

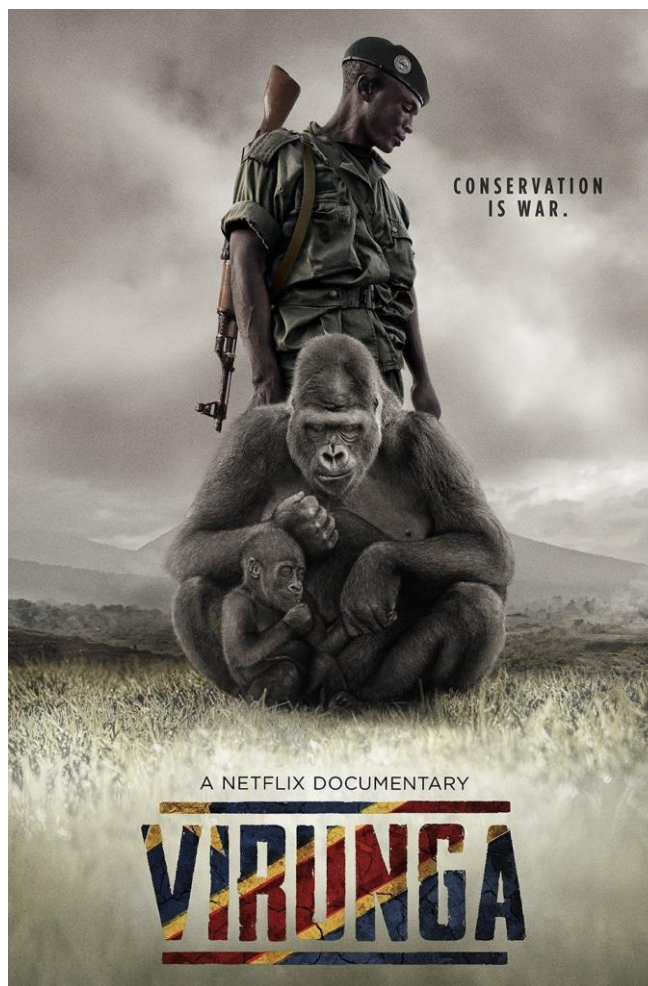
**The Baltimore Environmental Film Series at Loyola University Maryland**

Presents: *Virunga* (2014)  
February 21, 2017 at 6:30 PM  
McGuire Hall East

Dr. Elizabeth Schmidt, professor of African history at Loyola, will lead a post-film discussion.

**Discussion Guide for**  
*Virunga*  
(2014)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NHXxUoUwnE>



Executive producer Leonardo DiCaprio,  
director Orlando von Einsiedel,  
and producer Joanna Natasegara

## **FILM SUMMARY**

Virunga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, is one of the earth's most biodiverse locations. It shelters the world's last surviving mountain gorillas, which are threatened by war, poaching, and international oil exploration. Congolese rebels, supported by neighboring countries, poachers profiting from the sale of endangered species, and the British oil company, SOCO International, form the backdrop to the award-winning documentary film. The film features gorilla protectors André Bauma, a gorilla caregiver; Rodrigue Mugaruka Katembo, the central sector warden; and Emmanuel de Merode, a Belgian anthropologist who served as the park's chief warden; as well as Mélanie Gouby, a French investigative journalist.

## **FILM THEMES**

### **GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

Virunga National Park rangers work to protect wildlife and uphold the rule of law in opposition to diverse groups that attempt to exploit the park's natural resources. As a result, park rangers and civil society activists have become the targets of harassment and human rights abuses.

### **PROTECTED AREAS AND WORLD HERITAGE SITES**

Under international and U.S. domestic law, oil related activity is prohibited in protected areas such as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Environmental and human rights activists questioned the ethics and legality of SOCO's operations and pressed the corporation to withdraw from Virunga. Under the weight of adverse publicity, it agreed to do so. However, the agreement does not guarantee future protection of the park or its inhabitants if the Congolese government declassifies part or all of the contested area.

### **BUSINESS AS USUAL IN CONFLICT ZONES?**

The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the world's richest nations in terms of natural resources, but it ranks near the bottom of nearly all global human development measures. It has long been exploited by foreign countries and their business interests. SOCO International is but one of a long list of private companies that have engaged in corruption and human rights abuses in their search for profits in the Congo.

## **FURTHER DISCUSSION:**

1. What did you know about the Democratic Republic of the Congo before watching *VIRUNGA*?
2. What role have foreign entities—both government and private sector—had in generating violence in the eastern Congo? How have they affected Virunga in particular?
3. What responsibility do foreign governments have in overseeing the behavior of corporations based in their nations, but which operate in Africa?
4. What role does the independent media play in holding governments and corporations accountable?

5. What suggestions are made by African civil society activists for economic development alternatives to oil exploration in protected areas?

6. Do you think about where your own money is invested (i.e., your bank accounts, investments, etc.)? What actions can you take to encourage positive social change?

### **LEARN MORE:**

National Geographic (Excellent overview. Free access, but user name and password required.) <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/special-features/2014/06/140606-gorillas-congo-virunga-national-park/>

Interview with film director Orlando von Einsiedel about the dangers faced by Virunga protectors and difficulties encountered in making the film [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJj3\\_ELUz34](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJj3_ELUz34)

Human Rights Watch (Discusses attacks on park rangers and critics of SOCO International oil company.) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/11/dispatches-congos-virunga-park-rangers-activists-still-need-justice>

Global Witness and BBC (Describes bribery by SOCO International to corrupt government officials, park rangers, and rebel militias to promote their economic interests and to silence critics.) <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/archive/drillers-mist-how-secret-payments-and-climate-violence-helped-uk-firm-open-african/> and <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33079911>

Global Witness (Describes SOCO's continued activities in Virunga and new threats from neighboring Uganda.) <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/oil-gas-and-mining/protecting-virunga-national-park-oil-companies/>

African Conservation Foundation (Highlights concerns expressed by Congolese civil society about the continued harassment of SOCO critics and the dangers of future oil exploration in Virunga) <http://www.africanconservation.org/in-focus-current-threats/congo-civil-society-express-concerns-about-soco-s-deal-with-wwf-on-virunga-oil-exploration>