Joint statement in support of moratorium on all oil activities in the wider Virunga area

The undersigned call on UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)¹ to reach an agreement to prevent any oil exploration, extraction or related activities in the wider Virunga area which is key to the integrity of the Virunga World Heritage Site. This should include Virunga and Queen Elizabeth national parks and the whole of Lake Edward. As part of the agreement all existing exploration licences in this area, as well as plans to issue new ones, should be abandoned. In particular, the Government of Uganda should withdraw the Ngaji oil block from the current oil licencing round with immediate effect. The DRC government should refrain from granting any new licences, or transfer of licences, in Virunga National Park or seeking to re-draw its boundaries in order to allow oil activities in the area.

Last year SOCO International carried out seismic testing on Lake Edward in Virunga National Park, but the company has not yet published the results of its exploration. Following widespread local opposition and a huge international outcry, SOCO International committed to no further involvement in its oil block in Virunga and has since announced that it no longer owns the licence but did not provide further details.

Virunga National Park is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its ‘Outstanding Universal Value’ including a ‘wide diversity of habitats’ and ‘exceptional biodiversity, notably endemic species and rare and globally threatened species such as the mountain gorilla.’ An estimated 200,000 fishermen and local people depend on the lake for their livelihoods and a valuable source of protein. Any oil activities in this area could lead to significant damage to the lake, the broader ecosystem and the people and animals that depend on it. This could include adverse impacts from drilling, road construction, increased population or water pollution.

The undersigned note with concern that the Ugandan government intends to allocate a new oil exploration licence for the Ngaji block in early 2016 which covers the Ugandan side of Lake Edward and parts of Queen Elizabeth National Park. This area borders directly with the Virunga World Heritage Site and forms part of the same continuous ecosystem. Allowing oil drilling puts the area at risk and is inconsistent with UNESCO World Heritage status which both governments have an obligation to protect under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.² Given the tourism potential of the area, and the fact that Uganda’s oil is far from commercially viable at current world oil prices, the wider Virunga area could be worth a lot more to both countries as an area of outstanding natural beauty and source of critical ecosystem services than as an oil testing ground.

Queen Elizabeth National Park, responsible for a third of all visits to Uganda’s national parks, is a major draw for international tourists who contribute to around 8% of Uganda’s GDP – this is likely to be comparable to Uganda’s entire oil sector. Oil exploration in the park is likely to lead to a significant fall in visitor numbers in what is an internationally competitive and notoriously fickle market. The Ugandan government has already authorised oil activities in Murchison Falls National Park but it is yet to know what the impacts will be on tourism, the environment or local people as production has not yet started. The Virunga Alliance has proposed an alternative and sustainable economic model for the Virunga area that does not rely on oil.

Given the outstanding universal value of the wider Virunga area we urge UNESCO and the governments of Uganda and the DRC to prevent any oil exploration, extraction or related activities in
Virunga and Queen Elizabeth national parks and Lake Edward and cancel any oil-related licencing in the area indefinitely.

1 Although the immediate areas of concern as detailed in this communication are within Uganda and DRC, given it also borders the Virunga World Heritage Site within the wider Virunga area, we would welcome and invite the inclusion of Rwanda in such an agreement.

2 See for example World Heritage Committee Decision 37Com 7(III) para 8 which states: Notes with concern the growing impact of the extractives industries on World Heritage properties, and urges all States Parties to the Convention and leading industry stakeholders, to respect the “No-go” commitment by not permitting extractives activities within World Heritage properties, and by making every effort to ensure that extractives companies located in their territory cause no damage to World Heritage properties, in line with Article 6 of the Convention.
Signatories

Action des Chrétiens Activistes des Droits de l'Homme à Shabunda (ACADHOSHA) DRC
Action Coalition for Climate Change
Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE)
Advocates for Natural Resource Governance and Development (ANARDE)
Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)
African Wildlife Foundation
Association pour le développement des Initiatives paysannes (ASSODIP) - RDC
Asyanut Safaris
Australian Rainforest Conservation Society
Biosphere Expeditions
Bob Brown Foundation
Buliisa Initiative for Rural Development Organisation (BIRUDO)
Civic Response On Environment & Development (CRED)
CJDH - RDC
Community Development and Conservation Agency (CODECA)
Conservation Action Trust
CREDDHO
Earthworks
Ecological Christian Organisation (ECO Uganda)
eCountability
Elephants Alive
EST
Fauna & Flora International
FECOPEILE
Gaia Foundation
Global Rights Alert
Global Witness
Greenpeace
Greenwatch
IDPE
Jeunesse du Monde République Démocratique du Congo
Lake Albert Biodiversity Conservation Alert (LABCA)
Matoke Tours
Mid-western region Centre for Democracy & human rights (MICOUĐ)
Mutanda Lake Resort
Nature Uganda
New Eden Christian Foundation
New Progressive Alliance
Pro-Biodiversity Conservationists in Uganda (PROBICOU)

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Francis Garrard - Director
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Jennifer Krill
Charles Kabiswa
Bill Butcher - Director
Marlene McCay - Founder and Chairperson
Jean Marie Mangaya
Mark Rose - Chief Executive Officer
Josué Mukura
Liz Hosken
Winfred Ngabiirwe
Patrick Alley - Founder
Victorine Sirri Che Thöner
Irene Ssekyana
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Mr Tibère Kajemba Dunia
Mugume Michael
Willem Johannes Kok - Managing director
Lawrence Kangula
Willem Johannes Kok - Managing director
Archilles Byaruhanga
Canon Baluku
Ed Griffith
Robert Tumwesigye
Publish What You Pay – Uganda (PWYP-U)

Noreen Nampewo - National Coordinator

Rainforest Action Network

Lindsey Allen - Executive Director

Rainforest Foundation Norway

Lars Løvold - Director

Rainforest Foundation UK

Simon Counsell - Executive Director

RCGW

Kisuba Muliro Rousseau

Real Agency for Community Development (RACD)

Banturaki Benard

Road Free

Kriton Arsenis - Founder

Save the Elephants

Iain Douglas-Hamilton - Founder & CEO

Save Virunga

Save Virunga Team

SEA DRC

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Ben Tumwesigye

SVAN

Mme Masika Tulinabo

Synchronicity Earth

Laura Miller - CEO

The Wild Foundation

Vance G. Martin

Transparency International Uganda

Peter Wandera

Union D'étude Pour La Conservation De La Nature (UECN)

Jonas Pandasi - Executive Director

UFAREP

Janvier Kaikolo

Voluntary Initiative Support Organisation (VISO)

Daniel Aboye

Water Governance Institute

Henry M Bazira

World Heritage International

Tony Sadownichik - Chair of Board of Directors

ZSL

Jonathan Baillie - Conservation Programmes Director

Zevin Asset Management

Sonia Kowal