# The Battle for Africa's Oldest National Park

By Jon Rosen, for National Geographic

The waters of Lake Edward have finally grown calm as Josué Kambasu revs his outboard motor, steering the craft past the local pod of hippos before heading toward the fishing boats returning with their previous night's catch.

Kambasu, the head of a local fishermen's cooperative, has invited me on an early morning tour of the lake—located within Virunga National Park in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Plagued by decades of overfishing, he tells me, Edward's stocks of tilapia, bagrid catfish, and the eel-like *protopteur* have begun to recover. To prove it, he’s hoping to show me *pêche de Merode*—local slang for a bumper catch and a testament to the park’s chief warden, Emmanuel de Merode, whose strong enforcement of fishing regulations has helped drive the industry’s revival.

Despite de Merode's popularity on the lake, it's a sensitive time to be discussing his record.

Two weeks earlier, on April 15, the 44-year-old Belgian had been ambushed while driving to Virunga's Rumangabo headquarters, shot by unknown gunmen. Although he was widely admired for upholding the law in a region long defined by lawlessness, his work also had given him many enemies: poachers, illegal charcoal harvesters, and members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a rebel militia founded by the ethnic Hutu perpetrators of Rwanda's 1994 genocide who have long hunted the park's animals for bush meat, cut down its trees, and built bases in its vast remote areas. Along the way, they have often clashed with park rangers and raped and looted local populations.

In addition, de Merode had been a leading critic of oil exploration inside the park, currently being carried out by London-based SOCO International.

Under a contract signed with the DRC government in 2010, SOCO has access to a block of land that includes 1,500 square miles of the park—roughly 50 percent—including much of Virunga's southern and central sectors and the two-thirds of Lake Edward that falls within the DRC's borders.

On May 1, as de Merode was recovering from the shooting in Nairobi, Kenya, and preparing for his eventual return to the park three weeks later, SOCO contractors began recording seismic data from the lake floor. In the coming weeks, data they collect will be used to determine whether there are underground formations that might hold extractable oil.

It's a prospect, Kambasu tells me, that worries many in his home village of Vitshumbi, located at the southern end of Lake Edward. Almost entirely dependent on fishing, Vitshumbi's 20,000 residents fear a future of invasive rigs, polluted waters, and disrupted fish-spawning zones. But they also worry about potential violence, which has plagued the area for 20 years as multiple militia groups (some backed by neighboring countries) have fought the Congolese military and each other. Now the villagers see potential threats from powerful political actors vying for a piece of possible oil contracts; by armed groups targeting oil infrastructure for profit; and by local youths who, like many across the region, can't find work and often join militias out of desperation.

For now, though, there's little Vitshumbi's fishermen can do but cast their nets and hope.

**The Belgian Prince**

Appointed by the DRC government in August 2008, Emmanuel de Merode was an unusual choice to manage Africa's oldest national park, which is overseen by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN), a government agency.

Born into a family of Belgian noble lineage and officially designated a prince, he first arrived in Congo in 1993 to conduct research for a Ph.D. in anthropology. Eventually he began working closely with Virunga's rangers through the Nairobi-based NGO WildlifeDirect, established in 2004 by his father-in-law, Richard Leakey, the Kenyan paleoanthropologist. De Merode slowly molded a reputation as a friend of Congo's people and its wildlife.

Virunga, which was founded in 1925 by Belgium's King Albert I, is a naturalist's utopia: Slightly smaller than Yellowstone, it's a land of unparalleled biodiversity, home to half of all the species on the African continent. Because of the park's wide variations in altitude and rainfall and its location along the seismically active Albertine Rift, its habitats include lava plains, tropical forests, marshes, savannas, glaciers, mountain snowfields, and two active volcanoes—including one, Nyiragongo, with what is arguably the world's most spectacular open-air lava lake.

Virunga's fauna, which includes elephants, lions, hippos, chimpanzees, and okapi—striped forest-dwelling mammals most closely related to giraffes—is just as varied. The park's most prized inhabitants, though, are 200 of the world's 880 remaining mountain gorillas, which inhabit the lower slopes of several extinct volcanoes that rise from the southeastern edge of the park and cut across the borders of Rwanda and Uganda.

Despite Virunga's natural wealth, the park de Merode inherited was a mess.

Already in decline from decades of mismanagement by previous wardens, Virunga had served for the past 14 years as a theater for what some scholars have termed Africa's World War—a multilayered conflict that, at its height, involved nine African national armies and dozens of rebel outfits, and spawned a regional humanitarian crisis that left an estimated five million dead.

Since July 1994, when more than a million Rwandan Hutu refugees—including scores who had participated in the genocide—fled across the DRC border as the Rwandan Patriotic Front captured power in Kigali, the park had been under serious strain. With the passing of time, this would only accelerate, as myriad armed groups turned to poaching, illegal fishing, and other extractive activities to fund their operations. Sometimes, as the years went on, they continued to fight because they knew no other livelihood.

By 2007 Virunga's crisis had reached a breaking point. That September, forces loyal to a Congolese Tutsi warlord, Laurent Nkunda, had captured the Mikeno Sector of the park, home of the Virunga mountain gorillas, and had refused to let any rangers inside the area.

That year, ten gorillas had been killed. As it turned out, at least seven of the rare animals were not killed by rebels or poachers, but rather by members of an illegal charcoal racket linked to the park's chief warden at the time, Honoré Mashagiro. In August 2008, with Mashagiro in jail and facing trial and the government-run ICCN reeling amid internal power struggles, Kinshasa turned to a foreigner, de Merode, to take back control of the park.

By all accounts, he attacked the assignment with gusto. First on de Merode's to-do list was to approach the rebel leader, Nkunda, and negotiate a return of his rangers to Mikeno—a feat that, despite the burning of park headquarters, he managed to accomplish by November.

Next he turned to securing the rest of the park, improving patrols of its forests, cracking down on charcoal harvesters and poachers, impounding unlicensed fishing boats, and soliciting foreign donors to boost his administration's meager budget.

De Merode also worked to improve conditions among the park's 300 rangers, whose jobs have been called the most dangerous in all of conservation. Since the start of the Congo conflict, 140 have been killed in the line of duty, yet before de Merode arrived, their salaries—which often went unpaid by the government—barely covered the basic necessities of life.

"The conditions before were very, very bad," Augustin Rwimo, a 28-year ICCN veteran, tells me when I ask how his profession has changed under de Merode's management. "But now we eat three meals a day. And everyone who is working is able to send his children to school. Most of our rangers have even built their own houses."

After boosting the morale of his staff, de Merode then turned to local people—four million of whom, he estimates, live within a day's walk of the park. Knowing that their support is crucial for Virunga's revival to be successful, he balanced his crackdown—arrests and confiscations—with new roads, schools, health clinics, and water sources. He also implemented a program to support the manufacturing of eco-friendly cooking briquettes, intended to reduce reliance on expensive and destructive charcoal.

The projects are part of an initiative known as the Virunga Alliance, an ICCN-led consortium of government, civil society, and private-sector actors working to support local residents through four pillars: promoting investment in sustainable fisheries, developing green energy, establishing agro-industries, including palm oil, soap, and papaya enzyme processing, and—as the security situation allows—working to promote tourism.

For the moment, the alliance's flagship project is a 12.6-megawatt hydroelectric plant, funded by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, under construction near the town of Rutshuru, where less than 5 percent of households are connected to the grid. Although it was delayed by yet another rebellion—the Rwanda-backed M23, which occupied swaths of the park from April 2012 until last November—the project, which follows a smaller pilot in the north of the park, is due to be on line in 2016.

"Once we have power, we believe we can create sustainable industries," says Ir Safari Samuel, an engineer overseeing the project. "Today, for many of our youth, the main occupation is war. We want to change that."

It is clear that such investments have gained de Merode the respect of many locals—from fishermen, to farmers, to children who shout his name as I pass, unaware, perhaps, that the *mzungu* (Swahili slang for "white person") they know best is recovering from his shooting in Nairobi.

Even so, there are some who are not happy.

In the village of Kibumba, not far from the shooting site, Cristophe Bahati, 18, tells me of neighbors who were angered last year when no one from the area was selected in a drive to recruit new rangers. In Kibirizi, several hours farther north, villagers recount an episode from last October, when they say ICCN rangers ordered the destruction of several agricultural plots, leaving local farmers on the verge of ruin. Although they admit that the fields were inside park boundaries, they say authorities gave little warning before arriving to uproot their crops and that soldiers working alongside the ICCN had threatened them when they tried to resist.

One man, Kambale Katsuva, tells me he was previously harvesting 50 sacks of potatoes a year, worth $50 each—a decent living in eastern Congo—but now is jobless. After seeking approval from the local chief, he takes me on a motorbike to show me his former field, now overrun with weeds.

"I've been farming this land for years," he tells me. "And ICCN knew about it. I don't understand why they had to surprise us like this."

The most contentious issue of all, though, is the search for Virunga's oil.

Despite Soco's contract with de Merode's employer, the Congolese government, de Merode has been a leading opponent of all oil-related activity in the park, arguing that exploration and possible future extraction not only pose grave environmental risks but also are illegal under Congolese law.

The extent to which de Merode and ICCN have been involved in legal challenges to oil exploration remains in dispute. Prior to his shooting, according to multiple local activists who track issues related to the park, de Merode visited the Office of the Prosecutor General in Goma, North Kivu’s provincial capital, to discuss a legal inquiry into the Block 5 contract. However, the prosecutor general Dieudonné Kongolo Ilunga, has said that no such meeting took place.

De Merode has not commented publicly on whether or not he met with the prosecutor about Block 5, and neither he nor ICCN legal adviser Mathieu Cingoro responded to repeated requests for comment.

**Directions**: Read through the article and then answer the following questions in paragraph form. Make sure you are using and citing text evidence in your writing.

1. What is the Virungia National Park?

2. Who is Merode? Describe what he has done since being appointed to his current position.

3. What dangers are facing the Virunga National Park?