

## **Media Release**

June 26, 2012

### **Governments and oil companies slammed over Virunga exploration**

**Saint Petersburg** - The committee overseeing World Heritage Sites yesterday cautioned that petroleum exploration in Virunga National Park could cause serious harm and should be halted. WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Fauna & Flora International, the Frankfurt Zoological Society and the Lukuru Foundation welcome this strong position and urge the DRC government and oil companies to act on it.

Expressing its concern over recent actions by petroleum companies, the World Heritage Committee reiterated its position that oil development is incompatible with World Heritage status. In the Committee's decisions, passed at its annual meeting, the committee also called on the Democratic Republic of the Congo to revoke permits granted to exploration companies.

British oil company SOCO International, which has already begun activities in Virunga, was criticized in the State of Conservation report on Virunga as being "hostile to the park". The committee said SOCO's permits did not conform to Democratic Republic of the Congo's international commitments.

SOCO has announced plans to begin aerial surveys to map oil deposits, and reportedly landed a helicopter in the park earlier this month. Questions over authorization for the landing allegedly led to an altercation between Congolese navy sailors, acting as security for SOCO, and Virunga park rangers. The incident resulted in the bayonet stabbing of a ranger, according to witnesses.

[Residents have expressed concern over the possibility that pollution from SOCO exploration](#) in Lake Edward could contaminate fishing waters where 30,000 residents make their livelihoods.

Total, the other oil company with a concession in the park and SOCO were admonished by the committee for not joining other industry leaders in pledging to remain out of all World Heritage Sites. The Committee also called on the countries where the companies are headquartered to "to ensure that petroleum and mining companies in their territory cause no damage the World Heritage properties."

Virunga National Park was declared a World Heritage Site in 1979. It is recognized for its unique landscapes and rare animals, including critically endangered mountain gorillas.

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