



Virunga Landscape

Home to more than half of Earth's last mountain gorillas

From the mist-covered peaks of active volcanoes and snow-capped mountains to tropical rain forests and open savanna, the Virunga Landscape is Africa's most biodiverse region. Named after the Virunga Mountains, the landscape lies in the heart of the Albertine Rift, and runs from north to south along the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda.

At lower altitudes, the Virunga landscape is distinguished by Lake Edward – the smallest of Africa's Great Lakes – and vast plains where lions, spotted hyenas and hippos live. Its lush forests are home to populations of mountain gorillas, as well as endemic birds such as the yellow-crested helmetshrike and the Kivu ground-thrush.

The landscape is centered around Virunga National Park – Africa's oldest and most biodiverse national park and a World Heritage Site. More than half of the world's 720 remaining mountain gorillas live inside the park, along with numerous birds, reptiles and mammals found nowhere else on Earth.

WWF's work in the Virunga Landscape builds on more than 20 years of supporting the area's communities and wildlife, and is part of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership with funding from USAID. In that time, WWF has helped promote sustainable livelihoods, provided environmental education, and increased protection of species like the critically endangered mountain gorilla.



Threats

Virunga's fertile volcanic soils support the highest human population density in Africa, resulting in huge pressure on the environment. Direct threats to the landscape include poaching, the conversion of natural habitat to farmland, overfishing and illegal cattle grazing.

Over the past decade, civil wars in the DRC and genocide in Rwanda have turned national parks into battlefields and homes of last resort for displaced people. The resulting instability has led to increased deforestation for fuelwood and charcoal-making, and to intensified illegal bushmeat hunting.

Additional threats to the Virunga Landscape include limited protected area management (e.g., the lack of access during conflict) and a lack of environmentally sustainable livelihood opportunities for the surrounding communities. The two are intimately connected, as without proper management the area is vulnerable to the lucrative bushmeat and charcoal trade.



Virunga Landscape at a Glance

Surface Area:

- 3.7 million acres
(1.5 million hectares)

Countries:

- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Rwanda

National Parks:

- Virunga National Park
- Volcans National Park
- Rutshuru Hunting Domain
- Parks cover 56% of the landscape

Species:

- Mountain gorilla
- Chimpanzee
- Elephant
- Golden monkey
- Grauer's rush warbler
- Hippopotamus
- Lion

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WWF's Partners

The International Gorilla Conservation Programme (IGCP) is a partnership among WWF, African Wildlife Foundation and Fauna & Flora International. The IGCP's mission is to ensure the conservation of mountain gorillas and their forest habitat in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

WWF works on a number of fronts to protect mountain gorillas through the IGCP partnership. In one project we helped establish a monitoring system where rangers collect and analyze data on the gorillas and their habitat. The information is shared with park authorities to address the threats faced by mountain gorillas.

Another important aspect of IGCP's work is to strengthen links with the local communities who live alongside mountain gorillas and to develop sustainable tourism based on viewing the gorillas in the wild.

Through the ICGP, WWF has been providing equipment and logistical support to the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN), the government agency tasked with safeguarding the DRC's protected areas – including Virunga National Park. Although the ICCN's capacity has been weakened by armed conflict, WWF and ICCN will continue to work together to patrol the entire Virunga National Park as the security situation permits.



Programs

WWF's presence in the Virunga landscape began in the 1980s, when we developed close partnerships with local communities, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. One of our flagship programs in the region is the WWF-supported Virunga Environmental Program (PEVi) in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Established in 1987, PEVi's goal is the long-term conservation of Virunga's ecosystem through the training of park staff and environmental education. The project also focuses on empowering local communities to conserve their resources and improve their livelihoods.

Among other objectives, PEVi promotes privately owned tree plantations, encouraging economic development and the creation of alternative wood sources outside of Virunga National Park. This is especially important during times of armed conflict, when displaced people urgently need fuelwood to survive. By providing emergency assistance in the form of wood and fuel-efficient stoves, PEVi (in coordination with the UN) helps protect Virunga's forests and preserve mountain gorilla habitat.

Along with meeting emergency needs, this initiative provides long-term economic benefits for local communities. A 1,235-acre plantation can produce approximately \$1.5 million in revenue over 10 years from timber or charcoal production.

Recently, the PEVi program celebrated the planting of its ten-millionth tree. Other achievements in the field include the following:

- In partnership with local communities, one-third of Virunga National Park's border is now clearly marked, with community agreements to recognize and abide by this demarcation. In addition, a buffer zone was established to curb future encroachment, arrest further degradation and allow for forest recovery.
- Approximately 175,444 acres (71,000 hectares) of the park were recovered when more than 120,000 illegal settlers voluntarily relocated. This allows the land to recover and curbs future encroachment.



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