

**FILM SUMMARY**

Riveting and breathtaking, VIRUNGA portrays the powerful and deadly battle between corrupt politicians, international corporations, and concerned environmentalists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The film looks at a fractured nation impoverished by governmental mishandlings of its abundant natural resources.

Virunga National Park contains half of the world’s remaining mountain gorillas and a suspected surplus of oil beneath Lake Edward. Despite an estimated $24 trillion worth of untapped deposits of raw mineral ores, the majority of Congolese continue to live in extreme poverty. Mismanagement, greed, war, and extensive poaching has contributed to over 30 years of civil unrest and continues to threaten the delicate ecosystem. The endangered mountain gorillas and other Virunga National Park inhabitants are under constant threat of poaching. Lawful or not, money appears to maintain the toughest stronghold on those in power.

Under the patient leadership of Emmanuel de Merode, we meet a team of brave park rangers, as well as undercover journalist, Melanie Gouby, who are risking their lives to protect the mountain gorillas and provide a more stable environment for local Congolese people who rely on Virunga. They fight a tough, unrelenting battle but stand as living testaments to the power and beauty of the human spirit over war and greed.
FILM THEMES

The Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the world’s richest countries in natural resources, is replete with environmental disaster and financial despair. While the forces of evil are plentiful, a few well-intentioned warriors protect the Congo and its inhabitants from a fatal future.

DESTROYERS VS. PROTECTORS
Virunga National Park is arguably in the heart of the Congo, pulsing with a vast expanse of natural resources and animal life unrivaled in most of the world. Human shortcomings have transformed this earthly paradise into a battleground where the money-hungry, power-hunting majority seek to destroy both land and animals through unlawful mining and poaching. The park rangers dare to defend Virunga as passionately as they would defend their own flesh. The fragile future of the park depends on whether the few good people, who are underequipped yet full of hope, can overcome the dark forces of evil and greed.

WORLD HERITAGE SITE
According to UNESCO, “Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations.” The lush footage in VIRUNGA reveals why Virunga National Park is a designated World Heritage Site. Laws are in place to govern this certification, but in the face of shiny bribes by British oil company, SOCO, the laws become slippery guidelines that are mostly ignored. This undermines the international community and the lives of those within and around the park alike.

MY BRIBE, YOUR OIL, THEIR LIFE
Greed runs rampant in the film, as multiple parties become consumed with a desire for illegal oil and poached animals. With money-hungry warlords, foreign corporations, and a corrupt government at the helm, the displaced citizens of this war-torn nation cannot resist bribes when nothing separates them from rock bottom. The sad reality of reckless poaching doesn’t look so terrible in the face of poverty. But there are those who choose life and nature over bribery, holding the baton of hope high into the Congo sky.

WHITE IN A BLACK WORLD
SOCO views Park Director, Emmanuel de Merode, referred to as a member of the Belgian Royal Family, as the only obstacle in their path to oil and wealth. When Julian and John, two SOCO consultants, state that there is no reasoning with the black man, that “the best solution is to recolonize these countries,” it is clear that equality and just treatment is not on this corporation’s agenda. Instead of reaching out to black Africans who come from this highly desirable landscape and should rightly have the final say on how their heritage is handled, the disconnected white oil man does nothing more than battle his own kind.

“It is not with weapons that we are going to succeed but by documenting everything.”
Emmanuel de Merode

“When gorillas hear the sound of bombs, they want to be close to the caregivers.”
Andre Bauma
FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What did you know of the Democratic Republic of the Congo before watching VIRUNGA?

2. How much interest do you have in traveling to Virunga National Park? Do you think tourism could help the region?

3. Do you know where the minerals that are used to make your cell phone come from?

4. Have you ever visited a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

5. Should foreign companies be allowed to drill for oil in Virunga National Park? If so, under what conditions?

6. What responsibility do western nations have to the war-torn nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

7. What were your impressions of Park Director, Emmanuel de Merode, a white member of the Belgian royal family, leading the all-black team of African park rangers?

8. What were your impressions of Melanie Gouby, the French journalist in VIRUNGA? How does her work aid the local Congolese population?

9. A country so rich in natural resources is so poor in its standard of living. What factors, in your opinion, lead to such disparity?

10. Is there a way in which the mountain gorillas can help the Democratic Republic of the Congo repair itself?
FILM FACTS:

- VIRUNGA has won a number of awards, including Best Documentary at the Little Rock Film Festival, and was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the Tribeca Film Festival.

- Prior to filming VIRUNGA, Director Von Einsiedel had never visited Congo but had spent quite a bit of time in West Africa. He was inspired to make the film after reading an article on park rangers protecting mountain gorillas and wanted to tell a positive story about a part of the world in which primarily negative stories are told.

- There are currently 880 mountain gorillas located in the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, living at altitudes of 8,000 to 13,000 feet. Mountain gorillas, the largest living primates, weigh up to 440 pounds and are 4–6 feet tall when standing erect. Their natural life span is 40–50 years. Mountain gorillas are mainly herbivores and rarely need to drink, as they get water from food. Newborn gorillas weigh around 4 pounds.

- Since the outbreak of war in 1996, 140 Virunga rangers have lost their lives defending the park.

- In June 2014, British oil company, SOCO, bowed to international pressure and agreed to suspend its oil exploration in Virunga National Park. Leading conservation groups had collected the signatures of more than 700,000 people who were against SOCO’s involvement in Virunga.

- Two of the world’s most active volcanoes are located within Virunga. Nyamuragira (“to herd cows”), Africa’s most active volcano, has erupted over 40 times since 1885, most recently in 2011.

- Virunga National Park is one of the world’s most biodiverse regions, boasting 218 mammals (including 22 primates), 706 birds, 109 reptiles, and 78 amphibians. The vast range of habitats includes rift valley lakes, swamps, savannahs, woodlands, forests, volcanoes, and mountains.

- Virunga National Park was established in 1925 as Africa’s first national park and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

- 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 9 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. War was triggered by the Rwandan Genocide, when many of the rebels, along with two million Rwandan refugees, fled to what was then Zaire.

- Virunga National Park Director, Emmanuel de Merode, was seriously injured by unidentified gunmen in April 2014. He returned to the park in May 2014 to resume his duties.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Become involved with Virunga Alliance, a charity that “exists to help protect the flora and fauna of the park, as well as the local communities that live near Virunga’s boundary.”

2. Support Panthera’s Anti-Poaching campaign to help stop the war on wildlife.

3. Many of the minerals used in cell phones come from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Fairphone works to only use minerals extracted under acceptable humane and environmental conditions.

4. Eat chocolate to protect the gorillas and support women’s education in the Eastern Congo. Go to OriginalBeans.com to learn more.