

Living dangerously to protect the mountain gorillas of Congo's Virunga

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Andre Bauma, a ranger who is also the head gorilla orphan caregiver at Virunga National Park, plays with orphaned mountain gorilla Ndakasi at the park's Senkwekwe Center, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sept. 30, 2014. Photo: By Katie Falkenberg/Los Angeles Times/TNS

RUMANGABO, Congo — Andre Bauma rolls in the grass with a young mountain gorilla, Ndakasi. He hugs the hulking hairy creature, who he treats like his own child, and slaps her chest affectionately.

The great ape is part of park ranger Bauma's second family at the Senkwekwe Center for gorilla orphans in the 3,000-square-mile Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is believed that there are about 880 surviving wild mountain gorillas in the world, and a quarter of them reside in Virunga National Park.

"I love these gorillas, yeah, and I'd like to just stay with them forever," he says.

Ndakasi was 2 months old when Bauma found her clinging to her mother, who had been shot through the head. Besides the mother, six other Virunga mountain gorillas were shot dead with automatic weapons in mid-2007. The attackers were never found, but they were believed to be connected to the banned charcoal trade.

"I felt in my heart that we have to save those babies. This is our job, but it came from my heart," says Bauma.

One Of World's Worst War Zones

Bauma behaved like a parent with Ndakasi, sleeping in the same bed with her.

"We have to show them they are not orphans, they are in the family. That's why we have to play with them, to give them food, to sleep together; and they must know they have everything they need," Bauma explains.

Virunga National Park, established in 1925, is the oldest park in Africa, featuring volcanic lava craters, snowcapped mountains, tropical rain forest, misty lakes and the sweeping African savanna. It is also the largest, and remains home to more species of animals and plants than any other park in Africa.

But the gorillas reside in what has been one of the world's worst war zones and most corrupt regions, and have been on the brink of being wiped out for years. Threats have included rebel military forces and the profitable charcoal trade, which destroys their natural environment. Over the last two years, there has also been a high-stakes proposal to begin exploring for oil in one of the world's most remarkable animal reserves.

The British oil company SOCO carried out tests to locate oil in Virunga in 2014. The tests touched off an international outcry over possible damage to the UNESCO World Heritage site. After strong international criticism, the company said in March that it would give up its right to explore for oil in the park.

But the issue may not be over. Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo says the government still hopes to discuss terms with UNESCO, a division of the United Nations that tries to protect cultural and natural treasures around the world. The government of Congo would still like to find a way to explore for oil and "reap the profit of its resources to benefit the people who live there."

Park Rangers Killed By Trespassers

In recent years, the threats to Virunga's animals and those who care for them seem to have come mainly not from the oil industry, but from the poaching trade and the chaos of civil war.

The famed gorillas have been picked off — and so have the rangers who protect them.

In the last two decades, 140 park rangers have been killed by various people who have trespassed into the park, officials say.

Park director Emmanuel de Merode nearly joined the list himself last year when he was shot by unknown gunmen.

"It's not just the mountain gorillas. We've also got lowland gorillas and chimpanzees, so it's the only park in the world that has three types of great apes." The apes are helpless and under great risk, which makes Virunga extremely important from a conservation point of view, de Merode says.

Virunga's rangers, charged with enforcing the laws on poaching, often come into conflict with poor farmers and fishermen.

"We have a big problem in this area, for the conservation of this park," Bauma says. "There is the poaching. People like to hunt in the park. People like to do illegal fishing. People like to exploit natural resources."

"It's A Kind Of Hope For Everybody"

The rangers have also had to try to fend off armed rebels. Innocent Mburanumwe lost his brother, a fellow ranger, in fighting.

"He died in 1997 when the war started," Mburanumwe says. "He was caught by an armed group. He was killed by them."

Rebel groups benefit from the charcoal trade, worth \$35 million a year, in which ancient trees are chopped up to make fuel for cooking fires.

"The problem we have in Congo is that people are not very educated about the conservation of nature," says Bauma. "We need to educate the future generation."

The rangers see their mission as not just protecting the mountain gorillas and other species, but also teaching Congolese to value the park for its wildlife. They would like people to see that it is possible to create jobs through tourism and sustainable projects such as hydroelectric power plants that generate electricity by capturing the energy of falling or flowing water.

"Virunga National Park, it's a kind of hope for everybody, because we are working in a true way. We are fighting against corruption," says Mburanumwe. "I am hoping that in the future, Virunga will be providing many jobs for the community. In the future, Virunga will be helping our kids."