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# The 'green militarisation' of development aid: the European Commission and the Virunga National Park, DR Congo

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## ABSTRACT

To 'save' the Virunga National Park, located in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the European Commission (EC) allocates development aid to the paramilitary training of the park guards, their salaries, and mixed patrols of the guards together with the Congolese army. Moreover, the 'development' projects the EC supports around the park have militarising effects as they are based on a soft counter-insurgency approach to conservation and to address dynamics of violent conflict. This amounts to the 'green militarisation' of development aid. This article describes how a personalised network of policymakers within the EC renders militarised conservation-related violence and controversy around the Virunga park invisible, by framing contestations and violence in and around the park as solely caused by economic factors and motivations. Moreover, by 'hiding' the fact that the EC aid is used to fund armed conservation practices, policymakers circumvent political debate about the use of development funds for (para)military expenditures. While the existing literature focuses on the importance of securitised discourses to explain the militarisation of conservation, this article indicates that in addition, it is important to focus on these more mundane practices of securitisation within international organisations that ultimately fund the militarisation of conservation.

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## Introduction

The Congo Basin is, after the Amazon, the most vital forested area on our planet, spanning several countries located in Central Africa. For the European Commission (EC) the Congo Basin forms a main priority in its quest to protect biodiversity and it is therefore one of the largest providers of development funds designated to nature conservation in Central Africa. It is difficult to gain a comprehensive overview of all the aid the EC has allocated to biodiversity protection to specific protected areas in Central Africa as it through different financial instruments. For example, the regional ECOFAC (*Conservation et Utilisation Rationnelle des Ecosystèmes Forestiers d'Afrique Centrale*) programme alone distributed 200 million euro between 1992 and 2014 to 11 protected areas in the region. Moreover, the EC is the strategic and main financial partner of many public-private partnerships (PPPs) between international

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and respective government institutions. Examples are the Zakouma National Park in Chad, Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo. Yet, despite the significant support of the EC in Central Africa, it is a relatively invisible actor in the literature on politics of conservation, compared to other large aid donors and international conservation NGOs, which are increasingly scrutinised in debate on global environmental governance.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly in the Virunga National Park, located in the war-torn eastern region of the DRC, the EC has played an important role, estimating that between 1988 and 2015 it provided over 30 million euro in total to the park.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, the EC is the instigator and main financial supporter of the PPP between the Congolese state institution *l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN) and the Virunga Foundation, a British NGO that is now solely responsible for the management of the park. This article describes how the EC became the main institutional partner of the Virunga Foundation and how through this PPP construction it became possible for the EC to (in)directly fund militarised practices of conservation, such as the training of the paramilitary park guards, and the topping up of their salaries. Moreover, the aid is used for joint military operations of the park guards and the Congolese army, *Les Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* (FARDC). Lunstrum defines the amalgamation of these practices as 'green militarization': 'the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation'.<sup>3</sup> Other research indicates how this militarised approach to the Virunga park exacerbated instead of diminished conflict between the park and the adjacent population.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on how green militarisation is financed, this article aims to analyse how the EC managed to allocate development aid budgets to armed conservation efforts, and through which practices it was able to continue this support, despite controversies around the militarisation of development aid, and the effects of this support on dynamics of conflict.

In the existing literature on green militarisation there is an extensive focus on securitisation, specifically the use of discourses of exceptionalism and 'crisis', and more broadly how the use of violence in conservation is legitimised.<sup>5</sup> As Massé and Lunstrum argue, the 'militarization of conservation practice is driven and rationalized by discourses of war and national/regional security that transform poaching from a conservation into a security issue'.<sup>6</sup> The literature stresses that this is by no means 'new', and can be traced back to the colonial period when the first protected areas were established in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>7</sup> A significant part of this literature is grounded in the linguistic tradition and not in the so-called 'practice turn' in securitisation theory, which would provide additional insights into the more mundane practices of the securitisation of conservation issues.<sup>8</sup> I together with Judith Verweijen have argued elsewhere that also in the case of the Virunga park securitised narratives and other discursive techniques form an important element in the normalisation and legitimatisation of armed conservation efforts in eastern DRC.<sup>9</sup> Yet to understand how green militarisation is financed it is equally important to focus on everyday practices of securitisation that remain more 'invisible', such as bureaucratic procedures, and the role of experts and networks, that ultimately contribute to this militarisation. This article identifies various of these practices through which policymakers within the EC are able to circumvent political debate about the use of development aid for military purposes, and 'play' with existing ambiguities within the financial regulations of EC development funds. This offers the EC the possibility not only to finance the salaries and activities of the paramilitary park guards, but also to support

development projects around the park which, following a soft counter-insurgency logic, have a profound militarising effect on the wider Virunga area. Both ‘types’ of support constitute the green militarisation of development aid.

This article is based on multi-level field research conducted between 2013 and 2015 in and around the Virunga park and in Brussels. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with EC officials and consultants in Brussels and Goma; the respondents were selected due to their former or current involvement in EU policy towards the Virunga park. Through these interviews I was able to reconstruct the history and evolution of the relationship between the EC and the management of the Virunga Foundation. I also visited and observed numerous events about the Virunga park organised in Brussels. In addition, I conducted a textual analysis of relevant EC policy documents. Moreover, I conducted in total 245 interviews with residents, park authorities, employees of the Virunga Foundation, local environmental NGOs, administrators and politicians in 13 villages in and around the park.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the intersecting literature on green militarisation, the politics of development and securitisation is discussed. Second, I outline the history of the European Commission vis-à-vis the Virunga National Park, and how the institutional and political support of the EC contributed to the militarisation of the park management. I also discuss how a personalised network of EC policy officials renders it ‘invisible’ that EC development aid is in practice used to contribute to the militarisation of the Virunga park. Third, I identify various ‘local’ contestations concerning the way the park is managed, and how the EC reacts to and reports on these conflicts. I conclude by arguing that through these more mundane practices of securitisation policy officials within the EC are able to circumvent political debate, and strict financial regulations within the EU, about the use of development aid to fund green militarisation.

## **The politics of aid, securitisation and green militarisation**

The burgeoning literature on the effects of ‘green militarisation’ indicates that there is often a (re)production of violence in and around protected areas, while acknowledging that the use of violence and the militarisation of protected areas has been associated with nature conservation practices over a longer period of time.<sup>10</sup> Examples are violent (dis)possessions, coercive policing practices and enforcing of boundaries of protected areas, marginalisation of adjacent populations, and more symbolic forms of violence embedded in the institutions and daily practices of the management of protected areas.<sup>11</sup> It is also referred to as ‘green violence’ by Büscher and Ramutsindela: ‘the deployment of violent instruments and tactics towards the protection of nature and various ideas and aspirations related to nature conservation.’<sup>12</sup> Various studies that focused specifically on EC-supported conservation projects also indicated various instances of ‘green violence’.<sup>13</sup> While there is an increasing body of literature on conservation policymaking at multiple scales, focussing mainly on the role of the private sector and large international NGOs,<sup>14</sup> there are not many studies conducted on the bureaucracies of development aid donors, and how they understand and report on the violence generated through conservation.<sup>15</sup> Others have indicated these forms of violence often remain artificially separated from decisions made by international donor organisations supporting protected areas.<sup>16</sup> Yet the politics behind this artificial separation demands further scrutiny.

Within the existing literature on the transnational politics behind the intensification of green militarisation, the focus has been predominantly on three different aspects; first, the politics of transfrontier nature conservation that is inherently linked to ideas of national and regional security;<sup>17</sup> second, a mounting focus on the role of new media and transnational social activism, especially in relation to the 'rhino crisis', which generated popular narratives on green militarisation, especially in mainstream media outlets;<sup>18</sup> and, third, the intensification of securitised narratives promoting the militarisation of nature conservation in reaction to poaching crises, wildlife crime and 'nature under siege', and how these narratives influence NGOs and donor governments.<sup>19</sup> Yet the literature on the securitisation of conservation issues goes beyond 'green militarisation'. From the colonial era to the postcolonial, conservation-induced violence has been legitimised and normalised by colonial troops, and through declaring 'states of emergency'.<sup>20</sup> There is also a broader literature focusing on the influence of 'environmental crisis narratives' to explain the furthering of (external) protectionist measures.<sup>21</sup>

Most recently the 'terrorists-as-poachers' narrative, claiming that poaching forms a lifeline for insurgent and rebel groups, seems to propel the securitisation of conservation efforts even further.<sup>22</sup> Duffy described how this narrative emerged through a report written by Andrea Crosta of the Elephant Action League (EAL), an NGO working on combating wildlife crime, and Nir Kalron of Maisha Consulting group, an Israeli company that sells security services to wildlife departments and conservation NGOs especially in Central Africa and other difficult 'war zones'.<sup>23</sup> Yet the claims of Kalron and Crosta have repeatedly been questioned and no additional proof has surfaced since.<sup>24</sup> Duffy argues that this narrative leads to 'war, through conservation' as militarised conservation interventions overlap with American geopolitical interests in its 'war on terror'.<sup>25</sup> However, besides the USA, the EC also plays an important role in financing green militarisation in the region. It is, for example, the EC that finances the management bodies of the N'Djida National Park in Cameroon, Garamba National Park in the DRC and the government of Gabon, who all solicited the services of Maisha Consulting.

While the financial linkages are often indirect, there are direct personal linkages between the EC and Maisha Consulting. In 2015 the EU published its strategy to address wildlife crime in Africa: *Larger than Elephants*, written by a network of connected individuals who worked together intensively over many years across different protected areas. Among the contributors, both Kalron and Crosta are listed.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Kalron gave a presentation at an EC conference on wildlife crime in Africa based on the slogan 'help nature fight fire, with fire', a message that was welcomed by various EC policy officials as they associated this with the approach the EC supports in many protected areas in Central Africa. However, during interviews various EC officials argued that they pay lip service to the 'poacher-as-terrorist' narrative to gain political support internally within the EU for nature conservation, often a low political priority – especially since the Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DG DEVCO) has to collaborate with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the 'new' EU foreign affairs service, which initially was not very concerned with issues of wildlife crime. Thus, by linking the issue to security and stability concerns DEVCO officials aim to ensure internal institutional support for the practices they have been funding and supporting for many years. This underlines the importance of looking at daily practices of securitisation within bureaucratic institutions that enable the use of development to finance green militarisation,

in addition to a critical analysis of securitised narratives that are at times also employed strategically.

In a recent critique of the concept of 'green militarisation' it was argued that the existing literature does not distinguish discourses from the actual reality, and argues to analyse how much money and resources are actually deployed to a stated problem, in their case the 'Rhino crisis' in South Africa.<sup>27</sup> While it is indeed important to go beyond the militarisation 'on the ground' and to focus on the wider resources, practices and politics involved, this is not an argument against the concept of green militarisation but instead an argument to approach the concept in a way that is more context and place specific. While the concept bears clear connotations to 'the military', especially in the context of South Africa, the militarisation of conservation (similar to the militarisation of society or development, as analysed by other scholars) is about a focus on processes of militarisation that are 'constituted in large part by the activities of people in everyday settings' which 'work to make militarism a taken-for-granted, or "natural" facet of many societies'.<sup>28</sup> As Verweijen indicates, in the east of the DRC civilian space and social relations have been militarised where a whole range of different actors have incorporated further military objectives, practices and structures.<sup>29</sup> It is in this militarised context that the EC is allocating development aid to the management of the Virunga National Park; how this support contributes to the militarisation of conservation is discussed in the next part of the article. Moreover, because conservation in the DRC has been militarised since the colonial period, and the involvement of transnational actors herein has a long lineage, it is important to focus on historical continuities that influence the contemporary politics behind contemporary green militarisation.<sup>30</sup>

In this article I focus on how and why the EC continues to support green militarisation in Virunga despite the negative effects. I do this by focussing on processes of securitisation, which 'certainly bears an important relationship to militarization, but it allows for a broader range of actors and arenas, as it does not limit the scholar to exclusively consideration of the formal military institution'.<sup>31</sup> For example, while policy narratives on wildlife protection become increasingly securitised, mainly to gain political relevancy and attention at the global stage, development aid distributed to green militarisation is often purposefully kept off the political radar, as are the (violent) conflicts that such aid can exacerbate in the areas of intervention.<sup>32</sup> These everyday practices of 'hiding' also contribute to a process of securitisation that enables the green militarisation of development aid.

To analyse these more mundane securitisation practices, the methodologies advanced by the anthropology of development literature and studies of securitisation are complementary despite often focussing on distinct groups of actors, interests and institutions. Both literatures stress the need for empirical research on the transnational field of development actors or that of 'security professionals', stressing that there are complex interactions between legitimising discourses and policies and practices. As Mosse reminds us, policy discourses and political discourses of development interventions are often constructed in hindsight to represent a comprehensive account of a development project, and to offer the needed legitimacy for the continuation of already existing practices and conducted expenditures.<sup>33</sup> This especially relates to the 'practice turn' in securitisation theory that goes beyond the importance of speech acts and clearly identifiable securitising actors, which was traditionally the scope of the Copenhagen school.<sup>34</sup>

The practice turn in securitisation theory, building in part on Bourdieu's theory of practice, stresses the need to go beyond the focus on 'exceptionalist' discourses and to focus more

on everyday acts that facilitate securitisation in practice.<sup>35</sup> As Bigo stresses, certain problems can be securitised without speech or other forms of discourse, but through practical actions such as discipline and 'expertise'.<sup>36</sup> Referring to Bourdieu's notion of the 'habitus' of people, meaning their 'embodied historical experiences' that contribute to their dispositions and strategies, within a specific 'field' where power relations are hierarchised.<sup>37</sup> Léonard argues that in the case of the EU security logics are often not so much expressed in discourse, but are institutionalised in policies and seemingly technical responses due to the unique political character of the EU as a supra-national institute.<sup>38</sup> The existing literature does not give a clear definition of what securitising practices or tools are because they need to be empirically identified per field or subject through, for example, interviews with concerned experts and policymakers.<sup>39</sup> This focus on the diffuse politics, and thus going beyond the discourses in policy documents, overlaps with politics of development literature that focuses on how problems and contestations are rendered technical, or depoliticised.<sup>40</sup> Experts' play an important role in the process of depoliticisation, through producing authoritative knowledge claims, while leaving wider structures of power and inequality unaddressed.<sup>41</sup> In the following I indicate how the EC contributed to the militarisation of the Virunga park, through supporting both hard and soft counter-insurgency approaches to conservation.

### European Commission development aid and 'green militarisation' in Virunga

The EC started to support the Virunga park in 1988, but officially halted this support in 1992 due to concerns over the legitimacy of the Mobutu regime. In 1994, thousands of Rwandan refugees and people responsible for the genocide crossed into the DRC and took up residence around the borders of the park. A small group of EC officials, afraid that these pressures would destroy the park completely, arranged funding for a Belgian NGO, Nature+, to work with the Congolese state authorities and other environmental NGOs in the region. After the First (1996–1997) and Second (1998–2003) Congo Wars, which ended with the adoption of a peace accord in 2003, official development cooperation between the EC and the DRC government was resumed. The EC re-opened a field office in Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, and hired a consultant to coordinate, monitor and evaluate EC projects in the region. Until 2005 this consultant was Emmanuel de Merode, a Belgian national.

During the same period that de Merode worked for the EC, the latter started negotiations with the Congolese government and the ICCN to establish a PPP with the British NGO African Conservation Fund (ACF), which later changed its name to the Virunga Foundation. In 2005 the first PPP was signed, and was set up to manage the funds for the Virunga park, and to prepare for a 'full' PPP for 2010. The most recently negotiated PPP runs until 2040. Recalling this process, one EC official argues,

no, it was not a condition we imposed, the Congolese government was free to choose. But we said to the government, if you want us [the EC] to continue financing Virunga, we are only willing to do so when you sign a PPP with ACF.<sup>42</sup>

Concluding these negotiations in 2005, de Merode stopped working for the EC and co-founded ACF/Virunga Foundation. The NGO was registered in the UK to be eligible to receive EC development funds, which continues to be their main institutional financial supporter.<sup>43</sup> Many other international NGOs working on environmental protection in the DRC were, and continue to be, perplexed by the lack of transparency during this process, and the privileged treatment the Virunga Foundation received from the EC.<sup>44</sup> One of the first projects



financed with the EC aid was the training of a paramilitary elite anti-poaching unit executed by a private security company in 2006.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the tragic killing of seven mountain gorillas in the Virunga park in 2007 influenced the on-going negotiations for the 'full' PPP in 2010. As the director of the park at that time was allegedly implicated in the killings, this confirmed the belief of the EC that the Congolese state agency ICCN is incapable and lacks the political will to protect its wildlife. After considerable external pressure, in 2008 de Merode was appointed as the director of the park by the Congolese government and started to wear two hats, that of the ICCN director of the park, and that of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Virunga Foundation. Convinced that the law enforcement capacity of the park management needed to be enforced de Merode commenced with the 'Security Sector Reform' of the park, which was completely financed with EC development aid. About this support an EC policy document states,

In 2008, the European Union commenced a five years multi-sectoral approach *supporting ICCN, the Congolese Protected Area Authority* to address these problems ... A wide-reaching reform programme and institutional support for the Protected Area Authority to enable park rangers to more effectively protect the forest and discourage the presence of armed militias has been executed. EU funds EUR 12 millions have played a central role in *reinforcing DRC capacity to protect the Virunga forests* and supplying solutions for local communities attracting other private and institutional donors.<sup>46</sup>

However, the final PPP between the ICCN and the NGO shifted the entire responsibility for the management of the park to the Virunga Foundation, and thus does not represent an institutional reform of the ICCN in Virunga.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, the EC continued its 'general' discourse on contributing to institutional reform and capacity-building in the DRC, as the document above does not reveal that the EC does not directly support ICCN, but instead supports an NGO.

When looking more in detail at what this multi-sectoral approach entails in practice, it contains multiple actions contributing to the militarisation of the park management. First, it entails the creation of a 'new security service':

it was the EU at the basis of the creation of this new security service, they facilitated the internal reform process and the start-up of a strict command and control structure. We now have a service for security and operations; where all intelligence comes together.<sup>48</sup>

The current head of security of Virunga is not employed by the ICCN, but by the Virunga Foundation, and is a former Belgian paramilitary who presents himself in meetings with the neighbouring communities as the commandant. Second, the EC financed additional paramilitary training of park guards and provided communication equipment under the Instrument for Peace and Stability in 2009. Third, under the 10<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund (EDF) the EC donated 10 million euro, which covers around 80% of the day-to-day management costs, and is used to top up the salaries of the armed park guards with a US\$165 monthly prime, in addition to the US\$60 salary from the government. Moreover, the guards also operate in mixed brigades with the Congolese army, the FARDC under the command and control, and with logistic support, of the park management.<sup>49</sup> EC officials are aware that this might create controversy due to the controversial human rights reputation of the FARDC, but also because the financial regulations of the different development instruments and funds are rather strict about (para)military cooperation. Therefore, the EC avoids explicitly stating in public that development aid is used to pay the guards and their training; instead they frame their support in generic terms such as for building capacity. One EC official argued,



'No, no, the salaries of the guards are not paid by the EU. We pay the ACF, but it is up to them how they spend the money.'<sup>50</sup> Yet another official explained that the EC aid is indeed used to pay the guards, 'but we call them "primes" and not salaries; we do this also in other parks, we play a bit with the ambiguity in the regulations.'<sup>51</sup> Yet for some of the newly trained guards, already working for the park, the EC fee is *de facto* their salary as they are still waiting to receive salaries from Kinshasa.<sup>52</sup> Hence, through the application of seemingly broad concepts such as reinforcing capacities, and by only providing limited information, the EC managed to finance military activities, while limiting the risk of controversy. These practices, and technically naming the financial support to the paramilitary guards 'fees', are examples of the mundane practices of securitisation that enable the EC to continue its support to the Virunga Foundation.

In addition to providing direct support for (para)military park management activities, the EC also contributed to the militarisation of the park through supporting various development projects that are based on a soft counter-insurgency approach to establish a form of 'incursionary control' over neighbouring communities.<sup>53</sup> The EC describes this as 'Fuelling stability: implementing multiple strategies for forest protection in a region of armed conflict',<sup>54</sup> which includes a focus on economic development and stimulating the 'green economy'.<sup>55</sup> This economic focus stems from the fact the EC understands both the protracted violence in the east of the DRC and park-people conflict in the Virunga area from an economic perspective. Based on ideas around 'environmental security', poverty and 'greed' are seen as the main drivers of these conflicts.<sup>56</sup> To address these conflicts the EC heavily invested in the Virunga Alliance, a large-scale development vision for the Virunga area that is implemented by a consortium of public and private investors. Steered by the Virunga Foundation, and with the extensive support of Howard Buffet, a US multimillionaire, and the EC, the Virunga Alliance is planning to construct in total seven hydro-electricity plants around the borders of the park. A part of the generated electricity will be distributed to the adjacent population around the park, but the largest part will be sold to businesses and industries in the hope of generating jobs for the neighbouring population. It is believed that when these jobs are generated, people will become dependent on the park for their livelihoods, and therefore will want the park to survive. Moreover, according to the Virunga Alliance, this would stimulate the neighbouring population to distance themselves from the armed groups that are present in the park.<sup>57</sup> This security logic embedded in the development scheme of the park has a strong resonance with the EC: 'we are for 100 percent behind this vision, and behind de Merode'.<sup>58</sup> It was the EC that financed the first hydro-plant in Mutwanga as a pilot project for 1.8 million euro. Moreover, recently the EC decided to increase its aid to the Virunga Foundation from 10 million under the 10<sup>th</sup> EDF to 46.8 million to the 11<sup>th</sup> EDF. Of this, 15 million will cover a large part of the daily management costs, 12 million will go to construct additional hydropower plants, 15 million is for agriculture and forestry 'valorisation' projects around the park, and 4 million is for the oversight and implementation costs of the different separate projects.

The interlinked objectives of improving both security and economic development are also reflected in the focus of the EC to support re-launching tourism in the Virunga park. This support arises out of two axes: ensuring the security of tourists and investing in infrastructure. Under the first axis, guards were trained and their capacities reinforced to be able to assure the security of tourists visiting the park. For the second objective the EU invested in the tourist infrastructures around Rumangabo, so that tourists have access to water,

electricity and visas.<sup>59</sup> These objectives were repeated in a press release in which the EC reconfirmed its support to Virunga:

Infrastructure reconstruction and increasing security in the Virunga National Park, together with a training programme for rangers and park managers, has supported the resumption of touristic activity in the eastern part of the DRC. Tourism in the Virunga Park has produced more than US\$1 million in revenues, and has already created job opportunities and boosted economic activity.<sup>60</sup>

Improving security is framed here by the EU as a necessary precondition for tourism, which will generate revenues for the park, and contribute to local development. As other scholars have also indicated, in some (post)conflict areas tourism promotion and other forms of marketisation simultaneously intensify, and are enabled by increasing, militarisation.<sup>61</sup> Yet the increasing militarisation of the Virunga park fostered tensions between the adjacent population and park guards, and resulted in an upsurge of armed confrontations initiated by both groups.<sup>62</sup> In the following section I analyse how these incidents of violence, focussing on the contentious issue of land conflicts surrounding the park, remain (or are rendered) invisible at the EC level. This 'hiding' is realised through various practices of securitisation, which is not always done intentionally, as some of these practices have been institutionalised to a certain extent.

### The politics of (in)visibility surrounding Virunga's land conflicts

Approximately 80,000 people are believed to live within the borders of the Virunga National Park, excluding the people that daily encroach on its borders to access their fields that are located in the park. Conflicts over the park's limits have existed since the creation of the park in 1925 by the Belgian king Albert, during the colonial era. Initially the park compassed 25,000 hectares but was incrementally extended to the current 790,000 hectares, a process that faced a lot of resentment as whole villages were removed under the pretext of the sleeping sickness, without receiving sufficient compensation.<sup>63</sup> During the early days of the Mobutu regime, in the post-colonial era, the borders were respected mainly due to the strict policing approach of the park in those times.<sup>64</sup> Yet, when the economy crippled from the mid-1970s onwards, guards of the park started to get involved in illegal activities in the park in order to generate a form of income, and the population recuperated parts of the park.<sup>65</sup>

Especially in 1994, and the two decades of violent conflict that followed, the park faced tremendous pressures as refugees arriving from Rwanda were installed in camps located close to the borders of the park. Moreover, different rebel groups hold control over different areas overlapping with parts of the Virunga park. These rebel groups influenced and sometimes replaced the public administration in their zone of control, and at multiple places they officially allowed people to settle in the park. From 2008 onwards the park authorities have aimed to re-establish the rule of law in and around the park, starting to engage in various military-style operations to place populations outside of the borders of the park, and destroy houses and farms.

First, it must be stressed that problems concerning the park are also caused by wider problems of governance and on-going violent conflict in the DRC. The park management cannot be held responsible for all the challenges that Virunga is facing. Yet this highly complicated landscape makes it even more pertinent to take a conflict-sensitive approach to conservation, and it can be questioned to what extent this is currently the case, especially

vis-à-vis conflicts over the limits. According to an employee working for an international NGO in Goma, observing the conflict,

There are three different limits of the park; the ones according to the population, the legal boundaries as they are inscribed in the law and, third, the boundaries according to the park authorities, the ones they enforce. At some points these different limits overlap, but at other points they are conflicting.<sup>66</sup>

However, the park authorities refuse to sit around the table with the local customary chiefs in the area, as they are found to have no legitimacy. According to the director of the park, 'I will continue fighting the Mwamis [local chiefs] they make claims to which they are not entitled to, according to the law and we [the park] is here to implement the rule of law'.<sup>67</sup> Instead, park authorities adopt a 'top-down' approach, which consists of announcing and enforcing the borders, clearing villages and farms, and protecting the control gained over territory through the rehabilitation of patrol posts and increasing surveillance and patrols by the guards. This process is not accompanied by an extensive campaign to communicate to and with the concerned population. These observations are shared not only by the adjacent population, but also by numerous local and international environmental NGOs working in the area.<sup>68</sup>

In the central sector of the park, where the conflicts over limits are most ferocious, patrols are conducted in collaboration with the FARDC. In multiple places where people have been removed, or farms destroyed, vicious circles of conflicts have emerged as people tried to return afterwards. Yet, to return, they increasingly solicit the protection of armed groups, self-defence groups or other groups in the area, which sometimes results in lethal confrontations between park guards and armed groups.<sup>69</sup> The consequences for the guards are often devastating, and over the past two decades over 150 guards have lost their lives. The number has been sharply rising over the last few years, due to the intensified operations to retake control over territory. This creates growing resentment among the guards who regularly have to work at the 'front line'.<sup>70</sup> These confrontations also cause casualties among the civilian population; in 2013, for example two farmers were killed in Mayangoz during a patrol by two guards of the park. The guards were arrested and imprisoned, awaiting trial for over a year. The park authorities acknowledge that the guards at times make use of excessive force, but aim to reduce these incidents.<sup>71</sup> This raises the question to what extent the EC is aware of the challenges and contestations over the approach the park management has adopted to restore its control over the park.

### ***'There are no conflicts!'***

Despite much evidence to the contrary, according to an EC official contacted in Brussels, there are no conflicts over the limits of the park:

The limits of the park are clear; the local population only does not respect them. Around the Virunga park there are no conflicts over land, these local population are just manipulated and you should not talk too much with them because they will simply not tell you the truth, and will manipulate you as well.

By arguing that the land disputes are not conflicts, but that the population is just manipulated, the EC takes away any agency from the adjacent population, proclaiming there to be only 'one truth'. Yet, while EC representatives can claim that the borders are 'clear' from a legal perspective and that the Virunga Foundation has the legitimacy and right to reinforce the

borders, locally questions of legitimacy are not solely interpreted from a legalistic perspective, in light of the existing legal pluralism around access to and control over land in North Kivu, which has been aggravated by two decades of protracted conflict. Moreover, the EC neglects the historicity of the issue, which dates back to the colonial period when the park was created.<sup>72</sup>

During interviews, EC officials aimed to downplay the colonial past and were not receptive to critically reflecting on the more structural inequalities around the management of the park that remain unaddressed due to the extensive support from the EC to the transnationalisation of the park management. While locally it is seen as a continuation of the colonial past that a Belgian park director, with the support of Brussels, manages the park, during interviews the main EC official working on the park refuted this perspective as irrelevant. Instead, he argues that the current management aims to adhere to the rule of law and does the best it can due to the difficult circumstances, and therefore cannot be criticised.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, it was argued that the problems rest solely within 'the state' and the 'criminal local population'. Many of the EC officials I spoke with became illusioned with the DRC government and argue that the problems of Virunga, and the DRC at large, 'has to do with bad governance, incompetent state officials, corruption and no political will to solve the problems in the country and the park. They are basically all crooks'.<sup>74</sup> The EC engages more often in "functional pathologisation", lending credence to the need for Western intervention by painting Congolese politics as malevolent.<sup>75</sup> Not only are the government authorities criminalised, but so too is a part of the population living in or around Virunga.

It is believed that only a small part of the adjacent population has a hostile position towards the park, and that they are solely motivated by economic reasons to encroach on its borders to produce charcoal or to cultivate plots of land. Moreover, labelling them 'criminals' and their practices 'illegal' strengthens the understanding of the EC officials that reinforced law enforcement is an adequate solution. In addition to these measures, the EC aims to stimulate the 'green economy' to address these underlying 'economic motivations'. This narrow (economic) understanding of poverty as the cause of park-people contestations marginalises the perspectives of the affected population. It also allows the EC to present its support to the park and stimulation of the green economy as an adequate 'technical' solution to the conflicts.<sup>76</sup> This contributes to the depoliticisation of the contentious issue of land access related to Virunga.

Moreover, this singular focus on economic factors diverts attention away from the violence and land conflicts that have been intensified by the increasing militarisation of the park management, which has been supported by the EC. Once international organisations, such as the EC, make the decision to contribute to 'green militarisation' through development budgets, the range of involved individuals have a stake in 'playing with visibility, deciding what to show'<sup>77</sup> to ensure the continuation of the support. As Lombard argues, 'Playing with visibility is a way to keep politics personalized – that is, to perpetuate the importance of the people involved in determining the outcomes rather than handing over those decision-making powers to institutionalized rules or customs'.<sup>78</sup> In the case of the support of the EC to the Virunga park these practices of hiding are examples of mundane securitising practices, facilitating the 'green militarisation of development aid'.

The few EC policymakers aware of the everyday realities of conservation in conflict areas such as the north-east of the Central African Republic (CAR), or the east of the DRC, act as gatekeepers in deciding what to show to people in the wider EU system who do not work

directly in these areas. Within DG DEVCO there is one desk officer who became a central figure concerning biodiversity protection in Central Africa, having arranged funding for multiple Protected Areas (PAs) for over 30 years, including Virunga. He was the driving force 20 years ago behind the creation of *Réseau des aires protégées d'Afrique centrale* (RAPAC), a regional body which has its seat in Gabon to implement the ECOFAC programmes and finance. He was recently named an honourable member of RAPAC, the appointment letter stated 'You are the father, the ambassador, the protector and the defender of RAPAC, you were always there when the region needed support and allies.'<sup>79</sup> To arrange and design support and projects for Virunga, this desk officer closely collaborated with one EC official at the EU delegation in Kinshasa for over 21 years in Central Africa. When information is needed about the park, other officials within the EU often rely on the respective desk officer, who systematically refused any internal promotions so as not to lose the strategic position he was in.<sup>80</sup>

For example, an EEAS official recalled how a DEVCO colleague reacted to a question concerning land conflicts in Virunga and wondered how many people lived within the borders of the park: 'it was assured me that there were no such problems in Virunga, and because we change position every 4/5 years, we don't become experts.'<sup>81</sup> This in part also explains why the violence linked to the conservation practices remains remarkably hidden among the largest part of the EU institutions. Yet the politics of altering and framing information happen at multiple levels, also between the Virunga area and the EC delegation in Kinshasa and between the delegation and the headquarters of the EC in Brussels. As an example, many EC officials in Brussels were not aware that the first hydro-plant they financed produces substantially less electricity than planned, connecting fewer households, and that attracted agri-businesses also need to use generators to have enough electricity.<sup>82</sup> This is remarkable as the EC decided to allocate an additional 12 million to the construction of hydro-plants. The limited availability of updated information is also caused by the difficulty to access most of the areas in the park. Therefore, donors, auditors and journalists often limit their visits to the park headquarters in Rumangabo, where they are skilfully presented a limited reality of life in and around Virunga.

## Concluding remarks

Since 1988 the EC has been the main supporter of the Virunga National Park. While it is difficult to determine exactly how much of the development aid the EC provided has been used directly for military activities, it is safe to argue that the extensive EC support to the management of the park allowed the latter to adopt a militarised approach to conservation. By focussing on mundane practices of securitisation within the European Commission, and between the different European institutions, I demonstrate how it became regularised to use development funds for militarised conservation practices, whilst 'normally' the use of development aid for paramilitary purposes could generate political controversy and attract heightened scrutiny within the EU.

Yet in the case of Virunga, a personalised network within the EC renders it 'invisible' that development funds are actually used to finance armed conservation efforts. Through broad, and seemingly political neutral, descriptions within policy documents such as 'capacity building', the EC does not reveal much about the daily conservation practices that are financed with EC development aid. Moreover, the controversies around armed conservation efforts

in Virunga, and their effects, are also rendered invisible by policymakers often unintentionally. By framing contestations against the park as solely driven by economic logics, including the wider dynamics of protracted conflict in the east of the DRC, conservation-related conflicts are depoliticised. From this perspective the EC argues that its support to the stimulation of the 'green economy' is the 'solution' not only to protect the Virunga National Park, but also to bring 'peace' to the war-torn east of the DRC.

Moreover, in this article I argue that 'green militarisation' is enabled not only by the financial resources deployed to the salaries and training of the paramilitary park guards but also by the historical and personal relations between the Virunga Foundation and the EC. Because the EC has a long history of supporting the Virunga park, a small group of individuals was able to create a personalised network of governance around the management of the park, that provided the Virunga Foundation with sufficient political and financial support to implement its management strategy which consists of hard- and soft-counterinsurgency approaches to conservation. As a result, only a handful EC officials are deeply aware of the political sensitivity of the support of the EC to the park. By arguing that one should not listen to the 'local population', as 'they will manipulate you', authoritative knowledge claims are made with the aim to steer the knowledge production of the Virunga area in such a way to increase donor support to the park, instead of questioning the actual effects of the green militarisation of development aid. Through these practices of mundane securitisation, policymakers within the EC are able to circumvent political debate about the use of development funds for recurrent (para)military expenditures, allowing them to 'play' with the ambiguity in the financial regulation to pay the 'fees' of the armed park guards.

This is arguably less likely to occur in places that are not tainted by conflict and/or political crises, and points at a mode of 'crisis conservation' advanced by the European Commission, entailing coinciding processes of transnationalisation of management structures and its 'green militarisation'. To get a fuller picture of how 'crisis conservation' works, additional multi-level research is needed to analyse how the related discourses and practices are appropriated and contested by those involved in more local levels of these transnational governance complexes. Examples include state authorities, park guards, development workers, local authorities and inhabitants of the park area. It is only by exploring the agency of all layers of the crisis conservation complex that we expose their internal contradictions and their effects.

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## Notes

1. Corson, "Shifting Environmental Governance"; Sachedina, "Disconnecting Nature."
2. European Commission, see [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-14-547\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-547_en.htm) (accessed 18 April 2016).
3. Lunstrum, "Green Militarization," 87.
4. Verweijen and Marijnen, "Counterinsurgency/Conservation Nexus."
5. Neumann, "Moral and Discursive"; Büscher and Ramutsindela, "Green Violence"; Duffy, "War by Conservation"; Lunstrum, "Green Militarization."
6. Massé and Lunstrum, "Accumulation by Securitization," 229.
7. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness*.
8. Huysmans, "What's in an Act?"
9. Marijnen and Verweijen, "Selling Green Militarisation."
10. Büscher and Ramutsindela, "Green Violence"; Devine, "Counterinsurgency Tourism"; Lunstrum, "Green Militarization."
11. Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, "Guerilla Agriculture?"; Neumann, "Moral and Discursive"; Peluso, "Coersive Conservation."
12. Büscher and Ramutsindela, "Green Violence."
13. Lombard, "Autonomous Zone Conundrum"; Schmidt-Soltau, "Conservation-related Resettlement"; Poppe, "Conservation Ambiguities."
14. Corson et al., "Capturing the Personal"; Corson, "Shifting Environmental Governance."
15. See, for notable exceptions, Lombard, "Raiding Sovereignty"; Corson, "Shifting Environmental Governance."
16. Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, "Guerilla Agriculture?"
17. Büscher, "Transforming the Frontier"; Lunstrum, "Green Militarization."
18. Büscher and Ramutsindela, "Green Violence"; Büscher, "Rhino Poaching."
19. White, "The 'White Gold'"; Duffy, "War by Conservation."
20. Neumann, "Moral and Discursive"; Ybarra, "Taming the Jungle."
21. Beymer-Farris and Bassett, "REDD Menace."
22. White, "Africa's White Gold."
23. Duffy, "War by Conservation."
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. European Commission, *Larger than Elephants*.
27. Shaw and Rademeyer "Flawed War."
28. Bernazzoli and Flint, "Militarization to Securitization."
29. Verweijen, "Ambiguity of Militarization."
30. Fairhead et al., "Green Grabbing."
31. Bernazzoli and Flint, "Militarization to Securitization," 450.
32. Lombard, "Raiding Sovereignty."
33. Mosse, "Is Good Policy Unimplementable?"
34. Bigo, "Pierre Bourdieu," Huysmans, "What's in an Act?"; Huysmans, "Jargon of Exception."
35. Huysmans, "Jargon of Exception."
36. Bigo, "Pierre Bourdieu."
37. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*.
38. Léonard, "EU Border Security."
39. Ibid.
40. Ferguson, *Anti-politics*.
41. Li, *Will to Improve*.



42. Interview, EC official, Brussels, January 2014.
43. Interview, de Merode, Rumangabo, June 2014.
44. Multiple interviews, employees of international NGOs, Goma, 2014–2015.
45. Frankfurt Zoological Society, Press Release, <http://www.glenoakzoo.org/WPPHTAG/PPHTAGpdfs/Hippo%20Crisi%20DRC1.pdf> (accessed 15 February 2016).
46. European Commission, *Supporting a Climate for Change*, 27, emphasis added.
47. Hatchwell, "Public–Private Partnerships."
48. Interview, de Merode, Rumangabo, June 2014.
49. Ibid.
50. Interview, EC official, Brussels, January 2014.
51. Interview, EC official, Brussels, July 2016.
52. Multiple interviews with park guards in Rumangabo and Rwindi, 2014–2015.
53. Dunlap and Fairhead, "Militarisation and Marketisation of Nature."
54. European Commission, *Supporting a Climate for Change*, 27.
55. European Commission, see [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-14-547\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-547_en.htm) (accessed 18 April 2016).
56. Verweijen and Marijnen, "Counterinsurgency/Conservation Nexus."
57. Interview, de Merode, Goma, June 2015.
58. Interview, EC official, Brussels, July 2016.
59. Shifflette, "Democratic Republic of the Congo."
60. European Commission, see [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-14-547\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-547_en.htm) (accessed 18 April 2016).
61. Devine, "Counterinsurgency Ecotourism"; Dunlap and Fairhead, "Militarisation and Marketisation of Nature."
62. Verweijen and Marijnen, "Counterinsurgency/Conservation Nexus."
63. Vikanza, *Aires Protégées, Espaces Disputés*.
64. Verschuren and Mankoto Ma Mbalele, "Renaissance du Premier Parc National."
65. Vikanza, *Aires Protégées, Espaces Disputés*.
66. Interview, NGO employee, Goma, May 2014.
67. Interview, de Merode, Goma, June 2015.
68. Interviews, employees of multiple NGOs, Goma, 2014–2015.
69. Verweijen and Marijnen, "The Counterinsurgency/ Conservation Nexus."
70. Interviews with guards at multiple patrol posts, 2014–2015.
71. Interview, de Merode, Rumangabo, June 2014.
72. Vikanza, *Aires Protégées, Espaces Disputés*; Van Schuylenberg, "Entre Délinquance et Résistance."
73. Interview, EC official, Brussels, January 2014.
74. Interview, EC official, Brussels, March 2016.
75. Koddebrock, "Malevolent Politics," 670.
76. Li, *Will to Improve*.
77. Lombard, "Raiding Sovereignty."
78. Ibid, 279.
79. RAPAC, Libreville Ref. No 48/RAPAC/SE/asr/01-16, 10 February 2016.
80. Interview, EC official, Brussels, January 2014.
81. Interview, EEAS official, Brussels, April 2016.
82. Interview, Virunga Foundation employee, Goma, July 2015.

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