



## Virunga Discussion Guide

Director: Orlando von Einsiedel

Year: 2014

Time: 100 min

### You might know this director from:

Aisha's Song (2012)

Skateistan: To Live and Skate Kabul (2010)

## FILM SUMMARY

In the forested depths of eastern Congo lies Virunga National Park, one of the most bio-diverse places on Earth and home to the planet's last remaining mountain gorillas. In this wild, but enchanted environment, a small and embattled team of park rangers - including an ex-child soldier turned ranger, a caretaker of orphan gorillas and a dedicated conservationist who's a member of the Belgian royal family - protect this UNESCO world heritage site from armed militia, poachers and the dark forces struggling to control Congo's rich natural resources. When the newly formed M23 rebel group declares war, a new conflict threatens the lives and stability of everyone and everything they've worked so hard to protect, with the filmmakers and the film's participants caught in the crossfire.

A powerful combination of investigative journalism and nature, VIRUNGA is the incredible true story of a group of courageous people risking their lives to build a better future in a part of Africa the world's forgotten, and a gripping exposé of the realities of life in the Congo.

From executive producer Leonardo DiCaprio, VIRUNGA is the feature debut from director Orlando von Einsiedel and producer Joanna Natasegara.

## FILM THEMES

### GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Virunga National Park is run by a team of dedicated rangers. In a bid to create peace and stability, their purpose is to uphold the rule of law in an area where competing groups scramble to exploit the park's natural resources. By defending the park against oil exploration, park rangers and civil society alike come up against harmful opposition. Acts of bribery, corruption and human rights abuses, initially documented in the film, and later supported by various independent reports, establish why the rule of law and respect for human rights is still a live issue today.

### PROTECTED AREAS AND WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Virunga National Park was established as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, and later given an endangered status in 1994. International and domestic law renders any oil related activity incompatible with its status as a protected area. Perhaps because of pressure from the international political and business communities who questioned SOCO's ethical decision to explore for oil in a world heritage site, the company signed an agreement with the WWF in June 2014 agreeing to pull out of the park once seismic tests were complete. However, this agreement did not safeguard for the future of Virunga National Park and the door has been left open for oil operations to begin again should the DRC government and UNESCO agree to declassify all or part of the park. As a consequence, the struggle between conservation and corporate greed remains very real.

### BUSINESS IN FRAGILE REGIONS

Despite being one of the world's richest countries in terms of natural resources, it consistently ranks at the bottom of every global measure of human development. The onus is therefore placed on multinational corporations, such as SOCO, to ensure that adequate measures are in place to manage operations and specifically, not to exacerbate underlying issues when conducting their business. Secretly gathered evidence shown in VIRUNGA, demonstrates SOCO's lack of oversight amounting to allegations of bribery, corruption and human rights abuses by associates, or those claiming to be working in SOCO's interests.

### COLONIALISM AND SOVEREIGNTY

The DRC like many other countries is a relatively young sovereign state, only gaining independence in 1960. As to be expected, it experienced a period of difficulty in establishing its systems, which is why the strength and integrity of the park authority - one of the country's most successful examples of good governance and long term employment for men and women- is so important for the Congo's future. As the park implements the Virunga Alliance- a ten year initiative that sees clean energy alternatives bring sustainable economic and social development to the communities of Virunga and the 4 million people who live within a days walking distance of it- global respect for Congolese sovereignty is at a time of crucial importance.

**“We have to justify why we are on this earth”**

Andre Bauma, Gorilla Caretaker

**“What I am really scared about when this is published is that people read it and then they just go on with their life and nothing is done about this.”**

Melanie Gouby, Journalist



## FILM FACTS:

- There are currently 880 mountain gorillas located in the forests shared between the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, living at altitudes of 8,000 to 13,000 feet. Their conservation and protection is a very positive, common objective for all three countries.
- Members of civil society who've spoken out against oil exploration in the park or who are in favour of clean sustainable alternatives have received threats for doing so. You can read more about the effect this is having on the park's communities in independent reports published by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Global Witness](#) and [The Telegraph](#).
- The park's conservation work over the last ten years has seen dramatic improvements to the numbers of endangered populations. For example, the park now reports an increase in the number of hippos and elephants.
- Virunga National Park's Director, Emmanuel de Merode, was seriously injured by unidentified gunmen in April 2014, just two days before VIRUNGA's world premiere in Tribeca. He was returning to the park headquarters having just handed over a dossier of evidence to the DRC government documenting SOCO's activity in the region. There is no evidence to suggest that the two events are related. He made a miraculous recovery and returned to the park in May 2014 to resume his duties.
- The First Congo War, which began in 1996, was followed by the Second Congo War - or Great War of Africa - in 1998. Despite an official end to the war in 2003, the aftermath and its detrimental effects are still felt today. The war has directly involved nine African nations and 20 armed groups. By 2008, 5.4 million people had lost their lives to war-related causes, making it the deadliest war since WWII.
- Tourism is at an all time high since Virunga National Park reopened at the start of this year. Accommodation has been full to capacity and the park has hosted guests from all around the world who come for the incredible scenery, astonishing wildlife and of course gorilla trekking. Find out how to book your trip at [visitvirunga.org/](http://visitvirunga.org/)
- To date, VIRUNGA has won over 25 international film festival awards as well as the following prestigious nominations. The press attention surrounding the film since its release at Tribeca in April 2014 has driven donations and visitors to the park up and is having a very positive effect on the general public's engagement with the issues at the heart of the film
- Since the outbreak of war in 1996, 140 Virunga rangers have lost their lives defending their beautiful park. You can donate to the fallen rangers fund which supports the families of rangers who've died or suffered injury in the course of duty. Visit [virunga.org/donate](http://virunga.org/donate)

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Donate to the [Virunga Foundation](#), donations go directly to the park and the rangers who work everyday to protect this magnificent place and its communities.
2. Spread the word on Twitter and Facebook. We must not let this slide. Suggested Tweet: "What is SOCO International doing to safeguard #Virunga? Watch @VirungaMovie on #Netflix and #TakeAction <http://virungamovie.com/#takeaction>"
3. Write to [SOCO](#). Ask them how they intend to safeguard for the future of Virunga National Park.
4. Write to [SOCO's shareholders](#). Ask them to join #TeamVirunga in questioning SOCO's efforts to safeguard the future of Virunga National Park.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**