Doctor of Political Science

Beyond Rebels and Gorillas:
The multi-scalar politics of conservation and conflict in the Virunga National Park, DR Congo’

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation explores the complexity of protecting nature, including wildlife, in areas characterized by protracted violent conflict. It specifically focuses on the mode of ‘crisis conservation’ encountered in the Virunga National Park, a vast protected area located in the war-torn east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which reinforced pre-existing (colonial) tendencies to militarize and bolstered the supra-national character of the park management.

This PhD exists out of two parts. The first part focuses on the cosmopolitan aim to ‘save’ nature from its violent environment and analyzes how political and financial support is mobilized for the Virunga National Park. It is argued that through the depoliticisation of controversies that are inherently linked to natural resources management in conflict-affected areas, and by reinforcing structures of inequality that are present since colonization, the transnationalised park management foreclose on other alternative ways the park could be protected.

In the second part of this PhD it is analyzed from a livelihood perspective, how the transnationalization and militarization of Virunga’s management influences structures of public authority and dynamics of violent conflict (including armed mobilization) in the wider ‘Virunga area’. It indicates that conflicts around the park intensified, which reinforced links between rebel groups within the park and a part of the neighboring population. Moreover, the legitimacy of the transnationalised park management is questioned, as people perceive the park management increasingly acting as a ‘state within a state’.

As such, this PhD constructs a ‘global ethnography’ of ‘crisis conservation’ practices in the Virunga National Park. Within this PhD the Virunga National Park serves as a case through which broader questions regarding the multi-scalar politics of ‘crisis conservation’ and violent conflict can be investigated.