

¿DOES MONEY MEANS PROGRESS?

The SOCO Company and the Virunga's National Park rangers have a different answer to that question. Since 2012, SOCO has decided to search for oil in the Democratic Republic of Congo and part of their concession is half of the Virunga's National Park which is a World Heritage Site recognized by UNESCO. That oil exploration, together with the conflict caused by the M23 rebels and the poaching has caused a lot of problems for the population even though the park rangers have tried to protect it from this exploration, but their endeavor has been very hard with the war around them.

SOCO and some other supporters are against the conservation work of rangers within the park. They claim that this exploration project is going to bring progress to the country because it will become an oil producer, thus creating more job opportunities for the community, new schools, new universities, hospitals, etc. They are even saying that after the exploration starts, they are going to let people cultivate in some area in the park, without knowing vastly the conditions of it and assuming that they are going to own the majority of the park.

According to the park rangers and most of the community, this exploration is definitely not a good idea. Firstly, because this park is the only place where you can still find mountain gorillas and the project will take away a big part of their habitat. And secondly, it represents a very important thing for the



Andre Bauma with Maisha.

community, not only for the cultural and natural value, but for their daily living because the park is rich in many natural resources used by the population. For example, one of the spokespersons of the people living around lake Edward, located in the central sector of Virunga, said: "We don't care [sic] oil, we earn our living from the lake and fishing".

Another point to highlight is the fact that the park is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, so any oil related activities are illegal because they can interfere with the integrity of the park and the living beings there. However, in the documentary called Virunga (2014), SOCO seems not to care when one of their employees says to a journalist: "They don't really care about monkeys, I'm sure...

Fuck me; it's a monkey, who gives a fuck about a fucking monkey?" He also says that he can only see mine-wisely the value of the park and when he thinks about it, the only word that comes to his mind is "mine".

Another very convincing point is how badly they are proceeding by paying big amounts of money to politicians, people with a big influence in the community and to the M23 rebel groups. In the documentary mentioned above, important proof is shown where they are bribing people to bribe other people too. Not to mention the fact that the only thing they are doing by paying the rebel groups is increasing the conflict, which is already atrocious by itself. Furthermore, by increasing the conflict, they are increasing deaths, starvation and a displaced population.

To my way of thinking, this oil exploration is just making things worse than they are. I mean, the situation in Congo is really difficult because of the poverty and the conflicts, and this exploration is not going to bring benefits to change that. In the documentary they are just in the exploration phase, and a lot of problems such as violence and displacement appeared, so I can't imagine how it will be when they start the operation, extraction, etc. Besides, they seem not to care a bit about the people and the animals there because they are not making a proposal to avoid big impacts or to protect them, and as Andre Bauma, who is a mountain gorilla caretaker shown in the documentary said: "You must justify why you are on this earth - gorillas justify why I am here, they are my life". And if they wanted the good for the community and more, they should care and respect that together with other important things.

Written by: Angie Marcela Franco Álvarez