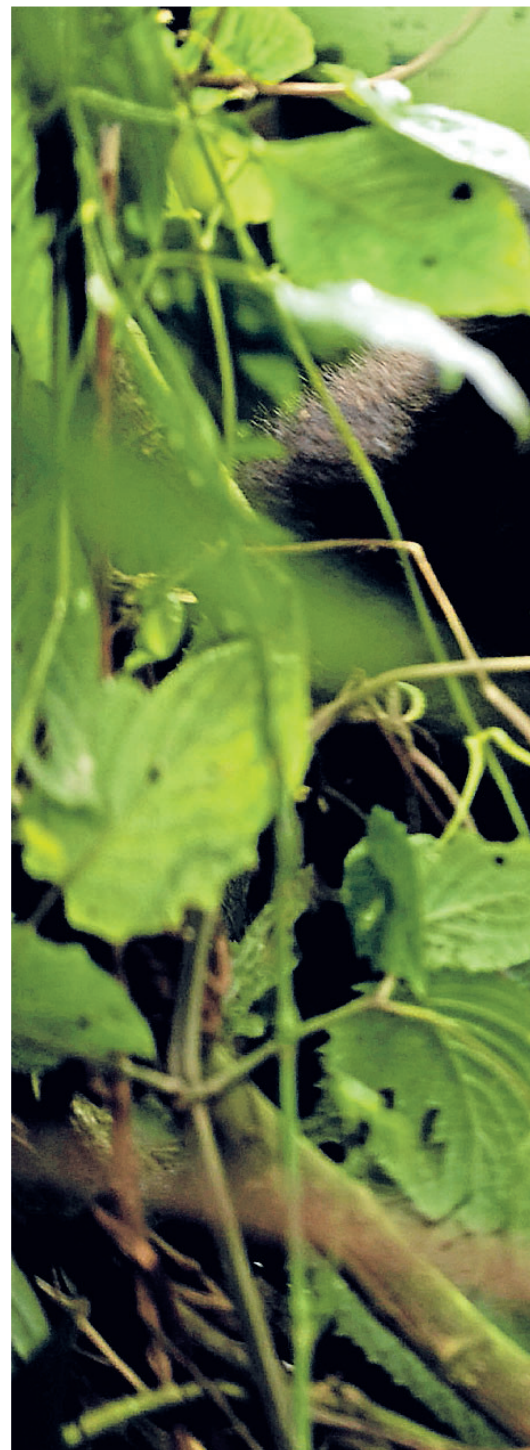


Another hill to climb for mountain gorillas

The famous gorillas of Virunga National Park have survived war, poachers and deforestation. Will oil exploration be the final straw? By **Anthony Ham**.



It was one of the most confronting wildlife images of our time: weeping villagers carrying the bodies of seven eastern mountain gorillas through the forest, bearing them up as if for a royal burial.

The gorillas had been murdered by unknown gunmen, execution-style, in 2007 in the deeply forested mountains of Virunga National Park, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Shock turned to anger when the truth emerged: the killings had been ordered by none other than Honore Mashagiro, Virunga's chief warden. By killing the gorillas he and other corrupt park officials had sought to divert attention away from their involvement in the illegal \$US30 million charcoal industry, an industry that causes Virunga to lose 15 per cent of its forest cover every year.

'The loss of the Virunga gorillas would be a devastating and potentially fatal blow to the species' prospects of survival.'

Outrage rippled across the world: not only were several members of the largest and most endangered primate species on earth dead, but they had been killed by the very people who were



supposed to protect them.

Just 880 eastern mountain gorillas are left in the world and the 200 that cling to life in Virunga could ill afford to lose even a single member.

It was a low point in the annals of conservation, even for Virunga and the Congo, and a reminder of how human greed all too often overwhelms efforts to protect some of the most vulnerable wildlife species.

And yet, six years later, history may be about to repeat itself. The new danger may not have the drama of an execution-style killing, but its scale may ultimately represent a more serious challenge to the gorillas' survival. The new threat? Our thirst for oil.

THE gorillas of Virunga stand at the centre of one of Africa's longest-running conservation stories. Virunga, Africa's oldest park, was founded in 1925 by Belgium's King Albert I, who ran the vast colony of Belgian Congo as if it was a personal fiefdom. He named it Albert

National Park. The colonial administrators who set up the park were drawn by the gorillas' unmistakably human characteristics, although they did not then know gorillas share an estimated 97 per cent of their DNA with humans.

In the decades that followed, Virunga was a quiet success. From the lowland savannah along the lakeshore to the high-altitude rainforest clinging to the Virunga volcanoes, the park protected more than 200 mammal species, including 22 different primates, and more than 700 bird species.

After independence in 1960, the park, which is three times the size of the ACT, became a symbol for a country fallen into disrepair; blighted by mismanagement and corruption. Then, as now, the threats facing Virunga National Park and its gorillas – rampant armed conflict, massive deforestation and poaching – read like a roll-call of impending environmental and human catastrophe.

Even so, into the 1970s the park was home to some of the largest mammal populations in Africa. In 1979 UNESCO inscribed Virunga on its list of World Heritage sites.

But Virunga and its wildlife inhabit one of the most volatile corners of Africa. After the 1994 Rwanda genocide, more than a million people fled across the border into an area that was already one of the most densely populated regions of Africa; many took up residence in the park.

In the decade that followed, eastern Congo was a battleground for a regional war in which, according to UN estimates, 5.4 million people died.

What drove the war was an unseemly scramble for natural resources – not oil, back then, but diamonds, gold and coltan (an essential ingredient of mobile phones). Almost a dozen African countries were drawn into the conflict.

The war officially ended in 2003 and many of the refugees would later leave the park. But the area remains susceptible to chronic instability and there are times when Virunga has proved a refuge in name only. In recent decades the park's wildlife populations have collapsed – just 350 hippos remain, down from 27,000 in the 1970s, and more than 20 gorillas have been killed since 1990.

Armed rebel groups continue to roam the park, ensuring the 400 park rangers are often unable to do their jobs. On one patrol, recalls Safari Ntanyungura, one of Virunga's rangers, the patrol was "encircled by elements of the [rebel group] FDLR. We were stripped and whipped and held for two hours. They told us not to return, saying that that part of the park was theirs."

With the rangers absent, the gorillas were frequently forced to dodge bullets close to the shifting frontline and to somehow survive an ill-disciplined rogues' gallery of armed rebels and drunken government soldiers.

As if that weren't enough, the pressures on the park itself can be intolerable, coming as they do from less malevolent but equally dangerous forces. Each year, the mountain gorillas must retreat ever higher within the shrinking forests as the surrounding humans clear land for agriculture and charcoal.