strictly confidential interview, triangulated with other sources.

Interview 9. Congolese researcher, Goma, May 2016.

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Notes

1. www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosebuchanan/instagram-wedding-congo-photos (last accessed 24 September 2021).
2. For the latest updates and statistics about insecurity in eastern DRC visit, https://kivusecurity.org.

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