Protecting wildlife in the Greater Virunga Landscape

23 billion USD
estimated global value of illegal wildlife trade, one of the largest forms of transnational organized crime. Illegal wildlife trade is the unlawful and unsustainable harvest of and trade in animals and parts or products derived from them.

Working with law enforcers to disrupt cross-border wildlife smuggling routes
Stretching across Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda, the Greater Virunga Landscape is one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet. With Virunga and Queen Elizabeth National Parks at its center, it is home to some of the world’s rarest species of plants and animals.

Rampant poaching and trafficking are threatening the region’s wildlife populations, with numbers plummeting across species like pangolins, elephants, hippos and monkeys, as poachers kill and trap these animals and sell them for their parts. Limited resources and political insecurity make it even more difficult for law enforcement officers to protect wildlife. Virunga National Park has borne a bigger brunt with multiple instances of rangers being killed by suspected militias. 13 rangers were murdered in April 2020 and a further six in January 2021.

Uncontrolled illegal exploitation of wildlife and other natural resources in the Virunga landscape threatens sustainable human development and is a major threat to political stability in the region, often allowing non-state armed groups and transnational criminal networks to operate.

Around Virunga National Park this volatile, complex, and uncertain situation has eroded community structures which enable further corruption and destabilization. Additionally, pressures on both, communities and the law enforcement officers protecting these areas, mean that both parties fear for their survival. Close collaboration with communities is essential to create stability and successfully combat poaching and trafficking.

Instability in the region allows violent poachers and other armed groups to exploit the situation to their advantage, moving freely throughout the landscape attacking security forces, exploiting local communities, and depleting wildlife.
the most common wildlife products include: elephant tusks, hippo teeth, pangolin scales and timber

Tragically the deaths of 18 people including 13 rangers, who were killed in Virunga National Park in April 2020, and another six rangers killed in January 2021 has brought renewed global attention to the issue. The relatively porous border between Uganda and DRC, including Lake Edward, which lies between Virunga and Queen Elizabeth National Parks, serves as an important transit route for transporting illegal wildlife products. The poorly protected borders, coupled with high levels of corruption, limited arrests and prosecution (especially in DRC), enable the flow of illegal goods between the two countries.

Preventing and combatting wildlife crime requires a holistic approach and a significant increase in investments that combines community involvement, strengthened law enforcement, and improved judicial and prosecutorial capacities.

A partnership to protect vulnerable wildlife in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In September 2020, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands started a Project funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) to build law enforcement capacity to stop the poaching and trafficking of protected wildlife between Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The goal of the project is to reduce poaching and trafficking of wildlife species and their products by strengthening transboundary collaboration. The partnership is seeking to improve investigations into illicit trade, increase on-the-ground operations and strengthen law enforcement presence. This will lead to more arrests and prosecutions by law enforcement and judiciary agencies—with a focus on engaging community members in information gathering to better protect landscapes and animals along the Uganda-DRC Southern border.

Through logistical support, training, cross-border collaboration and information sharing, the project will look to:

- Investigate traffickers, routes, concealments, and illicit methods of operations in between DRC and Uganda
- Promote interagency and cross-border law enforcement cooperation between Virunga and Queen Elizabeth National Parks and at key border points in the landscape
- Strengthen prosecutorial capacity in DRC to target transboundary wildlife criminals
- Strengthen the ability of community members and their efforts towards neutralizing wildlife crime and environmental threats around Lake Edward, which falls into both Virunga National Park and Queen Elizabeth National Park and spans the border between DRC and Uganda

see how at ifaw.org

Photo: Donal Boyd

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