

WWF urges DRC not to change Virunga park boundaries

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A mountain gorilla from the Kabirizi family at Virunga National Park waits for the rain to stop, April 7, 2011

Conservation group WWF on Wednesday urged the Democratic Republic of Congo to "drop any plans" of modifying the boundaries of Virunga national park—home to the mountain gorilla—for oil exploration purposes.

The organization said it was "very concerned" about the Congolese government's project to exploit potential [oil](#) reserves in the park which has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1994.

In January, Congolese Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo informed international lenders that Kinshasa had not yet approved plans for [oil exploration](#) within the park, but that if such a decision was taken, it could involve a slight modification to the park's boundaries.

According to WWF, any such changes to the park situated on Lake Edward would "lead to irrevocable disastrous consequences for ecosystems and economic opportunities".

"Lake Edward, which is part of the Virunga National Park, provides a livelihood for more than 50,000 people who live on its banks, and fishing alone generates nearly \$30 million (27 million euros) per year," it said in a statement.

The Congolese premier on Friday said he wanted to come to an understanding with UNESCO to find a way to explore for oil within the perimeter of Virunga, which has already suffered from decades of armed conflict in the DRC's restive east.

Virunga national park is Africa's most biologically diverse protected area and is home to a quarter of the world's mountain gorillas.

Created in 1925 when the DRC was a Belgian colony, Virunga's vast band of natural reserve stretches for 7,800 square kilometres (3,000 square miles) astride the Congolese border with Rwanda and Uganda and includes savannas, forests, swamps and active volcanoes.

In 2010 Kinshasa had granted French oil giant Total and British group Soco permits to explore concessions along large portions of the reserve.

After strong opposition from both the local and international communities, Kinshasa suspended the permits in 2011 and Total agreed not to enter into the limits of the [park](#).

Soco did the same last June, but not until having finished a seismic study as part of an "evaluation" the government had requested to estimate the effects an oil operation would have on the environment.

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