

**CONFLICT IN THE GREAT LAKES
REGION: IMPACT ON
CONSERVATION**

By Annette Lanjouw

The Albertine Rift, or western branch of the Great Rift Valley traversing Africa, comprises in its centre the Great Lakes Region. The region has been characterized by violent conflict since 1990 which has resulted in an excess mortality of 4.5 million people in less than 10 years. Millions of displaced people are still homeless and landless, and the fragile peace process in the region is still characterized by attacks on civilians and a war economy. The Central Albertine Rift includes eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. The programme area in consideration is the border region between the DRC, southwestern Uganda and northwestern Rwanda, including the Virunga massif (Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Southern Sector of the Virunga National Park and Volcanoes National Park) and the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The Virunga Massif is a high altitude forest ecosystem that straddles the borders of the three countries. Both the Virunga and Bwindi forest blocks play a critical watershed function in this primarily agricultural region and as forest refuges they play a significant role in stabilizing the fertile soils and providing reservoirs for natural resources. The Central Albertine Rift is a region of exceptionally high biodiversity and high levels of endemism, including the only natural habitat of the endangered mountain gorilla.

The conflict in the region has historical

precedents which led to civil wars in Rwanda and in the DRC in 1990. The conflicts spilled over the borders and neighbouring countries provided refuge for militia groups and refugees as well as military support for different groups within the conflict. Many of the interests were fuelled by the vast reservoirs of mineral wealth and other natural resources in the DRC. The war in Rwanda ended in 1994, but the civil conflict in the DRC is still unresolved. Although a transitional government is now in place and a peace process has been outlined, violence still erupts regularly in the east of the country, foreign armed groups are present throughout the region and there is extensive abuse of the civilian population.

The fourteen years of violence in the region has led to widespread proliferation of arms, used by military as well as civilians on people as well as wildlife populations. The conflict has exacerbated ethnic and cultural divisions in the region, has greatly exacerbated poverty and pushed many people to the forests in search for food, shelter and other resources. As mentioned previously, the human death toll of the war has exceeded 4.5 million people since 1990. Women and girls have been raped and children have been forced to participate as combatants in the war. Park guards, mandated by the state to protect the wildlife and halt human incursions in parks have been killed: in the Virunga National Park alone more than 100 park staff have been killed in the war since 1994. In addition, the prevalence of arms and armed men in and around protected areas lying along international borders has resulted in extensive destruction of the fauna. Eighteen gorillas were killed between 1996 and 2003 in the Virunga and Bwindi forest blocks. The

population of Hippopotamus in the Virunga National Park dropped from 29,000 in 1996 to 1309 in 2003. The Gishwati Forest Reserve in Rwanda was totally cleared of trees by Internally Displaced People following the genocide of 1994, with loss of all fauna. In the eastern sector of the Kahuzi Biega National Park in the DRC, the population of elephants dropped from 800 in 1996 to 7 in 2003, and Eastern lowland gorilla from 250 to 78. In addition, in March 1999, 8 tourists and the Ugandan park warden were killed by extremist militias in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The consequence of this act on tourism in the region, and revenue generated in these countries, has been enormous.

In summary, it is clear that the conflict has destroyed enormous natural areas, devastated fragile wildlife populations and created conditions of economic decline and insecurity that have greatly exacerbated poverty and the suffering of the civilian populations in the region.

To operate during times of conflict, it is critical to emphasise three levels of action: Monitoring the impact of human activities (including the crisis) on the wildlife/forests, supporting activities that can mitigate the negative impacts of the crisis and assisting groups affected by the crisis. The organisations have focussed their efforts on monitoring conservation impacts and supporting people who are either responsible for protecting and managing wildlife or who can have an impact on wildlife. The latter groups include park staff and local people who live near protected areas and whose livelihood activities depend on the forests and the parks. A significant emphasis has been placed on law enforcement and protection, even if this

is in conflict with the short-term interests of the impoverished local people. Protected areas in this region, however, have enormous capacity to generate revenue through tourism that can assist in post-war reconstruction of the country, as well as directly benefiting individuals at the local level. Mountain Gorilla tourism in the region generates in excess of 20 million US\$ per annum for Rwanda and Uganda (figures from 2001) and a portion of this revenue is shared directly with local people living near the parks. The mountain forests also serve an important watershed function, on which the fresh water supply, rainfall and fisheries industries in the region depend. Without the forests, the livelihoods of the people would be negatively affected in the medium to long term.

People living near protected areas often perceive the park as carrying with it an opportunity cost (not having access to land and resources) and harbouring wildlife that can come out of the forest to destroy crops. For subsistence farmers, the destruction caused by a buffalo or elephant in just a few hours can be devastating. Conservation organisations have worked with local people to develop barriers preventing the access of buffalo and elephant to fields, or to herd gorillas and other wildlife back into the forest. Organisations have also worked to develop conservation-based enterprise activities that depend on the wildlife and forest, but which do not damage the forest, to diversify livelihood activities. This contributes to reducing poverty as well as building a collaborative relationship between local people and the parks. Examples include bee-keeping, tourism-related enterprise, planting of bamboo and other forest plants outside the park, etc.

One of the main areas of success has been regional collaboration to effectively manage an ecosystem that straddles international borders. Given that the three countries sharing the ecosystem have had strained diplomatic relations with each other during this period of conflict, the focus of the regional collaboration has been at the technical, field level. The park staff from the three countries (four parks) have developed a strategy for working together, sharing information, communicating regularly and implementing joint activities, to ensure the effective management of the transboundary forests.

With peace returning to the region, it will become possible to formalize this collaboration and involve the governments at the highest level. The park authorities, however, have formally agreed to work together to ensure the threatened forests will be managed collaboratively. In January 2004, the representatives of Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing them to a strategy of regional collaboration for conservation. This is an important landmark contributing both to conservation and the building of peace in this region.

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FORESTRY AND CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES IN HOSTING REFUGEE AREAS (KENYA – UGANDA)

By Luc Cambrézy

Places and territories are perceived differently at times of peace or during conflict and extreme violence. When security becomes a major issue it is evident that some places are more exposed to risk than others. For everyone involved -protagonists or civilians, oppressors or victims- places like mountains or forests can become refuge areas in times of war. They are especially sought after for protection. This article examines the place and the ambiguous role of forest areas in two distinct refugee hosting situations, in Kenya and Uganda.

1 The example of Kenya

Somalian refugees have been gathering in Dadaab in eastern Kenya since 1991 and 1992. Extensive camps have been set up in this semi-arid region of quite dense bush and bushy savannah. For several years, the refugees were left to their own devices for their supply of wood, fuel, and construction (poles, herbs, etc.). It should be pointed out that this practice -akin to gathering- has had little overall effect on the maintenance of plant cover as long as stocks of dead wood were plentiful. Unfortunately, the proximity of this bush, so vital for the refugees, creates problems. These tracts of vegetation also serve as *refuges* for armed groups, more