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Grauer's Gorillas Successfully Reintroduced to the Wild

Rare Species in the Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve

Conservation of Itombwe Nature Reserve during Recent Conflict

Collective Departures in Wild Western Gorillas

BERGGORILLA & REGENWALD DIREKTHILFE

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Photos: ICCN

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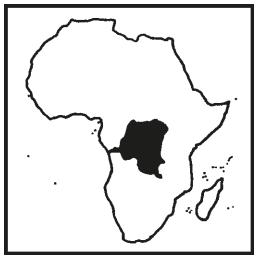

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Grauer's Gorillas Successfully Re-introduced to the Wild

For the first time, Grauer's gorillas from a sanctuary were successfully reintroduced to the wild. The gorillas, who had been rescued from illegal wildlife trade, grew up at the GRACE (Gorilla Rehabilitation and Conservation Education) Center in Kasuhgo in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. They were reintroduced to the wild in Virunga National Park, more precisely: on Mount Tshiaberimu.

These gorillas will provide a critical genetic boost to a small and isolated population of 8 gorillas living on Mt. Tshiaberimu, increasing the number of gorillas living there to 12. This translocation is the culmination of a more than five-year rewilding process led by GRACE, Virunga National Park and local communities, with support from Gorilla Doctors and Re:wild.

The gorillas arrived between 2010 and 2016 at the GRACE sanctuary, where they lived in a 39-acre facility that allowed them to forage, socialize, climb and play as they would in the wild. To find the best candidates for the reintroduction, a team from GRACE Gorillas, Virunga National Park and Gorilla Doctors evaluated all the suitable individuals and then selected Mapendo, Ndjingala, Isangi and Lulingu to rewild based on their behaviour, reproductive health and overall health. The process followed the best practice guidelines developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for the reintroduction of great apes.

Virunga National Park built a special facility for the gorillas to live in on Mt. Tshiaberimu as they transitioned to the wild. The gorillas – Isangi, Lulingu, Mapendo and Ndjingala – were airlifted from the GRACE sanctuary to the park in October 2024. They settled into the new facility on Mt. Tshiaberimu quickly – eating and sleeping normally – and their health remained stable during the move.

The four GRACE females on one side of the fence and Mwasa observes them on the other side

Photo: GRACE

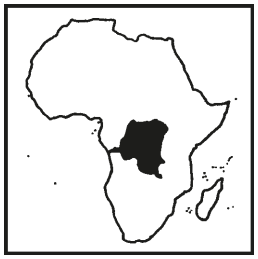
The gorilla monitoring team initially expected the transition period to take anywhere between several months to several years. Since Mt. Tshiaberimu is at a much higher elevation than the GRACE sanctuary, they were unsure how much time the gorillas would need to adjust to living in a colder climate and eating a diet consisting only of plants that grow natively on Mt. Tshiaberimu, without supplemental nutrition.

In late November 2024, the wild silverback Mwasa began visiting the four females at the fence line of the gorilla rewilding facility. He returned to the facility for several days indicating his interest in the females by beating the ground, posturing and making vocalisations, all of which are normal behaviours for a silverback. The females displayed behaviours indicating that they were equally interested in him, including staying within his line of sight, responding to his calls, and even choosing to sleep outside their indoor enclosures to be nearer to him along the fence line.

After several days of close observation, the gorilla monitoring team felt that the best decision for the gorillas was

GRACE Blog

You will learn more about the reintroduction of the females on the GRACE blog, and you can read interesting postings about many topics related to GRACE.
https://gracegorillas.org/blog/



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Silverback Mwasa with Lulingu (left) and Mapendo (right) after release
Photo: GRACE

to give them the opportunity to spend time together in the wild. On December 3, 2024 Isangi, Lulingu, Mapendo and Ndjingala voluntarily left the gorilla rewilding facility on Mt. Tshiaberimu and joined Mwasa.

Good and Sad News

In December 2024, Ndekesiri gave birth to an infant in the Katsavara group. Therefore, during that month the number of gorillas on Mt. Tshiaberimu rose to 12 individuals (from 7), since the four GRACE females and the newborn infant joined the small population.

Unfortunately, on 6 June 2025 their number was reduced to 11 because 23-year-old Mwengeshali died. The cause of her death is now being investigated. Her offspring Kavango is under the care of his/her father Mwasa, and we hope that the 3.5-year-old will survive.

All four females are exhibiting behaviours that have made the gorilla monitoring team cautiously optimistic that they are successfully acclimating to living in the wild. The gorillas have been foraging appropriately, they have improved their nest-building skills, their coats are thick and shiny, and they have large "browse bellies" (full bellies) which is a good indicator that they are healthy. Mwasa and the females have been spending much of their time together and the gorilla monitoring team has seen matings.

Approximately 400 people participated and engaged in discussions about rewilding the gorillas, more than 50 community members visited the GRACE sanctuary in Kasugho, while 20,000 people attended community-based conservation events. GRACE also trained six caregivers, including a local traditional leader, from communities around Mt. Tshiaberimu to join the gorilla monitoring team responsible for tracking the gorillas in the wild.

Summary of the joint press release of GRACE, the Virunga National Park, Gorilla Doctors, Re:wild and ICCN

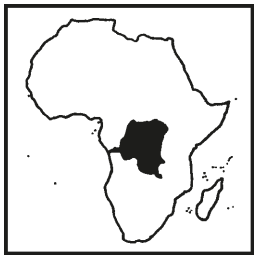
More information:
GRACE: https://gracegorillas.org/2025/05/29/rewilding-grauers-gorillas/
Re:wild: https://www.rewild.org/press/gorilla-reintroduction-drc-2025
Gorilla Doctors: https://gorilladoctors.exposure.co/guardians-of-a-new-beginning?source=share-gorilladoctors
Virunga National Park: https://virunga.org/news/eastern-lowland-gorilla-reintroduction/

Causes of Hunting of Gorillas and Other Key Species in and around the Maiko National Park

Poaching persists in the DRC's parks and nature reserves. Poaching is generally the work of renegade men in uniform. This illegal hunting threatens the survival of protected species. Due to its geographical position, the DRC has one of the richest biodiversity on the planet. The fauna includes unique and rare species such as the pygmy chimpanzee or bonobo, the lowland gorilla, the mountain gorilla, lowland and forest elephants, the northern white rhinoceros and the okapi.

Healthy ecosystems and the vital services they provide to people depend on wildlife. Managing human-wildlife conflicts is therefore essential to achieving the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, in which "humanity lives in harmony with nature and wildlife and other living species are protected".

Conflicts between humans and wildlife have serious implications for livelihoods, security and community well-being, and risk undermining conservation efforts by eroding support for protected areas, wildlife and biodiversity. Reprisals against wildlife can pose a serious threat to the survival of a species and reverse the progress made in conservation. All human-wildlife con-



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A view of the Maiko National Park

Photo: Papy Mahamudi

flicts are complex, but some are more so than others.

Indeed, the threats posed by animals to local communities living in the Maiko-Tayna Landscape are multiplying day by day, with potentially disastrous consequences for both wildlife and people.

The Maiko-Tayna Landscape is an area of pristine primary forest of great eco-systemic value to humanity. It is home to a number of rare species, including lowland gorillas, chimpanzees, red colobus monkeys, okapis, forest elephants, pangolins and Congolese peacocks. The connecting corridor between the two protected areas (Maiko and Tayna) increases the overall importance of the area for conservation, particularly for biodiversity, but also for the people who live there. Conflicts over resources and land have led people to invade and exploit the Maiko National Park, resulting in deforestation, extraction of mineral resources, poaching and illegal farming.

Description of the environment and involved conservation organisations

The area covered by this article includes the central sector of the Maiko National Park (MNP) as well as the corridors between this park and the Tayna Reserve, and between the park and the Usala Reserve.

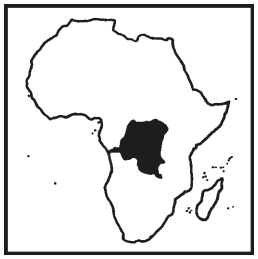
The serious situation in the area was first brought to our attention by an organisation called 'Communautés Locales Unies pour la Nature et les Développements' (CLUND), which is a community-based non-profit association. It aims to protect the forest and conserve its biodiversity, with one main objective: the development and defence of the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples who own the forests on the basis of their customs. Better-known players such as FLOWADE and the Usala Reserve have also sounded the alarm.

As with FLOWADE, CLUND's policy of working closely with local communities has enabled it to record cases of poaching of key species and of human-wildlife conflicts in the area. Despite these records, no practical measures have been put in place to prevent these conflicts and come to the aid of the victims of the destruction caused by wildlife through compensation or other support, even though the products destroyed by wildlife remain the only means and source of subsistence for local communities (Zimmermann et al. 2020).

The people expelled from the area when the MNP was created (most of them belonging to the Pygmy, Lombi and Kumu communities) have never been compensated in any way, which is the cause of numerous conflicts on the ground. From an economic point of view, the creation of the national park has caused much hardship for indigenous peoples and local communities, in particular the ordered abandonment of several villages of the Loya group in the Bakumu-d'Angumu sector – such as Batite, Bayangana, Bakwame, Banatindo and their lands – which have become part of the MNP. The people of these villages have taken refuge in the landless Usala community, where they lead an extremely precarious life, which has led them to exploit the fauna

Okapi shot dead in Magwada on 29 December 2024

Photo: CLUND/Village chief Magwada



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and flora of the park (information from Batite village chief).

Cases of poaching of key species in the area between 2023 and March 2025

- In 2023, one elephant was shot dead in Katrikwaze, Maiko-Nord, by renegade men of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC). The case was dealt with by the courts in Butembo.
- In October 2024, a gorilla was shot dead in Burondo (Papy 2024). This case was reported in our previous article (Gorilla Journal 69).
- On 29 December 2024, an okapi was shot dead by poachers in the village of Magwada in the Maiko National Park, two hours' walk from the village of Ilunga (see photo).
- Also in 2024, a male elephant and an okapi were shot dead by renegade men of the FARDC who had come from Balobe for the purpose.
- Families of elephants from the Maiko National Park returned to the area around the villages of Mandaye, Kamanya and Mabombi, but two of these elephants were shot dead in January 2025 by uniformed poachers (information from Vumilia village chief).

Measures to mitigate or eradicate conflict and poaching

- Plan and implement effective measures to protect flora and fauna through cooperation between the local communities living near the park and the park managers.
- Implement effective measures to prevent human-wildlife conflicts in the region through the mobilisation of park managers to develop an understanding of the socio-cultural reality of the communities affected by these conflicts.
- Deal immediately with issues of human-wildlife conflict to prevent these conflicts from degenerating into major rifts between park managers and local communities where professional mediation and reconciliation processes are necessary (Zimmermann et al. 2020).
- Establish sustainable forest management to ensure the viability of forest ecosystems as a whole, and at all levels, while meeting socio-economic needs for the use of various forest resources (Limoges et al. 2013).
- Draw up a programme of emergency anti-poaching measures through consultation with all stakeholders, take courageous action to defeat or negotiate the withdrawal of armed groups to enable the reopening of the patrol posts at Loya and Mandaye and the stepping up of anti-poaching patrols.
- Establish a collaborative partnership between the managers of the Maiko National Park and local partners (community-based associations) such as CLUND, FLOWADE, RGU, local communities and Tayna to help curb this worrying situation;
- Set up an environmental education programme for communities living near the MNP;
- Set up development actions with visible and rapid impacts to support the evicted communities in the central-eastern part of the Maiko National Park.

Conclusion

Several factors have contributed to the worrying situation of poaching in the Maiko-Tayna Landscape, particularly the socio-security situation, the absence of park managers in the area, human-wildlife conflict and the insensitivity of local communities to nature conservation. The solutions proposed here may go some way towards resolving this alarming situation, which is threatening the wildlife heritage of the Maiko National Park in particular, the biodiversity of the tropical forests of the Congo Basin, and the endemic species of the DRC.

Papy Mahamudi Kabaya Eustache and Claude Sikubwabo

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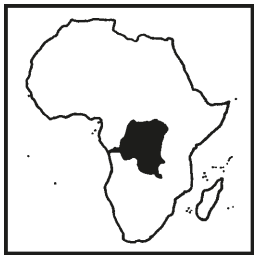
Threatened Gorillas and Other Rare Species in the Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve

Species conservation has a long history in Africa. Traditionally, many animal and plant species, and sometimes forest areas, were protected in accordance with ancestral customs or for religious reasons. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), administrative protection of nature dates back to the time of Leopold II. As early as 1889, Leopold II ordered the construction of nature reserves to prevent the destruction of certain animal species. The first national park created under colonial rule was the Virunga National Park to

Local chiefs of the Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve



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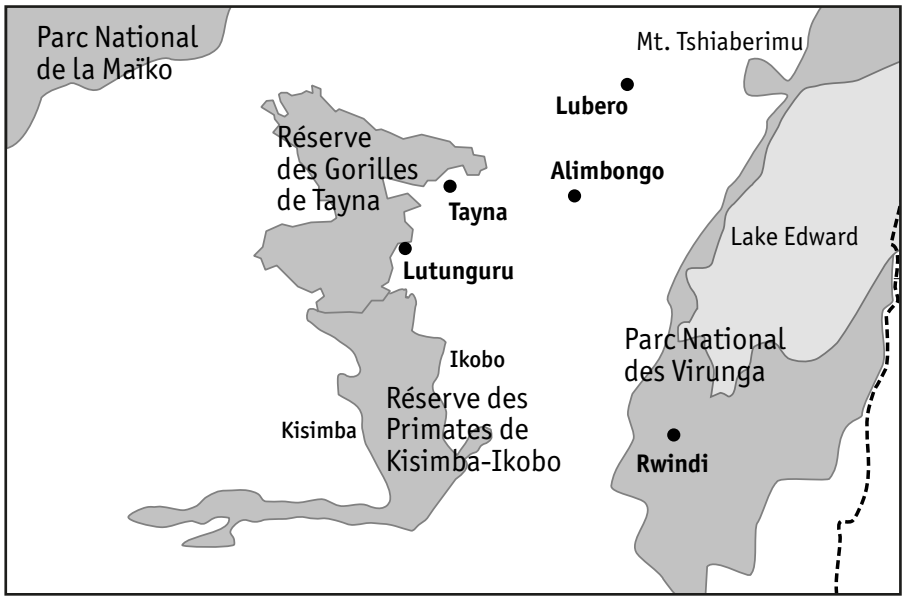


The Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve and other protected areas

Map: Angela Meder

protect the gorillas. It was followed by Garamba National Park (1938) and Upemba National Park (1939).

Biodiversity is protected by the State in accordance with the conventions to which it is a signatory, and by the international community in accordance with its mandate. Biodiversity protection in the DRC is still fragile despite the existence of support structures. Furthermore, the absence of an international biodiversity protection force makes conservation even more fragile.

Background

The 2000s were very decisive for the Government of the DRC in the fight against climate change and the protection of rare species found in various parts of the country, such as the gorilla and chimpanzee. It was in this context that the daughters and sons of the Kisimba and Ikobo communities in Walikale territory came together, with the support of the Government through the conservation authority ICCN (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature), to create the Bakumbule Primate Reserve, with its head office at Pinga/Nkasa and a representative office in Goma, North Kivu.

Four years later, the Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve (RPKI) was created, located in the Walikale territory, Wanianga sector, Kisimba and Ikobo communities, covering an area of 1,370 km^2. It is now managed by the communities alone, having been abandoned by the ICCN. The Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve, with its forest, is still intact with over 85 % of primary forest rich in faunal and floral biodiversity. This forest is teeming with a rich variety of primates, including Grauer's gorillas (or eastern lowland gorillas, *Gorilla beringei graueri*), Eastern chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*) and various monkey species.

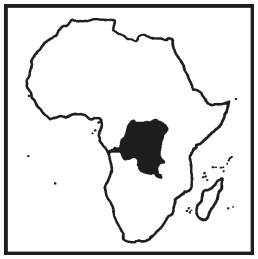
Challenges

While the historical distribution of Grauer's gorilla is fairly well documented, its current conservation status remains unclear. The high level of insecurity and the isolation of certain regions over the last decade have prevented the launch of an extensive coordinated effort to assess their status, although preliminary work has been carried out in some places. Several previously unconfirmed subpopulations have been documented in Tayna (Mehlman 2008), south of Maiko (Nixon et al. 2006), Usala (Nixon et al. 2007), Walikale (J. C. Kyungu pers. comm.) and Itombwe (WCS, unpublished data). Several gorilla and chimpanzee conservation initiatives are focused both on sanctuaries and on areas where large numbers of gorillas and chimpanzees are found.

The Kisimba-Ikobo Primate Reserve has been going through a very difficult time since Conservation International, with Disney funding, left around 2014, without any training in governance, financial management or fundraising having been given to the manager of the reserve, which is handicapping management.

The RPKI had 845 gorillas according to the latest inventory in 2015 (Plumptre et al. 2015). The community rangers responsible for protecting biodiversity in the reserve work as volunteers, facing difficulties such as a lack of funding for monitoring, a lack of working equipment, a lack of team mobility, the absence of viable ranger stations, etc. Thus, the securement and viability of the reserve remains uncertain for socio-cultural, commercial and customary conflict reasons.

Today, certain financed local organisations are sabotaging the work and actions of the RPKI, mobilising the local population to exploit the reserve through the creation of Local Community Forest Concessions (CFCL) within a protected area officially recognised by the Congolese Government. This is documented in letters of 29 December 2024 signed by the site chief and customary chiefs who are landowners, addressed to the North Kivu provincial authority.



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This issue is currently threatening the survival of the gorillas in the area, and several cases of poaching and illegal logging have been reported. Cases recorded include the killing of a silverback gorilla on Mwehu hill by unidentified poachers, and the killing of chimpanzees in Kahuwe, Kampongo and Tuwa/Ihabura by poachers (according to Community Rangers). Gorilla habitat is being ravaged by loggers in the villages of Pety, Kiriba, Mpombi and Kakanga (Service de l'Entité D Décentralisée poste Kisimba et poste Ikobo). Our investigations are continuing to document the facts and identify the perpetrators.

The Community Rangers confiscated several species of wildlife from poachers (six pangolins, four monkeys, one duiker and one hornbill). With the war raging in North Kivu, there is a risk of losing these animals, which are kept on a small island now threatened by flooding from the river Mwesso.

Due to a lack of funds, the surveying the area was not feasible and biodiversity monitoring activities were halted in June 2014. As a result, only members of the local communities, i.e. landowners with no resources, are carrying out conservation actions in the area.

RPKI needs technical and financial support to train its managers and leaders in governance and fundraising. It is also important to carry out a biodiversity inventory and bio-monitoring activities to establish the current status and update the distribution of certain key species, and to raise awareness of biodiversity conservation. In order to maintain the support of the population, development actions with rapid and visible impacts in support of the communities bordering the RPKI are necessary.

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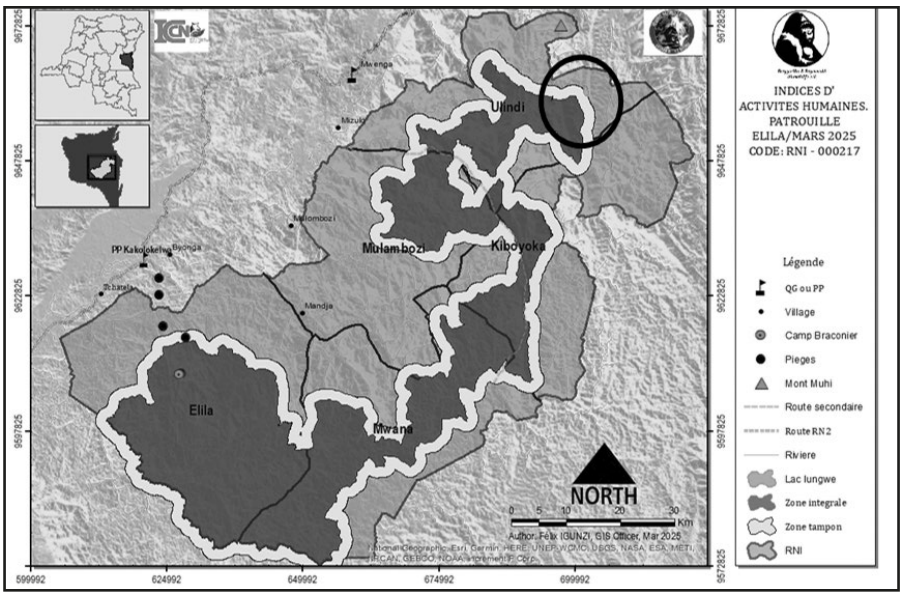
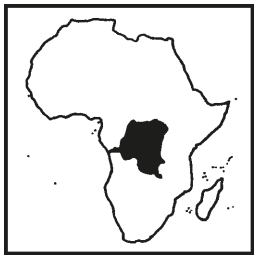
Conservation of Itombwe Nature Reserve during Recent Conflict

The Itombwe Nature Reserve is an IUCN Category VI Protected Area. It is 5732 km^2 in size, and one of Africa's most important sites for biodiversity, especially in the Albertine Rift area (Doumenge & Schilter 1997; Hart et al. 1999, Plumptre et al. 2007; Greenbaum & Chifundera 2012). The Itombwe Nature Reserve is one of ten priority sites for biodiversity conservation in the Albertine Rift region, including: in Uganda Semliki National Park, Kibale National Park, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Queen Elizabeth National Park; in Burundi Kibira National Park; in Rwanda Nyungwe National Park; in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Virunga National Park, Sarambwe Na-



Map of the Itombwe Reserve. The circle marks the area where the AFC/ M23 rebels chased away the Wazalendo and settled in March.

Map: ICCN/RNI



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ture Reserve, and Kahuzi-Biega National Park.

To ensure long-term protection of its biodiversity, it is crucial to strengthen conservation efforts in this zone.

Security status and conservation

Security status in and around the reserve: the Itombwe Nature Reserve and neighbouring territories (Mwenga, Uvira, Fizi and Shabunda) are not yet occupied by the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC/M23) rebels. These areas remain under the control of the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), the Wazalendo (patriots), and the Burundian military, all currently within the boundaries of the reserve on the side of the Bavira and Bafuliru chiefdoms (Uvira Territory).

For the rebels, the territories around the Itombwe Nature Reserve are very important due to their strategic positions, their natural resources, and access to Tanzania and other provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (e.g., Tanganyika, Katanga, Maniema). For these reasons, the AFC/M23 rebel forces are aiming to expand their control over these territories. To prevent the rebel forces from seizing these areas, various Wazalendo (patriot) groups have formed a coalition. Despite these efforts, on 11th March 2025, rebels from the AFC/M23 by-passed the coalition groups and settled at the perimeter of the Itombwe Nature Reserve, in the Ulindi sector, next to Lake Lungwe, located in the multi-purpose zone.

In an attempt to dislodge the AFC/M23 rebels from the Itombwe Nature Reserve, the FARDC and the Wazalendo groups set up a cantonment in the Mulambozi sector at Kalundu patrol post, as a support base for operations, which they occupied for three days, from 12th to 14th of March 2025.

Currently several clashes are taking place between Wazalendo and FARDC and the AFC/M23 rebels in nearby territories, not bordering the Itombwe Nature Reserve (i.e., Kalehe, Kabare, Walungu). Clashes have also occurred between allies of the AFC/M23 (rebels from Rwanda: Twirwaneho forces, Rwandan Banyamulenge, and Burundi: RED Tabara) and the Wazalendo in the territories of FIZI (locality of Rugezi/Minembwe), Uvira (Chefferie de Bafuliru in the locality of Mulenga) and Mwenga in the Itombwe sector (locality of Kawera). These areas are located at distances of 30 to 80 km from the borders of the Itombwe Nature Reserve.

Itombwe Nature Reserve conservation

Despite the volatile security situation, Itombwe Nature Reserve has organised conservation monitoring patrols in the Mulambozi sector (in January 2025) and the Elila sector (in February and March 2025). Over a 39-day period, a total of five camping patrols and a one day patrol were conducted and covered an area of 322 km^2 (11.27 % of the coverage rate).

The presence of rebels and military operations near the Itombwe Nature Reserve has led to fear among the local communities near Mulambozi and the Kalundu guard post, especially after the park guards left for safer areas. The current security situation in the Itombwe Nature Reserve is now calmer, and AFC/M23 rebels have not yet advanced into our work areas.

However, during the occupation of the eco-guards' post in Kalundu, the Itombwe Nature Reserve team had various items stolen by fleeing soldiers, including a motorbike, a 100-watt battery, a solar panel, a GPS, two 4-person tents, seven sleeping bags, three backpacks, two thermarest sleeping mats, seven torches, two tarpaulins, a digital camera and a patrol ration.

Our team is grateful for the following:

– they were able to return to the Kalundu patrol post after its liberation from FARDC soldiers and Wazalendo who were in transit;
– the re-occupation of the patrol post by the eco-guards;
– the resumption of activities in the reserve (organisation of surveillance patrols, conservation monitoring, sensitisation, …);
– the return of community members to their respective villages.

Difficulties

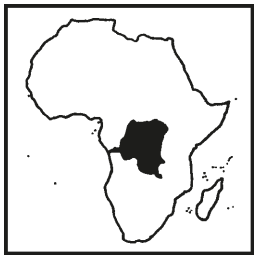
Following this war of the AFC/M23 several serious and traumatic consequences have been noted, namely:

– data collection equipment, camp equipment, rations were stolen;
– upon returning from patrols, eco-guards experienced psychological trauma/torture inflicted by FARDC soldiers fleeing from AFC/M23 rebels;
– local communities were harrassed by some Wazalendo;
– populations were displaced to Mwenga centre, with some people still not able to return to their homes;
– technical and financial partners' offices had to close; and
– Itombwe Nature Reserve conservation activities suffered a lack of support.

Suggestion for strengthening sustainable conservation in Itombwe

There have already been numerous conservation threats to Itombwe Nature Reserve, such as poaching, mining, logging, charcoal making, and deforestation. Now there are additional threats as a result of the AFC/M23 war and its consequences. For this reason, we are asking our technical and financial partners, as well as other donors, for their support to:

– organise biomonitoring activities of great apes (*Gorilla beringei graueri* and *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*) in Itombwe Nature Reserve,



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– acquire new materials and equipment for data collection on site,
– strengthen resilience of neighbouring communities by promoting income generating activities as an alternative for the use of natural resources of Itombwe Nature Reserve.

In conclusion, the security situation in Itombwe Nature Reserve is improving due to several factors: relocation of armed groups out of the reserve, control of the Mwenga zone by the FARDC and the Wazalendo, and the involvement of neighbouring communities in the reserve's conservation efforts as a result of dialogue with local leaders and community patrols.

Séguin Caziga Bisuro and Claude Sikubwabo Kiyengo

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Artisanal Mining and Deforestation in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) lies the Congo Basin, the second largest rainforest in the world. The DRC is particularly rich in valuable minerals, especially tantalum and tungsten, both critical in the manufacture of components for electronic devices. Tin and gold are also present. The minerals are mainly extracted using artisanal and small-scale mining, which is a critical source of income for local people. Newly discovered mineral deposits in forests lead to deforestation through mining activities. Expansion of farmland and settlements to provide food and shelter to the miners and their families causes further deforestation.

Using a difference-in-differences model, researchers from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, the Centre for International Forestry Research, Wageningen University and the Centre de Coopération International en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement, Montpellier, investigated the impact of artisanal mining on deforestation dynamics in the eastern provinces of DRC. The researchers analysed land use data between 2001 and 2020 and identified 255 forest-located artisanal mines.

The study showed that artisanal mining triggers deforestation within an area of at least 5 km from the actual mining sites. Within 10 years, every hectare of forest loss due to mining caused deforestation of additional 28.4 ha for other land uses, of which 21.8 ha are associated with agriculture and 4.73 ha with settlement expansion.

The researchers further tested several predisposing factors that activate deforestation. They found a positive effect of accessibility, agricultural suitability and river proximity on deforestation rate. Furthermore, they showed a positive relationship between deforestation and conflict events. The density of the initial forest cover also influenced deforestation. Mining sites in areas with low forest cover suffered higher forest loss due to settlement expansion, whereas areas with high forest cover experienced higher forest loss due to agriculture.

In line with previous studies, this study found a positive relationship between deforestation and accessibility as well as agricultural suitability of the area cleared. However, the researchers also showed that deforestation can be triggered in dense forest areas away from pre-existing settlements. Thus, artisanal mining can contribute to the fragmentation of previously undisturbed forest areas. This impacts on the integrity of ecosystems and biodiversity in an area known for its richness in endemic and endangered species, such as Grauer's gorilla.

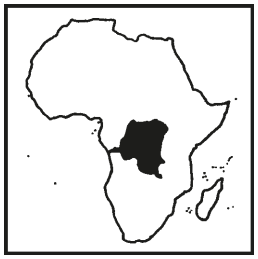
Artisanal mining makes a significant contribution to securing rural livelihoods and reducing poverty throughout sub-Saharan Africa. As long as alternative income possibilities are absent and the global demand for these critical minerals persist, artisanal mining will continue to be a critical source of income for local people. The researchers emphasize that both short-term and long-term strategies need to be developed and implemented to secure rural livelihoods in order to conserve the planet's second-largest rainforest.

Original publication

Ladewig, M., Angelsen, A., Masolele, R. N. & Chervier, C. (2024): Deforestation triggered by artisanal mining in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nature Sustainability 7, 1452–1460

Armed Conflict Menaces Gorilla Habitat in Eastern DRC

In January 2025, the M23, a Congolese rebel group backed by Rwanda, took control of the city of Goma. It then went on to seize large portions of territory in South Kivu Province. The militia, founded in 2012, resurfaced late 2021 in North Kivu Province, where it long remained in hiding amidst the dense forests of Virunga National Park's (VNP) mountains. Over the last four years, the renewed conflict has not only unleashed a humanitarian disaster; it is also driving significant environmental



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destruction on protected areas across North and South Kivu.

In this contribution, we outline some of the key environmental consequences of the crisis, in particular on gorillas, and examine how various armed groups have contributed to environmental destruction. We also explore ways forward to mitigate the damage and improve the situation.

An environmental and human tragedy unfolds

The resurgence of M23 has driven over 800,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) to seek refuge in and around Goma, with a dramatic humanitarian crisis unfolding. This massive displacement also led to rapid tree cover loss in the Southern Sector of Virunga National Park, where many IDPs have been left with little or no choice to collect firewood and timber in order to meet their livelihood needs, despite the major risks involved. Our analysis reveals a tree cover loss of 1,222 hectares in this area for 2023 alone (compared to a yearly average of 571 ha between 2019 and 2022).

Virunga has historically served as a charcoal production hotspot to meet the ever-growing energy needs of Goma's two million inhabitants. For many years, the 'makala' (the Swahili name for charcoal) from VNP also supplied the city of Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu. This started to change in late 2022, as M23 extended its presence across the park's southern sector – its main charcoal production zone. Producing and transporting charcoal from VNP became extremely challenging, leading suppliers to reinvent their supply chains. The influx of IDPs in Goma and increased demand for cooking fuels also caused charcoal prices to soar. As a result, in early 2023, charcoal production in the highland sector of neighbouring Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP) took off, following the construction of two informal ports on the southern shores of Lake Kivu. At this point, makala from Kahuzi-Biega started to feed both Bukavu and Goma. Our analysis shows a tree cover loss of 1171 ha in 2023, almost a nine-fold increase compared to 2022 (131 ha).

The impact of the crisis on gorilla conservation

In both parks, which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the presence of the rebels tremendously complicates law enforcement and wildlife monitoring. Eco-guards are unable to carry out patrols in M23-occupied areas. This makes it difficult to assess the impacts of the conflict on mammal populations, including two gorilla subspecies. Virunga is home to one-third of the last mountain gorillas remaining in the wild, while Kahuzi-Biega is a critical sanctuary for eastern lowland gorillas. The most recent episode of the conflict threatens to undo decades of conservation efforts, in particular for the latter species.

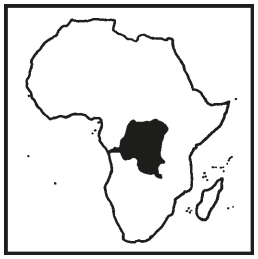
In Virunga, the endangered mountain gorillas, while few in number (1063 individuals), have benefitted from massive international attention and intensive conservation efforts over the last decade and maintained a relatively stable population. In contrast, eastern lowland gorillas count more individuals: the most recent survey suggests the population is just under 7,000. Yet, they are experiencing a far more rapid population decline, as highlighted by their critically endangered status on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List.

The latter species can be found in the highland sector of KBNP, an area largely isolated from the rest of the park and currently facing a wave of massive exploitation. As the frontline advances, the gorillas' habitat is shrinking rapidly. This highlights the growing threat for one of the world's most endangered primates, and the relative powerlessness of park authorities and eco-guards in a setting where the state's monopoly of violence has completely broken down.

The role of armed actors in the destruction

Our research shows that armed actors are central to environmental changes taking place in the region. M23 has had a significant and deleterious impact on tree cover in the park – both by driving refugee displacements and through its involvement with the illegal timber trade. Yet, this is just one part of the story: when it seized control of the majority of the Southern sector of Virunga late 2022, M23 enforced a strict ban on charcoal production, under environmental pretenses. The group claims it is protecting the park from exploitation by rival armed groups.

While this might appear surprising upon first inspection, there are actually strong incentives for M23 to support conservation efforts in VNP, at least discursively. First, the group aims to present itself as a credible source of authority and 'good governance'. Given Virunga's high international profile, being associated with the destruction of such a renowned protected area could seriously damage its reputation. Moreover, Rwanda, M23's main support, is heavily dependent on its tourism industry. Gorilla trekking in Volcanoes National Park, which borders Virunga, is a major contributor of this industry. Failing to protect the mountain gorilla populations that freely circulate across both parks could jeopardize Rwanda's economy and reputation. Lastly, Virunga provides important public services such as electricity, through its subsidiary company Virunga Energies, and water. As M23 attempts to setup a viable administration, it will need a strong public support base, which necessitates the provision of public services to the population. The result is that M23's strategic interests coincide with those of Virunga, in some ways.



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In South Kivu, Kahuzi-Biega finds itself in a more fragile position. The park is currently at the heart of crossfires between M23 troops and government soldiers which fight alongside the Wazalendo (Swahili for patriot) militia. While armed groups have long been involved in resource exploitation in KBNP, the arrival of M23 in the region led to a massive increase in exploitation. Armed actors on both sides of the conflict benefit from this exploitation, mainly by taxing trade routes. The production of makala soared to such an extent in the first half of 2025 that charcoal prices were slashed by up to 50 % in Bukavu markets – according to our local sources. This can be explained two-fold. First, M23 confiscated the eco-guards' weapons upon arriving at the park headquarters. This has made it impossible for the guards to prevent and sanction illegal charcoal exploitation within the park. Second, much of the park's highland sector remains highly contested, frequently changing hands between M23 and pro-Kinshasa militias. It is therefore difficult to attribute the destruction of any zone of the park to any specific actor – including M23. Coupled with the fact the park is less well-known than Virunga, this reduces the incentive for M23 to prioritize its protection.

What can be done to improve the situation?

While there are no easy answers, there are some avenues to improve the situation. First of all, we believe park authorities and their international partners ultimately need to negotiate with the various armed actors involved in and/or enabling and profiting from the destruction. This will be no simple task. Yet, there are some encouraging precedents: during the Congo Wars of the early 1990s and 2000s, the authorities of Kahuzi-Biega National Park were able to, at points, negotiate with different belligerent parties to protect gorillas. Such a strategy could once again help conservation law enforcement resume as soon as the security context allows.

And indeed there are some promising signs that dialogue with M23 could be possible. As discussed, the group imposed a charcoal production ban in Virunga in late 2022. More recently, on June 4th, 2025, the new governor of South Kivu appointed by M23 issued a press release strictly banning the trade of bushmeat, charcoal, timber or any product originating from KBNP. It remains to be seen whether this actually translates into action. As seen in Virunga, M23 is no stranger to double standards, often making public commitments that it then fails to uphold. Nevertheless, the rhetorical commitment to conservation is a step in the right direction.

Second, credible alternatives to charcoal, both as a cooking fuel and an economic activity, must be provided at scale to reduce the incentives to exploit the park. In this sense, Virunga's conservation model is an encouraging example of how local economic development can contribute to environmental protection. Virunga Energies was established in 2013 to meet local energy needs and stimulate economic activity. It currently supplies up to 80 % of Goma's customers thanks to three hydro-electric plants. The profits contribute to Virunga's conservation activities, while reducing neighbouring communities' dependency on park exploitation and other illicit activities for income generation. Alongside job creation, Virunga is also paving the way for a transition to cleaner cooking fuels. In 2022, Virunga Energies distributed over 1,000 Electric Pressure Cookers which helped beneficiaries reduce their charcoal consumption by up to 35 %.

Third, delivering such projects at scale demands significant investment. Additional funding will be needed to rehabilitate the areas of Virunga and Kahuzi-Biega that have been destroyed since the conflict started. The dismantling of USAID and development aid funding cuts in various European countries have no doubt made this more difficult. Virunga and Kahuzi-Biega National Parks have themselves received significant funding from USAID at points. Filling the gap left by the Americans will require significant alternative funding to be sourced. But more money alone will not suffice.

The proposals we highlight above can go some way to slowing, and ultimately halting, the destruction of the flora and fauna in eastern DRC's protected areas. However, as long as the conflict rages, progress will likely remain elusive. Peace in eastern DRC should be seen to be as critical for the protection of the environment as it is for the well-being of its people.

Lara Collart and
Fergus O'Leary Simpson

Original publication:

Simpson, F. O., Collart, L & Masselink, J. (2025) The environmental toll of the M23 conflict in eastern DRC (Analysis). Mongabay, 7 March 2025. https://news.mongabay.com

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RWANDA

Gorilla Doctors First Snare Rescue of 2025

(Reprinted with permission from Gorilla Doctors)

At Gorilla Doctors we are on call 24/7, ready to respond to a gorilla health emergency, rain or shine. On this particular Sunday, January 19, we received an urgent call from Volcanoes National Park trackers who discovered an infant mountain gorilla caught in a snare. Dr. Adrien Emile Ntweri and I raced into the forest and up the mountain to an elevation of more than 8,500 ft (~2,600 m). The infant's family, Hirwa group, had moved nearly 1,000 ft (~300 m) away and the infant was languishing in the snare, cold and exhausted.

Using nose print ID cards, trackers identified the infant – Intare (name translating into "Lion"), the 3.5-year-old male infant of adult female Umuteguro. We immediately anesthetized Intare and got to work removing the rope snare from his left ankle. He had also suffered serious injuries to both arms, likely from his family attempting to free him from the snare. We cleaned the wounds and applied topical antibiotic ointment. We also administered antibiotics, pain medication, and vitamins.

Drs. Gaspard and Adrien race to treat Intare in the pouring rain. January 19, 2025

Photo: Gorilla Doctors

It was cold and there was a heavy rainfall, increasing the urgency with which we worked. When a gorilla is anesthetized, we must be very sensitive to decreasing body temperature, so we work quickly, and reverse the anesthesia as soon as we are done with procedures. In this case, because Intare's family had moved away, we had to keep him anesthetized while transporting him back to his family.

Once we were close to the group, while he was still in the stretcher we reversed the anesthesia. Intare woke up, cried out for his family and all the gorillas came running. While they watched him with interest, no gorilla – including his mother – was willing to touch him or pick him up until he moved off the stretcher.

The gorillas of Hirwa group curious but wary of Intare on the stretcher. January 19, 2025

Photo: Gorilla Doctors

It took about 10 minutes but then his mother carried him away and the entire group disappeared into the vegetation. While we were packing up the medical kit, the group started screaming aggressively for a prolonged period. Instantly worried about Intare, we rushed back to the group. The drama for Hirwa group wasn't over yet!

Intruder alert!

The group was fighting with a lone silverback and they were succeeding: in the short time it took us to locate the group, the lone silverback had sustained several wounds. To our great relief, Umuteguro and Intare were away from the fighting, with Intare looking quite relaxed while sitting with his mother and occasionally breastfeeding.

Intare showing visual signs of pain during follow up monitoring visit, January 21, 2025

Photo: Gorilla Doctors

Intare recovering

Given the seriousness of Intare's injuries, I conducted a follow-up monitoring visit on 21 January. While he was more alert than the day of the snare rescue and his wounds were visually clean, it was clear that he was in pain and his movement was affected by his injuries.

Intare was able to ride on his mother's back, using all but his left foot to grip. January 21, 2025

Photo: Gorilla Doctors

He remained close to either his mother or the silverback during my observation. As you can see from the above image, he is able to hold on while riding his mother's back but not yet able to grip with his left foot. In a video captured by park trackers on January 23, I was happy to see Intare making good progress. We are always grateful to our park partners who serve as our eyes and ears on the days between our visits.

We will continue keeping a very close eye on Intare over the coming days and weeks to ensure a full recovery.

Gaspard Nzayisenga

This article was first published on January 24th, 2025 in the Gorilla Doctors Blog (https://www.gorilladoctors.org/updates/).

Collective Departures in Wild Western Gorillas

For group-living animals, staying together is vital for survival. If members cannot agree on when or where to move the group may split, putting individuals at risk. To prevent this, group members typically reach a consensus before setting off. However, the process and the participants involved in these decisions vary across species.

We wanted to understand how such coordination unfolds in a highly intelligent species. Our focus was on wild western gorillas, one of our closest relatives. These gorillas live in stable family groups, usually led by a dominant silverback male and composed of several adult females and their offspring. Silverbacks are about twice the size of females and provide protection, leading to the assumption – supported by previous observations on mountain gorillas – that males dominate group decisions, particularly when it comes to initiating movement.

We revisited this assumption in western gorillas, a species more reliant on fruit than their mountain-dwelling relatives. Because fruit sources are patchy and variable, locating them requires considerable ecological knowledge. To explore how travel decisions are made, we studied three habituated groups in the Dzanga-Sangha Protected Areas, managed collaboratively by the government of the Central African Republic and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Our research revealed that travel decisions were typically made collectively, with most or all adult group members participating. These decisions involved coordinating both the timing and direction of movement. Grunt-like vocalisations played a crucial role in the process. We found that while high-ranking individuals – regardless of sex – had more influence over the direction of travel, the timing of departures was shaped by any individual who signalled their intent using vocal cues.

Despite the significant size difference between males and females, our findings show that western gorillas use a consensus-based process to decide when and where to travel.

Lara Nellissen, Terence Fuh, Klaus Zuberbühler and Shelly Masi

Original publication

Nellissen, L., Fuh, T., Zuberbühler, K. & Masi, S. (2024): Vocal consensus building for collective departures in wild western gorillas. Proceedings of the Royal Society B 291: 20240597

A resting silverback with a female

Photo: Lara Nellissen

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Penalties	730.00 euro
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Expenses in 2024	
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Currency differences	28.99 euro
Gorilla Journal	2,205.28 euro
Website	510.00 euro
Items for sale	90.70 euro
Postage	2,844.22 euro
Pay/top-ups	14,000.00 euro
Sarambwe	
Support of trackers, kitchen personnel, supplies, medical care	32,300.00 euro
Equipment	3,297.00 euro
Border demarcation	6,502.50 euro
Rotating goats, sheep	3,000.00 euro
Bee keeping	3,266.00 euro
Mt. Tshiaberimu	
Tracker top-ups	14,900.00 euro
Equipment	150.00 euro
Motorcycle	2,500.00 euro
Water supply villages	2,500.00 euro
Water supply schools	1,990.00 euro
New school building	3,012.50 euro
Itombwe	
Ranger top-ups, food for patrols, medical care	30,399.89 euro
Office rent	3,000.00 euro
CoCoSi	2,000.00 euro
Maiko	
Ranger top-ups and medical care	25,900.00 euro
Bwindi	
Tree network	9,300.00 euro
BACEP	19,100.00 euro
Virunga Conservation Area	
Gorilla Doctors	3,000.00 euro
Total	***189,189.73 euro***

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Two examples for activities that supported our work