

Agency and Structure in Militarized Conservation and Armed Mobilization: Evidence from Eastern DRC's Kahuzi-Biega National Park

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ABSTRACT

Ongoing debates in conservation studies stress the dire consequences of 'fortress' and 'militarized' conservation at violent frontiers. Presenting evidence from Kahuzi-Biega National Park in war-torn eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this article shows how the park has become a focal point for armed insurgent groups in the region. Although fortress conservation has contributed to one major incident of violent resistance in recent years, it plays only a marginal role in defining the structures shaping the actions of armed groups. These structures — some of which are reproduced and (occasionally) reshaped by armed groups — include the legacies of poverty and insecurity, the geographical features of the park and the presence of illicit trading networks. This perspective emerges only when we zoom out from the park to place it within the context of the history and broader political economy of the DRC. On the one hand, these dynamics severely constrain the agency of conservation organizations, leaving militarized conservation as the only feasible form of enforcement. This approach at times generates violent outcomes for certain groups of people and produces a resource-rich, isolated terrain which provides a staging ground for broader conflicts to play out. On the other hand, militarized conservation could provide basic law and order at the forest's edge. Ultimately, therefore, militarized conservation plays an ambivalent role vis-à-vis security and stability.

The authors thank the four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article. At various points, Papy Mulume, Michel Bazika, Yves Ikobo and Romain Lwaboshi accompanied the first author in the field. We thank them for their commitment to the research, without which this article would not have been possible. We also thank the Université catholique de Bukavu (UCB) and its Centre d'expertise en gestion manière (CEGEMI) as our local partner. The research was funded by VLIRUOS (grant number CD2019JOI013A102) and Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (grant number V432519N).

Development and Change 0(0): 1–40. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12764

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018 the indigenous Batwa people forcibly reoccupied their ancestral forests in Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP), eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), from which they had been removed by force during the 1970s. Joint battalions of armed park guards and government soldiers once again attempted to expel the Batwa from the forest. The Batwa fought back and some of them vowed that under no circumstances would they leave their ancestral forest again. The conflict that ensued resulted in numerous deaths and injuries and the destruction of hundreds of hectares of forest in the park's highland sector.

These events appear to depict a classic case of local mobilization against 'fortress conservation'. This entails the displacement of an indigenous population from its traditional lands for biodiversity conservation purposes, leading to its impoverishment and marginalization, which causes the population to resist conservation rules. Resistance from the indigenous population is subsequently brutally repressed by park authorities, only to lead to further conflict. In this instance, such a reading tells only part of the story of armed mobilization and violence inside the park.

Although the militarized enforcement of fortress conservation was an important factor in the Batwa's decision to revolt against park authorities, it is by no means the only cause of armed group activity inside the park. Even if some of their leaders are willing to take advantage of local animosities against the park in order to gain supporters, the majority of the small, non-state armed groups that now hide out and illegally extract resources from inside the park are not (principally) motivated by grievances generated by the legacies of coercive conservation, both past and present. To understand these armed mobilizations, this article examines how broader political and economic structures have generated a perpetual state of militarization in and around the park's highland sector. It concludes that these dynamics and their violent outcomes are jointly constitutive of the social structures that shape opportunities and constraints for individual and organizational agency, including the agency of conservation organizations.

In this study, we draw on the theory of structuration by Anthony Giddens (1984). The structuration approach is based on the assumption that while the agency of people is influenced by the social structures that surround them, those same structures are reproduced by the actions of individual agents. We deploy this approach and conceptualize armed group mobilization as a fundamental part of the political-economic structure in which KBNP is embedded. Of particular significance to our argument is the geography of the park — rich in various minerals, with a harsh topography, and located at the DRC's national borders, it provides an ideal location for armed groups to hide out, extract resources and pursue wider ends. This works

in conjunction with broader legacies of insecurity, poverty and illicit networks which link the armed groups engaged in mineral extraction inside the park to powerful Congolese politicians, businessmen and international markets. In accordance with the theory of structuration, we also show how some of these structures are recreated and/or modified by the members of armed groups and how conservation is inserted in these structures. Our analysis follows and attempts to provide an empirically grounded answer to the pertinent question of ‘whether militarized conservation ultimately contributes to rising levels of violence in contexts of armed conflict’ (Duffy et al., 2019: 69).

The analysis draws on fieldwork conducted in August 2019–February 2020, April–June 2021, and July 2022 in the territories of Kalehe and Kabare, South Kivu province. The data, contacts and leads developed in the first visit were built upon during subsequent visits, thus enabling us to build a chronological understanding of armed mobilizations surrounding the park. The first field visit involved around six months of exploratory ethnographic research on conflicts involving the park which was carried out by the first author and local researchers¹ around KBNP’s highland sector. During this period, over 100 semi-structured interviews and 11 focus groups were conducted to understand the key conflicts relating to the enforcement of conservation regulations among different groups surrounding the park. Data were also collected using other ethnographic methods, including transect walks² and general observations. For the second field visit, the first author worked alongside an assistant and a team of local researchers³ for one month to conduct semi-structured interviews and run focus groups specifically on the factors that influence the mobilization of non-state armed groups. The team conducted more than 50 semi-structured interviews and ran 13 focus groups. Around 50 more semi-structured interviews were carried out during the third visit to understand people’s perceptions of different military actors operating in the vicinity of the park.⁴

When entering a village, as is customary in eastern DRC, the team would first introduce themselves to the chief and explain the nature and purpose of our research. Purposive sampling was then used to identify key respondents. These respondents were generally selected based on the advice of the local researchers, who in some cases were themselves members of the communities upon which the study is based. Subsequently, a snowball sampling

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1. Papy Mulume and Michel Bazika supported the first author with data collection, translation and negotiating access during the first fieldwork.
 2. A transect walk is a qualitative research method whereby the researcher conducts a systematic walk along a specific route (transect) to gather observations on people, their surrounding and resources.
 3. The team for the second fieldwork included Romain Lwaboshi, Yves Ikobo and Papy Mulume.
 4. Michel Bazika worked as a translator and research assistant for the first author during the third field visit.

strategy was deployed, whereby the key informants acted as 'gatekeepers' to the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), helping us to identify additional informants based on the questions asked. When a key informant was identified, the team would often go back for several interviews with the individual and people close to them in order to build trust, delve deeper and construct life histories (see the vignettes presented later on). As the armed groups operating in and around the park are engaged in illegal resource extraction, and therefore do not wish to attract attention to themselves, we also often had to 'follow our noses', to listen out for gossip that could lead to relevant sources or information. Chance encounters were a crucial source of information while researching illicit networks 'in the shadows' and some of the most relevant, nuanced data were acquired in one-off, spontaneous encounters with people on roads leading up to the park, while eating lunch in small restaurants, or in bars during the evenings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the leaders of seven armed groups of various sizes; six focus groups with their soldiers; eight interviews with park guards and two with government soldiers. Other people engaged in interviews and focus groups included artisanal miners, farmers, livestock breeders, small business owners and timber and charcoal traders. Data collection focused on villages and towns in the territories of Kalehe and Kabare. Our respondents came from the Batembo, Bahavu, Bashi, Balega, Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa ethnic groups. In Bukavu, around 50 in-depth interviews were carried out with representatives of local and international NGOs, international development agencies, the Congolese state conservation agency L'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) — Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation — customary chiefs, local civil society and members of the government. Most of our informants have been anonymized for security reasons given the sensitive nature of some of the data they reported. However, not all informants have been kept anonymous: for example, the actual names of the leaders of armed groups are those used in the vignettes. This is because a large amount of information about these rebel leaders is available online, or because they agreed for details to be published after the interviews took place.

After gathering the data, it was transcribed onto computers either by the first author or by local assistants, if the data had been recorded by them. We also hired local researchers to transcribe data from French and local languages into English. The data were uploaded into NVivo and then coded based on categories identified from the relevant social science literature on conservation in violent frontier regions. Rather than taking a pure grounded theory approach based on 'axial' coding, whereby theory emerges from the bottom up, a mixture of induction and deduction was used throughout. This is often the case with ethnographic studies where typically 'ethnographers start with a theory — a broad explanation as to what they hope to find — drawn from cognitive science to understand ideas and beliefs' (Creswell,

2013: 92). During the analytical phase, we relied on the emic perspectives provided by the research participants and then filtered them through our own etic viewpoint to develop arguments. Rather than describing how the data were validated or objective, as quantitative researchers might do, we sought to demonstrate, in line with Eisner (1991), the credibility or trustworthiness of the qualitative data and of our interpretations. This was achieved through a process of triangulation across different interviews and with NGO reports, online and newspaper articles, and personal communications with key informants.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins with an overview of the literature on militarized conservation at violent frontiers and indicates how a structuration approach may be insightful in understanding the mobilization of armed groups in parks. The subsequent section describes the form and effects of conservation in KBNP, focusing on the grievances it has generated among local populations. The section that follows provides a history of violent conflict and armed mobilization in the region surrounding the park. Next, we outline the main social structures that give rise to motivations and opportunities for armed mobilization inside the park. We then provide vignettes of the lives of three people (two armed group leaders and one potential armed group leader) to highlight how the actions of individual agents reproduce and/or reshape the social structures that give rise to armed mobilizations through time and space. Interactions that occur between the structuration armed mobilization and militarized practices of fortress conservation are then considered. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and conceptual approach for the broader literature on militarized conservation and armed mobilization in violent frontiers.

MILITARIZED CONSERVATION AT VIOLENT FRONTIERS

Political ecologists have long highlighted how fortress conservation can dispossess local populations of their traditional lands, resources and histories. Earlier assessments frequently paint a dichotomous picture. On the one hand, there are state conservation agencies and international conservation NGOs who dispossess and discipline local communities in the process of enforcing conservation rules. On the other hand, there are the people marginalized and impoverished through protected area designation and enclosure (Brockington, 2002; Büscher, 2013; Kelly, 2011; Neumann, 2004a). A part of this literature highlights how fortress conservation typically leads to resistance when people adversely affected by conservation regulations revolt against them (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2015; Holmes, 2007; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Peluso, 1992; Simpson and Geenen, 2021).

More recently, political ecologists have turned their attention toward the implementation and effects of militarized conservation, which is apparent in the use of military-grade weaponry, technologies and techniques to enforce

conservation regulations. Militarized conservation is effectively an intensification of the fortress model that was dominant during colonial and post-colonial periods (Lunstrum, 2014). A wave of literature has been published on the subject over the past decade. In a landmark paper, Lunstrum (*ibid.*) shows how the spatiality of the Kruger National Park in South Africa combined with environmentalist discourses and notions of state sovereignty to justify 'green militarization' as a way to tackle commercial rhino poaching. Building on Lunstrum's work, Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) introduce the expanded notion of 'green violence' to highlight the wide range of violent strategies — material, social and discursive — used to respond to the poaching crisis in Southern Africa's peace parks.

The violence of militarized conservation made visible by this line of research often occurred far from anybody who might provide oversight and control of its excesses. This formed the basis for an increasing number of critical accounts. Lunstrum (2014: 817) argues that green militarization leads to a self-reinforcing 'arms race between poachers and anti-poaching forces' that is difficult to de-escalate once in train. Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) argue that the green violence of conservation threatens the ideals of 'peace parks' to a greater extent than rhino poaching ever could. More recently, Witter (2021) proposed that militarized conservation is likely to be counterproductive, fuelling resentment, resistance and, ultimately, increased poaching. These analyses provide an important rejoinder to the discourses of some pro-conservation activists and NGOs, which have at times contrasted narratives of violent poachers against heroic park authorities (as highlighted by Massé, 2019). However, the fieldwork upon which these arguments are based was primarily conducted in Southern Africa, a region where states maintain a reasonable monopoly over the means of violence, at least when compared to the Central African region where our research is based.

Another strand in the literature has paid greater attention to cases where militarized conservation is implemented in what are already profoundly violent frontier regions — and in that sense, is coherent with the social arenas in which it is carried out. In regions where multiple state and non-state armed actors (i.e. government militaries and insurgent groups) are already present, the characterization of much of the violence that takes place in and around protected areas (including against park guards) as resistance to conservation has been questioned. For instance, Lombard (2016) proposes that the case of militarized conservation in the Central African Republic (CAR) forces us to rethink binary 'domination/subjection' accounts of conservation conflicts. Instead, the majority of people, including armed conservation guards and rebel groups, living in a region where hierarchies are volatile, seek to maintain and gain access to sources of income through practices of both 'threats' and 'hiding'. In Chad and the CAR, Lombard and Tubiana (2020) show how, rather than being separate from the broader social structures that shape the political economy of violence, armed conservation thus becomes

a component of them, 'a part whose importance varies in part as a function of how much the donors fund it, and a part that inextricably includes violent practice' (ibid.: 4).

In conflict-afflicted regions, militarized conservation essentially comes to intersect and interact with existing dynamics of armed mobilization and violence. The primary critique in these contexts, which we will come back to, is that militarized conservation tends to intensify and exacerbate existing dynamics of conflict. For example, Lombard's (2016) research in CAR shows how militarized conservation can lead to an increase in wider 'threat economies', even if it did not originally cause them. With data from Virunga National Park, Verweijen and Marijnen (2018) argue that militarized conservation serves to exacerbate armed mobilization, resistance and unauthorized resource exploitation. Devine et al. (2020) demonstrate how strict conservation combined with international demand for cocaine and US drug policy in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve. A political forest was created where narco-cattle ranchers could operate with impunity, in turn accelerating deforestation and violence. Wrathall et al. (2020) show how in Central America coercive conservation provided drug-trafficking organizations with opportunities to gain local legitimacy and cement control. Thus, the effects of militarized conservation on environmental protection are frequently viewed as counterproductive.

Other observers have focused on how militarized conservation can expand the reach of state sovereignty (and coercion) into isolated frontier regions. In this sense, conservation becomes part of a wider 'civilizing' mission that requires the reordering and rationalization of society and space, territory and population (Scott, 1998). For example, Neumann (2004b) explores the use of conservation as a tool in wider state-building projects and how conservation affects understandings of nationhood in Tanzania and the United States. In their classic article on the political ecology of war and forests in Southeast Asia, Peluso and Vandergeest (2011: 587) demonstrate how during the Cold War, 'insurgency and counterinsurgency helped normalize political forests as components of the modern nation-state during and in the aftermath of violence'. Several other authors characterize protected areas as sites of state consolidation to counter rebel groups and unruly populations (Dutta, 2020; Lunstrum, 2013; Massé and Lunstrum, 2016; Woods and Naimark, 2020). In these contexts, conservation can either be viewed as a form of counterinsurgency or seen to blend with a wider range of counterinsurgency strategies deployed by governments.

We present a different analysis. Protected areas are rich in economically valuable and 'lootable' resources. They are also ideal hideouts since they are often geographically marginal, scantily populated, rough terrains. In effect, the 'friction' (Scott, 2009) of the landscapes created through protected area designation makes them inherently difficult to govern. In conflict-afflicted regions, the agency of conservation initiatives is also severely constrained by broader dynamics of violence and armed mobilization that find in pro-

tected areas the ideal 'staging grounds' (Gaynor et al., 2016) for broader conflicts and political-economic interests to play out. When state control is especially weak, it becomes very difficult to properly police the boundaries of these areas and uphold conservation regulations. Rather than increasing state sovereignty, protected areas could therefore serve to fragment governmental power by maintaining the kinds of resource-rich, wild and isolated spaces that are attractive to existing non-state armed groups. Apart from being the only feasible form of enforcement in violent frontier regions, militarized conservation is part of and (marginally) reinforces broader political economies of violence. In the parts of protected areas where they assert a degree of control, armed park guards can also, at times, be viewed by some people as contributing to security and stability.

Although infrequently acknowledged, the latter point is not entirely new. Kelly and Gupta (2016) showed how people living around a protected area in Cameroon came to consider certain aspects of coercive conservation previously conceived negatively — i.e. hunting restrictions and exclusionary practices — as something to be desired. The population around Garamba National Park in DRC looked to conservation as a source of predictability and stability in a region otherwise racked by violence and insecurity (Titeca et al., 2020). These interpretations lend support to the idea that the impact of conservation on dynamics of violence are ambiguous, with heterogeneous effects for people living in different geographical, political and historical contexts. One of our goals here is to bring out the drivers of non-state armed group mobilization in war-torn KBNP and the multifarious impacts of militarized conservation on security — negative and positive — for people living under its influence. To do so, our primary focus is not on the armed park guards financed by militarized conservation (see Lombard and Tubiana, 2020), but instead on the non-state armed groups that are operating in the area of the park.

AGENCY AND STRUCTURE IN ARMED MOBILIZATION

In contrast to some accounts which have represented individual agency in relation to structures of militarized conservation as taking the shape of a domination/resistance binary opposition (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2015; Holmes, 2007; Witter, 2021; Witter and Satterfield, 2019), we look to the broader political-economic forces that lead non-state armed groups to engage in illicit resource extraction inside a conservation area enforced by military-style park guards in collaboration with government soldiers. In this regard, our approach aligns somewhat with Lunstrum et al. (2021) who focus on how changing aspects of a broader political economy in South Africa and Mozambique provide an enabling environment in which young men choose to enter the risky (though lucrative) illicit rhino trade.

We take direct inspiration from the theory of structuration developed by Anthony Giddens (1984) in his book, *The Constitution of Society*. Rather than representing a dualism, i.e. comprised of two independent phenomena, Giddens argued that the connection between structure and agency should be seen to be as a duality, i.e. comprised of two interdependent phenomena. Giddens concluded that neither agency nor structure should be given primacy since social practices are recursive: 'they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors' (Giddens, 1984: 2). The theory of structuration conceptualizes social structures as enabling, as opposed to prohibiting, the action of knowledgeable human agents (North, 1990). Rather than being some distant, abstract, or domineering force, the structure can be seen to comprise the practical rules, norms, discourses and resources that bring about the chronological ordering of social practices over relatively long expanses of time and space (Giddens, 1984). In turn, the structure itself could not exist without the repeated, quotidian actions of multiple, knowledgeable human agents. The structure thus comes into being and is maintained directly through people's free and creative choices, as opposed to in isolation from them.

'Structuration' refers to the conditions leading to the continuity and reproduction or transformation of structures (ibid.: 25). Routine, which is the main form of day-to-day social action people use to reduce 'unconscious sources of anxiety' and increase 'ontological security' (ibid.: 282), is a keystone to continuity. According to Giddens (ibid.: 26), 'Through the knowledgeable continuation of routine activities to reduce everyday sources of anxiety and marginalisation, conscious agents unintentionally perpetuate the very sources of the (structural) conditions which serve to reproduce anxiety and marginalisation'. In effect, the actions of individual agents give rise to unintended consequences that reproduce the same socio-structural conditions that first generated the initial actions. Thus, structuration necessarily implies a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop (Parker, 2000). Agency refers to the capability of individuals to do things volitionally and is displayed when an individual could have acted differently (Giddens, 1984: 9). Thus, agency rests on the opportunities afforded by structures, on the capability to exercise power including the power to affect structures.

To understand the structural conditions which give rise to armed mobilization, we also draw on the literature on the causes of civil war. The greed conflict hypothesis proposes that insurrection occurs as a result of people's desire to gain access to natural resource rents that are the spoils of war. Thus, people perform a cost-benefit analysis to assess whether the rewards of joining an armed group are greater than those of not joining: that is, 'where a rebellion is financially and militarily feasible, it will occur' (Collier et al., 2009: 1). The notion that greed is the primary cause of civil war has been widely critiqued in the literature on the Congolese conflict, and more broadly (Cramer, 2002; Stearns, 2014). In the case of DRC, it is

argued that natural resources only result in armed mobilization when 'they can find expression through social and political tensions' (Stearns, 2014: 158). Recognizing this, we have chosen to combine the greed conflict hypothesis with what is known as the grievance model of civil conflict (Korf, 2011). This alternative, though complementary, explanation for armed mobilization suggests that people rebel over injustices related to issues of identity, such as ethnicity, religion and social class. In line with Korf (*ibid.*), we seek to understand the complex entanglements between greed *and* grievance which instil pervasive insecurity in the context we observe. Our argument is, therefore, that the socio-structural conditions surrounding KBNP provide both economic opportunities and injustices which motivate rebellion. Agents reproduce these structural conditions through the unintended consequences of their actions, in the process generating new motivations as well as opportunities to rebel.

The primary social structures that shape armed mobilization in and around KBNP are the legacies of insecurity and poverty in the wider region; the geographical features of the park, including its proximity to an international border with Rwanda, mountainous terrain, forest cover and mineral resource abundance; and the presence of illicit or 'shadow state' networks (Reno, 1995). The latter connect armed groups to politico-military elites and enable them to sell minerals on international markets and to access weapons. Some of these structural conditions are reproduced or reshaped by the actions of the members of armed groups and their supporters. Militarized conservation adds fuel to the structuration of armed mobilization through the violence it brings to the table, producing additional grievances, and more broadly through the normalization of militarization. Over the long term, conservation's contribution to the structuration of armed mobilization is likely also to include the production of a resource-rich, harsh terrain in which armed groups can hide out and pursue their political and economic agendas. In conjunction with this, the presence of armed park guards at the edge of the forest is viewed by some people as a potential contributor to security. The overall impact of militarized conservation on wider dynamics of conflict and violence is therefore probably mixed.

MILITARIZED CONSERVATION, GRIEVANCE AND RESISTANCE IN KAHUZI-BIEGA NATIONAL PARK

KBNP straddles the provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu and Maniema in the east of DRC, covering an area of 6,000 km². One of the three most important protected areas for biodiversity conservation in the Albertine Rift, it is home to a significant population of endangered eastern lowland gorillas. The area is protected exclusively for conservation purposes, scientific research and tourism as opposed to local land uses. It has long been managed through a strict law-enforcement approach that draws on a variety of mili-

tary techniques and technologies. To many observers, the park epitomizes fortress or militarized conservation.

The territorialization of the park occurred in three stages. In the first stage in 1937, the Belgian colonial regime created the Zoological and Forest Reserve of Mount Kahuzi intending to protect the region's unique biodiversity (Mutimanwa, 2001). The status of 'nature reserve' meant access to natural resources was restricted though not entirely forbidden. In the second stage starting in 1970, the Congolese government of President Mobutu turned the nature reserve into a fully-fledged national park. The change in designation meant local populations would no longer be permitted to live or extract resources within its boundaries. From that point onward the park would be protected for only science, conservation purposes and tourism. In the third stage in 1975, the government expanded the park to include an extensive lowland sector. Around 13,000 people, including groups of indigenous Batwa, were forcibly expelled from inside the park boundaries during the 1970s (Barume, 2000). For decades after the Batwa were expelled, they lived an impoverished life among other Bantu communities at the forest's edge (Isumbisho et al., 2021). They fell victim to cultural and socio-economic discrimination yet continued to enter the park to gather resources for their survival and, arguably, as a form of covert or 'everyday' resistance (Simpson and Geenen, 2021).

The park is currently managed through a public–private partnership between ICCN and the World Conservation Society (WCS). The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) has supported the park since the 1980s, including during the Congo's two wars, but does not currently provide funding for military training or equipment. The German development bank KfW (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau) pays more than 200 park rangers an additional US\$ 80 on top of the small state salary of US\$ 20 a month. These rangers are equipped with full military uniforms and AK47s to secure the park's perimeter and stop illegal resource extraction within its boundaries. Some of these guards have been trained in military-style tactics by the Maisha security company (Flummerfelt, 2022). A network of patrol posts surrounds the park boundaries, from which the rangers conduct regular patrols in and around the park. The park's control centre in Tshivanga uses a flat screen monitor and satellite technology donated by the United States to follow the patrols in real-time.⁵ When ICCN park guards are tasked with removing illegal settlers and resource users inside the park, they sometimes team up with government soldiers from Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo (FARDC) — Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On some occasions, government soldiers also conduct their own operations against non-state armed groups inside the park. Soldiers from Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies

5. As reported by journalist Simone Schlindwein (2020).

pour la stabilisation en RD Congo (Soldiers from United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DR Congo) have even accompanied patrols in the past. The above actors are effectively the state (or state-like) actors that enact the militarization of conservation in the park and other protected areas in eastern DRC. They can be contrasted with, though often maintain shadowy links to, the numerous non-state armed or rebel groups which operate in the vicinity of the park.

The coercive approach deployed in KBNP has resulted in at least one case in which local people excluded from the park have mobilized against park authorities, leading to violent conflict. In October 2018, groups of Batwa started to return to the park's highland sector from which they had been expelled when the reserve was transformed into a national park in 1970. Simpson and Geenen (2021) argue the reasons the Batwa decided to return to their ancestral lands at this specific point were threefold: first, the failure to secure compensation and access rights to their ancestral lands through formal and legal channels; second, an increase in threats to the Batwa's dignity, identity and livelihoods over recent years; and third, the emergence of opportunities to forge alliances with more powerful actors in a way that consolidated the group's power and allowed it to exploit natural resources for commercial purposes. We take stock of these arguments and put them in the context of broader structural conditions. Our objective is to show that although fortress conservation and its militarized enforcement have generated and fed into dynamics of violence and resistance, the agency of most non-state armed groups inside the park is primarily shaped by wider forces. As a result of the sheer concentration of armed actors inside the park, the organizational agency of park authorities is severely constrained, leaving little alternative than for a militarized approach.

The Batwa's struggle represents perhaps the most obvious example of resistance to militarized conservation in the park. However, they are not the only ethnic group around KBNP with grievances against the legacy of forceful conservation. Multiple conflicts continue over the location of park boundaries in various administrative territories that surround the protected forests. For example, a representative of local civil society on the side of the park adjacent to Kabare territory described how ICCN reset the limits of the park with GPS technology in 1997, but ended up taking additional land that previously belonged to the population. The population made a formal complaint to ICCN about the issue, but to no avail, further fuelling their anger. Another source of anti-park animosity is apparent in the destruction of crops by wild animals. We received multiple reports of large mammals — including baboons, gorillas, chimpanzees and elephants⁶ — raiding the fields of local farmers. According to a local chief, the population made multiple re-

6. However, the majority of elephants were killed or fled the park during the Congo's wars (1996–97 and 1998–2003). Elephant raiding of crops around KBNP is therefore, for the most part, now a thing of the past.

quests to ICCN to remove baboons from their land and provide compensation for damage done. But recompense was not offered: ‘Animals come from the park to eat our crops. We have no right to push the animal off our land. So we must allow them to harvest our crops for free and do nothing! They give us nothing back in compensation’.⁷

Another source of resentment emerges from the scant economic or developmental benefits people receive from conservation. When projects are implemented, the benefits are typically perceived to go to local elites. People’s expectations for what the park should provide in terms of compensation for the restrictions imposed by conservation can be divided into two categories: development projects and employment opportunities. Regarding the former, a local representative of civil society implored, ‘the local population wants ICCN to lead some projects for them — school buildings, animal breeding, electrification. If they make breeding [projects], we will not take animals from the forest. If they give electricity, we will not take charcoal!’.⁸ Many respondents also lamented the lack of job opportunities coming from the park. For example, a peasant farmer described how ‘NGOs come here but they do not recruit from the local population. They only employ people who have high positions [i.e. elites]’.⁹

Human rights abuses committed by park guards and government soldiers during patrols have intensified local anger directed at the park. Although there are examples of park guards being held accountable for incidents of abuse, this happens only rarely, which further aggravates local resentment. Over the period of research, we recorded accusations of arbitrary arrests, corruption, extra-judicial killings and even rape. These are apparent in the following quotes:

Sometimes when we are in our fields, ICCN come and arrest us and take us to jail. We say we did nothing, but they bring us to the jail anyway and then call our families to bring money to let us out. Sometimes we have to pay a lot of money! If it is a little it would be just US\$ 100, but it could be even more.¹⁰

Even one sister of mine was raped by park guards in 2019. She was only a girl when this happened. She went to go and collect wood in the park. The park guards went there wanting to arrest them, saying that they were destroying the park. They tried to run away, but my sister could not run away. She was only 18. When the girl she was with ran away, the guards took her by force.¹¹

A park guard and two soldiers were drinking beer in the bar of a gentleman who was a friend of the park guard. When they finished, they left without paying for the beer they had consumed. The man who owned the bar followed them to ask for his money; he talked for

7. Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

8. Interview, local civil society representative, territory of Kabare, 16 September 2019.

9. Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Interview with peasant farmer, territory of Kabare, 14 April 2021.

a long time with these three armed men. In the end, shots were heard. The owner of the bar and another person had been murdered.¹²

Since 2018, government soldiers and park guards have committed large-scale human rights abuses, including torture and killings, while trying to expel groups of Batwa from the forest once more, as identified in a report commissioned by Minority Rights Group (Flummerfelt, 2022). While the park authorities question some of the report's findings, it is clear that several incidents of egregious violence have certainly occurred. For this and the reasons discussed above, resentments about how the park is managed are widespread in villages scattered around its boundaries. When accounting for these factors alone, the case of KBNP seemingly fits and vindicates predominant critiques of fortress and militarized conservation. However, a closer look at the history of armed mobilization in the park and the wider political economy of violence in eastern DRC reveals broader dynamics at play. As we will show in the following section, armed groups have a long history in the region and their presence inside the park boundaries can be explained by forces largely unrelated to conservation governance. Overall, the role played by militarized conservation in reproducing these violent dynamics is likely to be marginal.

CONSERVATION AMIDST INSURGENCIES

The territories of South and North Kivu that surround KBNP have been the locus of virtually continual rebellion since the 1990s. In this section, we identify several phases of armed mobilization in the region, all of which have overlapped with KBNP as a fortress conservation area, yet remain external to it in terms of their causes which are rooted in much broader structural dynamics. The park, a resource-rich, isolated terrain close to the DRC's international borders, has effectively become the arena for wider conflicts and political-economic interests to unfold.

The Rwandan civil war, genocide (April–July 1994) and refugee crisis were the sparks that ignited war in DRC. The genocide led over a million people to flee for safety in eastern Congo, including between 50,000 and 65,000 soldiers from the ex-Rwandan army and the notorious Interahamwe Bahutu youth militia group (Vlassenroot et al., 2016). A large number of Bahutu refugees took shelter in two huge camps next to Lake Kivu close to the park's highland sector. From these camps, they formed militias and started to launch cross-border attacks back into Rwanda. In 1996, the new Rwandan regime joined forces with the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL) — Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire — rebel insurgency to dis-

12. Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

band the camps and ultimately overthrow the what was by then moribund regime of Mobutu Sese Seko.

In September 1996, the AFDL coalition launched an offensive into South Kivu from the town of Uvira, triggering what has come to be known as the First Congo War (1996–97). As the rebel army advanced into Bukavu, thousands of Bahutu refugees and soldiers fled into KBNP's forests in an attempt to escape retribution. Many then took refuge inside the park, including members of the ex-Rwandan government and the Interahamwe youth militia. The latter eventually went on to form the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) — Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda rebel movement — which had numerous bases in the park. These rebels wreaked havoc on Congolese civilians living around park boundaries. Looting, kidnapping and banditry became a daily occurrence. A community leader from Bunyakire chiefdom described the scene:

Some FDLR positions were in Kahuzi-Biega National Park and others at its periphery. They started to attack villages and take the people into the forest. They built shelters and fields inside the park. At that time, no one could approach their camps except the captives who would carry their booty for them. The FDLR really made us suffer.¹³

The First Congo War ended in May 1997 after AFDL successfully ousted Mobutu. However, any hopes for lasting peace would have been misguided. The Second Congo War kicked off in August 1998 when Kabila tried to oust his one-time Rwandan and Ugandan backers from the country. The war set off armed mobilizations across eastern Congo, eventually drawing in the armies of nine different African countries and about 25 rebel factions. Throughout the war, the park headquarters was located in the territory of the new *Ressement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) — Congolese Unity for Democracy — Rwanda-backed rebel government. Other regions of the park were under the control of the FDLR and Congolese local defence or 'Mai Mai' groups. During this period, some of the Mai Mai groups joined forces with the FDLR located in and around the park to launch joint operations against RCD. ICCN lost control of the park almost entirely.

The Second Congo War eventually came to an end with the signing of the Sun City Peace Agreement in April 2003. However, tensions had started to emerge between the FDLR and some of the Mai Mai groups, which had worked together in their fight against the RCD up until that point. FDLR abuses against the local populations living around the park boundaries had reached a critical level. A particularly brutal incident took place at the Nduma mine in Kasese, Shabunda territory, at the park's periphery. A group of FDLR soldiers had controlled Nduma along with other artisanal mining sites in the area for several years. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the FDLR soldiers killed 36 people at Nduma in January 2010. They reportedly forced their victims to eat cassiterite (tin ore) before

13. Interview with community leader, Bunyakire, territory of Kalehe, 6 May 2021.

burying them alive (Stearns, 2013). Brutal events like this ultimately drove another wave of armed mobilizations across the territories which surround the park.

In response to the FDLR abuses, a new rebel movement emerged in Shabunda, the Raia Mutomboki (translated as Outraged Citizens), in 2011. Its leaders wanted to chase the FDLR from eastern DRC. A resident of Bunyakire described the movement's genesis: 'The young and old created a new movement in coalition with the population of Shabunda to wage war against the FDLR. All FDLR strongholds in Bunyakiri and Shabunda were destroyed. They fled to North Kivu, the forests of Kahuzi Biega National Park, and several villages of Congolese Hutu in Kalehe'.¹⁴

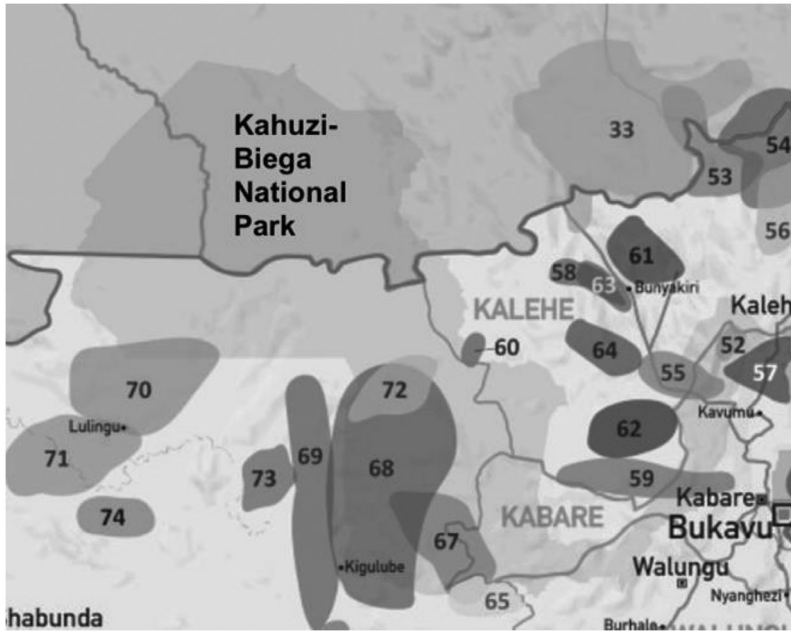
The Raia Mutomboki initially enjoyed considerable local support. Youths and army deserters joined its ranks, often with the blessing of customary chiefs (*ibid.*). While it started as an attempt to protect Congolese people from the ravages of FDLR, it eventually morphed into a rebel group just as violent as any other: looting and terrorizing people it claimed to defend. Although the movement is nowhere near as powerful as it once was, some commanders remain at large in and around the park. To this day, fighting between Raia Mutomboki factions associated with the Batembo community and different Bahutu groups¹⁵ erupts from time to time. This violence has on occasion surrounded gold mining sites inside the park's highland sector near the village of Katasomwa. In April 2021, the fighting spilled over from the park into neighbouring villages, sparking brutal violence between armed factions of the Bahutu and Batembo groups, which led to the mutilation and death of civilians on both sides.

Another round of armed mobilizations followed the return of the Batwa in October 2018. Once inside the park, some Batwa chiefs were able to access weapons in order to secure their newly acquired territory. Some of them formed temporary alliances with non-state armed groups operating in the park's vicinity. The resource frontier the Batwa opened up upon returning to the park effectively generated new opportunities to profit from the park's resources. Hundreds of hectares of forest have since been destroyed through the illicit production of timber and charcoal primarily to sell to urban populations in Bukavu and Kavumu. The case of the Batwa is the only significant case of armed mobilization in KBNP explicitly directed toward the legacy of fortress conservation. However, even this cannot be entirely attributed to resistance against conservation regulations. As laid out by Simpson and Geenen (2021), the Batwa were able to reoccupy the park partly as a result of the alliances

14. Interview with local chief, territory of Kalehe, 6 May 2021.

15. These include Nyatura and FDLR groups. Here it is significant to note that the branch of FDLR in South Kivu has now changed its name to the Conseil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie — CNRD — National Council for Renewal and Democracy.

Figure 1. Location of Armed Groups (Numbered) in and Surrounding Kahuzi-Biega National Park, South Kivu Province, Eastern DRC (2021)



Note: On this map, the shaded areas which are numbered represent the zones of influence of different non-state armed groups operating in the vicinity of the park in 2021. The names of the specific groups are provided in Appendix Table A1. It should be noted that this map under-represents the number of armed groups operating around the park and does not include some of the armed groups mentioned in this article. However, it still gives the reader a flavour of the sheer concentration of armed actors in the area.

Source: Kivu Security Tracker (2021: 6)

they formed with more powerful actors, including non-state armed groups, most of which had much broader political-economic interests. Indeed, the agency of the majority of non-state armed groups operating around the park’s highland sector is not shaped by the desire to oppose conservation, but by the wider structural context in which the park is embedded.

SOCIO-STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF ARMED MOBILIZATION

There are several enduring features of the social structures in which the park is embedded that have perpetuated armed mobilizations across time and space. These features can help to explain why the park has become the staging ground for wider dynamics of conflict and violence. The mobilization of armed groups typically follows a pattern of ‘circular return’ whereby every time a group is disbanded or defeated another takes its place,

often pulling in members of previous groups (see Vlassenroot et al., 2020). In this section, we focus on interlocking aspects of the social structure that make insurgent activity intractable: namely, those social structures that generate 'motivations' and 'opportunities' which stimulate the formation of — as well as collaboration with — armed groups inside the park.¹⁶

Factors Motivating Armed Mobilization

The first enduring feature of the social structure that motivates armed mobilizations is the legacy of insecurity itself. This has led to multidimensional grievances among people living at the edge of the forest. As elaborated in the previous section, the villages and towns surrounding the forests of KBNP have been ravaged by conflict since the Rwandan genocide and the advent of the Congo Wars in the 1990s. This has led to the dizzying number of rebel groups and factions that operate inside the park today. For decades, successive governments have failed to provide security for the population. As a result, numerous houses and farms have been abandoned at the edge of the forest where the threat of looting is highest. In the words of one village chief:

I can confirm that the park is a deep source of insecurity here in our village but also in all the surrounding villages. This is because, first of all, being a forest, the park serves as a hiding place for many armed groups and other people of bad faith. And at any moment, these rebels hiding in the park can appear and attack us.¹⁷

In the *groupement* of Irhambi-Katana — an administrative entity in the territory of Kabare — local civil society frequently requests the government military to demobilize the armed groups and secure villages.¹⁸ Yet when soldiers are provided, they are poorly trained and incapable of confronting the rebels. At the same time, government soldiers occasionally demand 'contributions' from the local population. In the first half of 2021, for instance, a group of government soldiers imposed an illicit tax on charcoal extracted by Bantu peasants working with a Batwa community inside the park. Members of the national army are even reported to have collaborated with the armed groups to profit from the park's mineral resources located near Katasomwa village. When the army has successfully demobilized armed groups, new groups emerge to replace the old, as described above. Limited protection, rumours of collusion, and the circular return of armed groups combine to generate widespread dissatisfaction with the state.

16. 'Motivation' refers to what the conflict literature usually terms 'grievance'. 'Opportunity' is usually referred to as 'greed' (Collier et al., 2009).

17. Interview with peasant farmer, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

18. In the DRC, 'groupement' refers to an administrative territorial division between 'locality' and 'territory'.

One way that people living around the park and in eastern DRC more broadly deal with pervasive insecurity is by obtaining the protection of powerful armed patrons (Verweijen, 2018). Although the patrons themselves often pose very real security threats to civilian populations, they at least ensure a semblance of stability, which can sometimes generate strong local support. Around the park, these protection relationships are often structured across ethnic lines. For instance, when conflict over access to the park's gold-mining sites contributed to a flare-up of violence between the Bahutu and Batembo social groups in April 2021, civilian populations looked to armed groups affiliated with their particular community for protection.

A second enduring structural feature creating motivations to mobilize is the lack of job opportunities and widespread poverty. When asked about the key economic challenges that they face, people frequently cited food insecurity, unemployment, the lack of agricultural extension services, scarcity of firewood, limited education and substandard healthcare. These are challenges faced by almost all communities living in the rural parts of eastern Congo; however, they are exacerbated by the pervasive conditions of insecurity and violence at the edge of the park. Alongside insecurity, the condition of economic scarcity provides additional incentives to form and cooperate with armed groups in order to access opportunities for income generation, often through the illegal exploitation of the park's resources. When asked why people join armed groups inside the park, people repeatedly pointed to economic factors. For instance, during an interview, the leader of a small armed group in the park's highland sector told the first author, 'First of all, it is poverty and unemployment, and therefore, economic reasons'.¹⁹ A customary chief made a similar statement: 'When delinquents [young people without jobs] hear that there is a rebellion somewhere, they jump in without questioning'.²⁰ Known criminals who are already in trouble with the state have also joined armed groups inside the park looking for livelihood security and meaning where few other opportunities exist. In turn, former rebels disappointed by the conditions of demobilization have (re)joined armed groups in search of income and social status: 'There are many young people demobilized [from non-state armed groups] in Katana who have not received socio-economic reintegration kits. These kits were promised but never delivered. These young people represent a security risk'.²¹

Conservation enforcement has maintained a resource-abundant landscape where few options exist for development, gainful employment or income. The paucity of wider opportunities is, in part, what drives illegal resource uses inside the park which, in an already heavily militarized landscape, shapes motivations to collaborate and form armed groups as a way to access and benefit from those resources. Still, although some people blame

19. Interview with leader of armed group, territory of Kalehe, 2 June 2021.

20. Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 15 April 2021.

21. Interview with customary chief, territory of Kabare, 16 April 2021.

the park management for their desperate situation, many others see this as the wider responsibility of the state, rather than a direct consequence of strict conservation enforcement. The statement below, from a chief of a village in Kabare territory, lends support to this reading:

The government does nothing for the youth and our rural areas are underdeveloped. Almost all the government's responsibilities — the rehabilitation of roads, bridges, hospitals and the provision of markets — are carried out by NGOs. How can you expect the park to be protected when the government is sitting on its hands? The insecurity in and around the park is a consequence of the poor management of public affairs by the Congolese state.²²

Opportunities Enabling Armed Mobilization

If it was not for the economic opportunities presented by armed mobilization, people would be less likely to act upon their motivations to join insurgent groups. Structural conditions providing opportunities to mobilize are twofold. First, the geographical features of the park make it an ideal hiding place for insurgent groups and an abundant source of 'lootable' biotic and abiotic resources that help to finance rebel activity. This is compounded by the park's location close to the DRC's international border with Rwanda, where large movements of refugees and combatants have taken place over the past three decades. Second, entrenched illicit networks offer armed groups a way to access weapons and wider markets to sell the park's resources.

By maintaining relatively high levels of tree cover inside the park, the very act of conservation enclosure creates an attractive landscape for armed groups to hide out. The trees themselves provide shelter and the rough mountainous terrain, particularly in the park's highland sector close to Bukavu, means the park is difficult for conservation guards and the state military to patrol, manage and enforce. For example, a member of an armed group working at the edge of the park in the territory of Kabare described how, 'Kahuzi Biega National Park represents a perfect hideout and a source of income. When you enter this park, nobody can see you or catch you'.²³ In turn, a customary chief in the territory of Kalehe said, 'Kahuzi-Biega National Park is so large, yet its leaders do not have enough park guards to monitor it. The armed groups are aware of this and that is why there are so many of them inside [the park]'.²⁴ Located close to the DRC's international border, the park has become an attractive refuge for Rwandan rebels. This occurred most dramatically in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide when the Interahamwe militia (later named FDLR) entered its forests. More recently, in December 2019, the government military conducted operations in

22. Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 14 April 2021.

23. Interview with member of armed group, territory of Kabare, 11 May 2021.

24. Interview with customary chief, territory of Kalehe, 27 April 2021.

Kalehe territory against the CNRD rebel group. To evade capture, the rebels fled into the park's highland sector. They were later chased out of the park and some moved into another protected area nearby, the Itombwe Nature Reserve.

The park's mineral resources are located close to the surface, often in streams such as the Nyaweza river gold mining site, and are accessible using low-tech methods of extraction and processing. They can therefore be considered what is described as 'lootable' in the literature on natural resources and violent conflict (see Lujala et al., 2005). The Belgian company *Minière des Grands-Lacs* had been mining in the area in which the park boundaries are now located since the 1920s. However, armed group involvement in mineral extraction became ubiquitous throughout KBNP during the Second Congo War and, perhaps even more importantly, with the global coltan boom of the 2000s. There are estimated to have been about 12,000 miners operating illegally inside the park's boundaries at the peak of the boom (D'Souza, 2003). Temporary trading posts sprang up all around its borders during this period. The frequency of road and air travel dramatically increased between Bukavu and the territories of Walikale, Shabunda and Kalehe. The frenetic coltan boom is now over. However, cassiterite mines have now appeared across the park's lowland sector, with a particular concentration around the town of Itebero. Numerous gold mining sites have also emerged across the park's highland sector, especially in the territory of Kalehe region close to the village of Katasomwa.

Multiple non-state armed groups contest the park's mining territories. Over recent years, at least three well-known rebel leaders have lost their lives while battling over the mining sites. People who wish to gain control of the mines are therefore typically armed themselves or work under the protection of armed actors. A miner in the village of Bitale described his experience when kidnapped by a Bahutu armed group that was mining inside the park: 'To keep the operation safe, they had armed guards around the outside [of the mine] — one group was mining and another was keeping protection'.²⁵ Despite the dangers, people are still willing to take the risk of working with armed groups in the park to access the profits of mining. A village chief in the territory of Kabare described how, 'They [the local population] can get as much money in one day of mining gold as they would get in a month outside of the park'.²⁶ It is this combination of forest cover, relative isolation, proximity to international borders and high-value resource abundance that makes the park such an attractive place for non-state armed groups to operate.

The second structural condition providing opportunities for armed mobilization is the presence of 'shadow state' networks (Reno, 1995) which link the armed groups operating inside the park to state agents and business

25. Interview with artisanal miner, territory of Kalehe, 29 August 2019.

26. Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 16 April 2021.

people. These networks effectively blur the boundaries between legal/illegal, state/non-state and civilian/military (Bayart, 2009). They 'are marked by personalized power relations and generally encompass both state and non-state actors, and both soldiers and civilians' (Verweijen, 2018: 288). In KBNP, manifold entanglements between armed groups, powerful politicians, military officers and businessmen in the urban centres of Bukavu and Goma enable the sale of mineral resources extracted within park boundaries. They also enable armed groups to access weapons and ammunition to continue their activities within the park. The fact that the park is located close to the DRC's borders with Rwanda and Burundi further enables the smuggling of the park's mineral resources onto international markets. Like intractable conditions of insecurity, shadow state networks have become so engrained that they can be viably considered an enduring socio-structural feature of eastern DRC.

In interviews with various armed group leaders, we were repeatedly told about 'Big Men' in the government and its military who facilitate the trade in minerals from the park and provide weapons to armed groups on the ground. For example, one rebel chief described how, 'We are working with other rebel groups and some people from the government. We sell our minerals to people in Bukavu and others from Goma'.²⁷ It is a well-known fact that politicians in eastern DRC often lend their support to non-state armed groups in order to enhance their negotiating position in the government and advance their own political-economic agendas. For example, a representative of civil society in the town of Kalehe Centre in Kalehe territory, described how 'The involvement of notables at the national and provincial level is suspected. Politicians like to manipulate people to position themselves for their own selfish interests'.²⁸ Shadow state actors also appear to alert armed groups of incoming attacks by ICCN or FARDC soldiers before they take place, thus enabling the armed groups to take refuge in other areas. According to a miner working at a validated cassiterite mine outside the park in the village of Bitale: 'It is as if there is a kind of communication between ICCN park guards, government soldiers and the armed groups. That is why the armed groups know when they are coming to attack them'.²⁹

Various mineral traceability initiatives have been implemented across eastern DRC over the past decade or so (Geenen and Radley, 2013). These mechanisms are designed to stop the illegal extraction and trade of minerals that contribute to the reproduction of regional conflict — as well as mining in illegal areas, such as inside national parks. However, shadow state networks ensure minerals extracted from inside the park can still get into legal, certified supply chains. For instance, according to Kirkby et al. (2015: 8), 'Mines in Lulingu and Nzovu villages on the edge of the park are often

27. Interview with leader of small armed group, territory of Kalehe, 16 November 2019.

28. Interview with member of civil society, territory of Kalehe, 1 May 2021.

29. Interview with artisanal miner, territory of Kalehe, 28 August 2019.

understood as extracting coltan from outside the park. Conversely, it is well known that it is actually being extracted from within'. The blended minerals are sold to trading houses in Bukavu and Goma, which then often transport them to neighbouring countries before exporting them onto international markets via Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania. Once illegally mined minerals from within KBNP enter validated supply chains, there is virtually no way to differentiate them from legal minerals extracted outside of the park.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND ARMED MOBILIZATION

We will now show how armed mobilization is generated through the interplay of larger socio-structures and the creative choices of individual agents. Of particular importance to our analysis is Maclure and Denov's (2006: 132) observation that 'while the process of becoming a ... soldier involved a circular dynamic between agency and structure, it also revealed the differentiated and individualized ways in which this duality was played out'. To demonstrate the differentiated and individualized nature of armed mobilizations around KBNP, we offer short vignettes of the lives of two rebel leaders that were powerful players in the park's highland sector over recent years, along with the story of one potential rebel leader who has so far resisted the call to arms. Their stories demonstrate how the creative choices of individual agents serve to either reproduce, in the case of the former two leaders, or reshape, in the case of the latter leader, the socio-structural landscape which causes people to form and join armed groups. In none of these cases is militarized conservation a key factor in shaping the agency of armed groups, although one rebel leader strategically appropriated a resistance narrative to further his interests.

'Cisayura': The Local Defence Leader

Born in the locality of Kasheke in the territory of Kalehe, Cisayura Bienvenu created an armed group in 1997 to defend the local population living on the periphery of the park during a period of regional instability. By that time, large numbers of FDLR rebels had taken refuge within the park and had started to loot the local population for food and other resources.³⁰ Cisayura described how his own family was affected:

The Interahamwe [FDLR] made life difficult in our villages. I remember the time when these people invaded our village. My grandparents, my parents, my little brothers and my sisters were all killed. That is why I have been in the forest up until today. The government has failed to secure the people and that is why I am a rebel.³¹

30. Interview with Héretier (Cisayura's son), territory of Kalehe, 6 June 2021.

31. Interview with Cisayura Bienvenu, territory of Kalehe, 15 October 2019.

By this point, the FDLR had formed an alliance with some of the Mai Mai in Kalehe territory against the Rwanda-backed RCD rebel movement. To counter this coalition of groups, the RCD provided Cisayura and several other local defence leaders on the lake side of KBNP with finance, weapons and training. On occasion, the RCD and Cisayura's group worked together to attack FDLR and Mai Mai positions inside the park. Cisayura was able to protect his community with the support he received from RCD. This strengthened his legitimacy among people living in the area. He and his group essentially came to fulfil what would normally be the role of a functioning army or police force. Even today, the population in many villages between the park and Lake Kivu still revere Cisayura for his time working as a leader of the local defence. According to a local chief of the groupement, 'The local population loved him. When he was defending us, we could sleep without worrying'.³²

However, Cisayura eventually became disillusioned with the RCD, which had started to harass the local population and provided only minimal financial compensation to the local defence groups it was supporting. During the research, several informants recounted stories about how RCD would force people to carry things between different locations. Rather than playing a protective or stabilizing role, the movement eventually came to be viewed as a dominating, repressive and violent force by many of the people who had once accepted help from it. Cisayura decided to defect from the RCD alliance and start his own Mai Mai group along with other disaffected youths from the area. His group joined forces with another group under the leadership of Muhindu Changoco from Mubugu groupement to form the 'Mai Mai Kalehe', which aimed to counter the influence and power of RCD in the region.

Cisayura's armed group was demobilized after the end of the Second Congo War and the signing of the Sun City Peace Agreement in 2003. Although he was no longer a soldier, many people living in the Kalehe area still feared him. A key informant described how, 'Once he [Cisayura] returned to civilian life, the population were afraid of him because he had handled weapons. So he was recruited into the regular army'.³³ For several years Cisayura worked as a soldier with FARDC in Kisangani and in Equateur province, but did not achieve a high rank because he had not studied beyond primary school. He was poorly paid and lacked the status he had enjoyed as a leader in the local defence. He was eventually presented with an opportunity to demobilize, and the government paid for him to retrain as a carpenter: 'I had a deal with the government. They asked me to go to join a carpentry training course. Imagine a gentleman like me who has already

32. Interview with an acting chief of groupement, territory of Kabare, 16 April 2021.

33. Interview with Héretier (Cisayura's son), territory of Kalehe, 6 June 2021.

drunk and eaten goat meat! Is it possible to go into carpentry? But I agreed and honoured the government's request'.³⁴

Yet Cisayura quickly became dissatisfied with this offer too. He put down his carpenter's tools and became a motorbike taxi driver. As a civilian, he did not command the respect, power and prestige he had once enjoyed as a local defence leader and powerful chief in the Mai Mai. A lack of alternatives ultimately led him to reform his armed group. Over the following years, Cisayura would demobilize and remobilize numerous times. Although at first he aimed to protect the local population from external threats, his later mobilizations focused more on revenue-generating activities, which eventually included the extraction of minerals and other resources from inside the park. His soldiers also started to loot from people living at the edge of the forest. These events paradoxically served to reproduce the very conditions of insecurity Cisayura had first mobilized his group to protect people from. A businesswoman from the village of Kabamba described how the group's behaviour shifted over time:

Cisayura was good in the beginning. He truly fought FDLR in the region. We could breathe thanks to him. He was a formidable defender of the community. He would not loot us. But his militiamen started to go and loot villages. He would send his men to loot. He would then intervene as a saviour in the victimized villages and return with the looted goods to show the people that he was there for them.³⁵

At the time the Batwa reoccupied the park's highland sector, Cisayura remobilized his group for what would be the last time. He established numerous gold-mining operations in the park. More than 200 young men are reported to have joined him. According to a local chief, 'Cisayura had different groups of people that mine gold for him inside the park. He took young people from different villages. As there was no money, jobless people were willing to go with him'.³⁶ Cisayura formed an alliance with a Batwa group to stop ICCN from conducting patrols in the Kalehe side of the park's highland sector. On 2 August 2018, the two groups are reported to have attacked ICCN's patrol post in Lemera.³⁷ Together, they chased the park guards from the area and killed one in the process.³⁸ This event appears to have provoked a further influx of armed groups and illegal resource users into the highland sector to profit from what was increasingly becoming a wide open resource frontier.

34. Interview with Cisayura Bienvenu, territory of Kalehe, 15 October 2019.

35. Interview with businesswoman, territory of Kabare, 9 September 2019.

36. Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 15 April 2021.

37. This version of events has since been questioned in a report for Minority Rights Group, which asserts the Batwa attacked the patrol post alone, without support from Cisayura (Flummerfelt, 2022).

38. This patrol post remains abandoned. By July 2022, the park guards were staying with a group of FARDC soldiers on a tea plantation at the edge of the park in Lemera owned by a prominent local businessman.

Numerous civilians and state agents worked with Cisayura in a clandestine fashion. For instance, two teachers entered the park to buy gold from him, which they would then sell at trading houses in Bukavu. 'As a teacher, I earn just US\$ 145 per month. I can earn US\$ 60 every time I go to the park to buy minerals!'.³⁹ Businessmen, military officers and politicians from Goma and Bukavu were also reported to maintain commercial relationships with the rebel chief. A case in point is that of Colonel Charles Bizimwami. Charles and Cisayura had been classmates in Mabingu village at the edge of the forest and were both in the local defence force of Kalehe. They joined FARDC after having been demobilized. But when Cisayura left FARDC and reformed his armed group, Charles remained in the government military. When Cisayura returned to the park in 2018, Charles became his main supplier of weapons and ammunition in exchange for a cut of the resources Cisayura extracted from the park.

In sum, Cisayura's agency in armed mobilization was shaped not by militarized conservation and its discontents, but by broader dynamics of insecurity, impoverishment and economic opportunities. The park is the arena in which many of his conflicts with other non-state armed groups, RCD and later the national army played out. Later on, the park's geographical features, including its abundant mineral resources, provided further incentives for Cisayura to mobilize. Cisayura also briefly collaborated with a Batwa group inside the park to secure territory and resources. Cisayura's re-mobilizations served to recreate insecurity, poverty and opportunities for income generation through the illicit mineral trade from the park. Under these conditions, the agency of conservation organizations is severely limited and militarized conservation has become the only practical form of enforcement.

'Chance Mihonya': The Opportunist

Social structures also provide incentives for counter-mobilizations as different rebel leaders vie for control of the park's minerals. On the night of 18 October 2018, after about two decades spent hopping in and out of the bush, Cisayura was killed by members of a rival armed group under the leadership of a rebel chief called Chance Mihonya. In the weeks before his death, Cisayura attempted to stop Chance from mining gold. To take control of several mining sites inside the park, Chance is reported to have bribed Cisayura's bodyguard to shoot his boss while he was eating dinner. The bodyguard asked Cisayura if he could take his rifle while he was drinking water — which would disable the rebel leader's protective charms — and then shot him. Cisayura tried to reach for restorative herbs in his bedroom. But it was too late, and he died. The bodyguard fled the scene. Cisayura's

39. Interview with schoolteacher/mineral trader, Bukavu, 19 September 2019.

soldiers quickly took his body to Kalehe so Chance's soldiers would not mutilate it for use in black magic rituals.

In the following days, fighting broke out between the two armed groups. Gunshots could be heard in villages at the edge of the forest. According to a local source, 'people could no longer sleep in their houses'. They hid in their banana fields at night or moved away from their dwelling places to the security of more populated centres in Kabamba or Katana. Once again, they had been swept up in wider dynamics of violence and insecurity around the park over which they have little control. One of the inadvertent consequences of perpetual armed mobilizations inside the park is their further impoverishment and marginalization.

Chance had a long history of arms-carrying work dating back to the First Congo War. At the age of 16, he was recruited as a *kadogo* (child soldier) in the AFDL rebellion against the regime of President Mobutu. Following that, he fought for two weeks in Congo Brazzaville to defend the government of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso from an incoming rebel advance in 1997. That same year, he also fought alongside the Angolan military against the rebel army of Jonas Savimbi. During the Second Congo War, he fought against the RCD, the politico-military movement controlling eastern DRC at the time. He eventually joined the government army after the signing of the Sun City Peace Agreement in 2003. Working for FARDC, Chance fought against the warlord Laurent Nkunda's Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) — National Congress for the Defense of the People — and then against the FDLR during FARDC's Kimia II operations in 2009.⁴⁰

Chance was promoted to the rank of Captain within FARDC in 2011 and assigned to the town of Nyabibwe, Kalehe territory. He commanded a group of over 100 soldiers. However, Chance deserted from the army in 2017 after being accused of raping a young girl. He fled to the region of Bunyakire where he reportedly joined an armed Mai Mai group led by his uncle, a famous rebel in the region named Shabani. When Chance learned the Batwa had returned to the park in 2018, he saw an opportunity to improve his own economic conditions. He decided to separate from Shabani and create his own group. He established his headquarters in Cirehe, a small village on the outskirts of KBNP's highland sector in Kabare territory.

Unlike Cisayura, Chance was a Mutembo from Bunyakire. He did not originate from the region in which he started his rebellion. To justify his activities, he claimed to be a Mutwa⁴¹ defending the rights of his family who had been expelled from the park in the 1970s — a claim widely rebutted by Batwa chiefs. Although some of the wider Batwa community worked with Chance at certain points out of personal interest, Chance also fought against

40. Interview with Chance Mihonya, Bukavu Central Prison, 3 June 2021. The term *kimia* means 'peace' or 'quiet' in Lingala and Swahili.

41. In Swahili, Mutwa is the singular form of Batwa (plural). Mutembo is the singular form of Batembo (plural).

a Batwa group that had settled in the forest on the Kalele side of the park's highland sector. In other words, the Batwa inside the park were victims not only of the violence of militarized conservation, but also of non-state armed groups with whom they were in occasional conflict. Chance's group was the only one during the course of research (other than the Batwa groups) to use a narrative of resistance to conservation in order to justify its mobilization. However, its objectives were primarily economic in nature.

Chance exploited the park's minerals and timber and produced charcoal with ex-members of Shabani's group, demobilized soldiers and unemployed young men from villages located at the periphery of the park. He was able to accumulate wealth and shore up his power position through these extractive activities. In the words of a local chief, 'Chance stayed in the park with his militiamen from where he was the law. He got very rich by exploiting the gold that he mined in the Nyaweza river, making charcoal and the sawing of wooden planks'.⁴² Another local chief highlighted the opportunity this presented to jobless young men: 'He recruited young people by promising them work and wonders. As there were many unemployed people in our villages, he promised jobs to many young people who approached him'.⁴³

Chance asserted control over part of the park's highland sector through a mixture of intimidation and coercion. He dug a hole in the park where he imprisoned and tortured anyone he believed to have spoken ill of him, including a park guard. He released people from the hole only after they gave him US\$ 100 and a crate of beer. While Chance was present, hundreds of people abandoned their farms and homes close to the park in Kabushwa locality to seek refuge in Katana, where the state military has a greater presence. However, Chance did not only perpetuate insecurity at the forest's edge: some people enjoyed his favour. He offered protection to people who submitted to his rule and a way to access park resources. Some former members of his group expressed strong support for this rebel chief: 'We called him Papa Chance. We were like his children. He managed to reduce the prevalence and movement of thieves in the area. Some people even referred legal cases to him. He restored the rights of the inhabitants. He protected our villages against other armed groups and bandits who attacked and pillaged our community'.⁴⁴ Of course, such glowing praise could also be explained by the fact that people remained afraid to speak ill of Chance even after his arrest. However, the period of relative security and access to the park's resources which Chance provided to some of those who accepted his authority are also likely to have produced a degree of local support for him.

Chance was eventually arrested during a joint operation between FARDC and ICCN park guards in May 2020. A Batwa chief with whom Chance was in conflict provided FARDC with the information that led to his cap-

42. Interview with customary chief, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

43. Interview with customary chief, territory of Kabare, 13 April 2021.

44. Interview with peasant farmer, territory of Kabare, 16 April 2021.

ture.⁴⁵ Chance was incarcerated in Bukavu Central Prison for over a year and eventually given a life sentence by the Military Court of South Kivu on 21 September 2021. He was charged with crimes against humanity including murder, rape, the recruitment of child soldiers, and the destruction of a protected area. Chance's supposed accomplice, a major from FARDC suspected of facilitating the transfer of weapons to the armed group, was acquitted for lack of sufficient evidence.

The forces shaping Chance's decision to form an armed group inside the park were related to, though distinct from, militarized conservation. It was only when the Batwa reoccupied the park's highland sector that Chance took advantage of the opportunity to form his own armed group and begin mining operations in the park. This vignette of his life demonstrates a case where wider incentives for armed mobilization interact with genuine resistance to the legacy of displacement through fortress conservation. The fact that Chance was not a Batwa, but still piggybacked on their struggle for his own private ends, further muddies simple explanations.

'Héretier': The Reluctant Rebel

Following the death of Cisayura and the arrest of Chance, it could have been expected that peace would once again return to villages at the edge of the park. However, both the social structures and the individual agents that led to the mobilization of armed groups were still in place. A local chief described how, 'All the armed group leaders were arrested, but their militiamen remained with their weapons'.⁴⁶ Indeed, at the time of writing, there were reports of unidentified armed men now operating in the villages where both Chance and Cisayura used to operate, suggesting that this void was already being filled.

The story of Héretier, Cisayura's son, illustrates how individual actors can sometimes prevent new waves of armed mobilization through their agency. Cisayura had many children and his family struggled to cope after his death. Héretier lamented: 'We ate badly, we studied in difficult conditions, we lacked everything'.⁴⁷ When Cisayura died, Héretier was expected to lead his father's armed movement: 'In our culture, when the father dies, the eldest son should take over'. But Héretier was hesitant to adopt his father's role. He understood he could earn money in the park as a rebel. He saw how this could help alleviate his family's financial problems. But he also knew how difficult and dangerous the life of a soldier could be. Given all the time and effort he had put into his studies (partially funded by his father's activities),

45. In other words, where advantageous to them, people resisting the rule of fortress conservation can also collaborate with the actors that enforce it.

46. Interview with chief of groupement, territory of Kabare, 14 April 2021.

47. Interview with Héretier (Cisayura's son), territory of Kalehe, 6 June 2021.

this was not the future he wanted for himself or his family. He wanted the life of a civilian, not a soldier. To begin with, the government military told Héretier they would give him a job so that he would not follow in his father's footsteps. But almost a year and a half later, no job materialized. Héretier eventually contacted one of Cisayura's former collaborators in FARDC to see if this man could find him work. However, the man pushed Héretier to lead his father's movement: 'To my surprise, he suggested I join the militia!'.⁴⁸

Héretier remains unemployed, struggling to make ends meet. To put it bluntly, his life is a far cry from his father's — a man who was once feared and loathed, but also respected and loved by his community. As a result, Héretier is now reconsidering whether or not to remobilize his father's group. 'When I get tired of my living conditions, I will step out of my comfort zone and join the movement. But I'm still looking for alternative ways to make a living'.⁴⁸ For the time being, this reluctant rebel remains a civilian. By resisting the call to arms when faced with external pressure, Héretier is inadvertently reshaping the conditions in which armed mobilization occurs. The question is, for how long will he use his agency to do so?

MILITARIZED CONSERVATION, ARMED MOBILIZATION AND VIOLENCE

The previous section demonstrated how the enduring social structures which perpetuate armed mobilization are reproduced (and occasionally reshaped) through the actions of individual agents and the unintended consequences of those actions. The three vignettes represent cases where structuration is conducive to the continuity of social structures based on armed mobilization. These dynamics exist broadly independently from militarized conservation, although to a limited extent militarized conservation both influences and is influenced by them. They are exemplified by the three stories we have just introduced. The notable exception is the role played by park guards in Chance's arrest, which will probably not structurally diminish the armed mobilization dynamics but is unlikely to contribute to them systemically.

We now assess the effects militarized conservation has on the structuration of armed mobilization and violence. As highlighted above, the livelihood restrictions imposed by an exclusionary conservation model frequently led to grievances among people living in the vicinity of protected areas in eastern DRC. These grievances shape human agency to a degree by producing defiance and resistance to conservation rule. In some instances, this adds to the motivations for armed mobilization generated through the wider social structure within which the park is embedded — for example, by motivating people to form or collaborate with armed groups in order to take

48. Interview with Héretier (Cisayura's son), territory of Kalehe, 6 June 2021.

revenge against conservation-related injustices. The following ultimatum issued by a focus group participant supports this interpretation: ‘If the park does not meet our needs, we will tell our young children to avenge their fathers who had their lands taken forcefully. We need to train our children that the park is for their benefit; but if this situation continues, we will send our children into the rebellion to fight the park guards!’⁴⁹

Some people also collaborate with armed groups to gain access to land and resources within park borders. For example, it is unlikely that one Batwa group would have successfully reoccupied parts of the park if it had not formed a brief alliance with Cisayura’s group. Cisayura himself did not have grievances against the legacies of coercive conservation, but wanted to use the park as a source of forest cover and valuable mineral resources. Some non-Batwa people have also sought protection from armed groups and collected charcoal, timber and minerals inside the park. This unintended consequence of the continuation of militarized conservation could be considered a factor contributing to insecurity in the region. In this sense, our findings are similar to those of other research on the dynamics of armed mobilization in eastern DRC, which highlights the potential for militarized conservation to further fuel collaboration with armed groups and illicit resource use within park boundaries (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018).

The actors that enforce militarized conservation also generate violence. Although it was the Batwa who forcefully returned to the park in October 2018, it was when joint units of ICCN park guards and FARDC soldiers confronted them inside the forest that the violence between these two groups really started. A recent report commissioned by Minority Rights Group documents several attempts to expel the Batwa from the forest since 2018, detailing the violence involved (Flummerfelt, 2022). Abuses committed against the Batwa by armed park guards and government soldiers during the expulsion campaign are shocking and should be firmly condemned. These human rights violations are antithetical to delivering effective and socially just conservation. Still, the principal source of violence in KBNP, both in terms of frequency and severity, is not militarized conservation, but the non-state armed groups looting from populations (including Batwa communities), warring against one another and state forces in order to secure mining sites.

The work of indigenous rights activists and critical conservation scholars in highlighting the violence that militarized conservation produces is important. We do not dispute this. However, their critiques of coercive conservation projects must be contextualized in regions where the violence of militarized conservation is anything but anomalous and rather represents a continuation of wider socio-structural forces. Our fundamental point here is that militarized conservation transects with existing practices of violence,

49. Focus group, Lwiro village, territory of Kabare, 21 April 2021.

with different effects for different actors and groups, but without fundamentally altering the overall structuration process. Thus, where violence and armed groups are widespread, conservation organizations have little agency in the way they deploy their activities as a result of the structuration of armed mobilization: the duality between agency and structure shapes the way conservation is operationalized and, in turn, conservation practices provide marginal feedback by reinforcing the social structures.

Militarized conservation clearly has negative effects. However, the demilitarization of conservation would also produce some inadvertent — as well as undesirable — consequences of its own. Allowing local people free access to the park's resources, for instance, would almost certainly produce adverse outcomes for conservation and security. Conflicts between the diverse non-state actors looking to profit from the park's resource wealth would likely continue, while conservation-related conflicts would be replaced by other conflicts whose relative intensity would be difficult to predict. The following quote provides an indication of what would happen if militarized conservation was abandoned in all regions of the park:

The park is a morgue. The armed groups have divided up the hills and rivers. You can't walk around. Even the park guards don't dare to enter anymore. Everyone is afraid of the park since the militia moved in. If the agents of the park can dare to walk there, it is perhaps toward Tshivanga. The land has been conquered by the armed groups. The FARDC soldiers based here are helplessly watching the illegal exploitation of the park's natural resources.⁵⁰

There is increasing pressure to demilitarize protected areas in the DRC. For example, the NGO Survival International recently celebrated the French Development Agency's decision to suspend its plan to provide financial support to the park. The NGO suggested this decision represented a 'great step to #DecolonizeConservation and to putting an end to a violent, racist and colonialist model'.⁵¹ On Twitter, they even called for the project to be 'cancelled definitively'. However, not all people who bear grievances related to conservation favour the defunding of protected areas. Despite recognizing some of the negative consequences of militarized conservation, many people living around KBNP have experienced the fragmentation of ICCN's territorial authority as detrimental to their lives and livelihoods.

It is in the regions of the park where ICCN has the least territorial control that the majority of non-state armed groups operate and most violence occurs. For example, ICCN all but abandoned a region of the highland sector, along with several patrol posts, when the Batwa entered the park along with multiple non-state armed groups: 'Park guards used to secure the area. But at the moment, the park guards can no longer set foot in the park because of the armed groups'.⁵² For a period of time, the sheer concentration

50. Interview with human rights defender, territory of Kabare, 14 April 2021.

51. Survival International's tweets on KBNP can be viewed at: <https://twitter.com/Survival/status/1551619257452068864/photo/3>

52. Interview with local civil society, territory of Kalehe, 26 April 2021.

of armed actors in the region made it difficult even for joint patrols of armed park guards and FARDC soldiers to police certain areas. The dissipation of conservation rule coincided with further insecurity, which restricts people's ability to live and practise farming at the forest's edge. The insecurity has also provoked significant migration away from the park boundary to urban centres. In areas recently overtaken by armed groups, many people are longing for a return to times when the state, through FARDC and ICCN, exerted greater control. Rather than calling for the demilitarization of conservation, some people want more park guards and government soldiers to secure the forest's perimeter, so that they can once again access the farms and homes they have been forced to abandon as a result of the insecurity. One villager remarked:

We want the state to come back to these places and make itself felt. This would give us more confidence in terms of security. We will also ask that ICCN build patrol posts for park guards all around the park so that they can ensure the security of the surrounding population. The people who fled their homes here due to the insecurity would like to return to their native lands, because they have been scattered to different villages.⁵³

The security situation is considerably better at the park limits close to ICCN's headquarters in Tshivanga, where multiple park guards are permanently based and conduct regular patrols. The continuous presence of park guards has effectively prevented armed groups from establishing a foothold in the area. On occasion, the park guards have even intervened to protect local people when armed groups come to loot. For instance, in the village of Kafurumaye next to Tchivanga, a peasant farmer described how a park guard helped him when members of the FDLR group attacked his house. Although the man was severely wounded and left disabled after being shot by the FDLR, he credits the park guard as having saved his life: 'He heard the FDLR soldier shoot me and then came out of his house shooting in the air to chase the soldier away. I owe that man my life!'.⁵⁴ In the aftermath of Chance's arrest, many people living in the region where he had been operating reported a marked improvement in their physical and economic security, enabling them to access their farms and houses located close to the park boundary once more. For them, militarized conservation was preferable to rebel rule. A village in Kabare territory provides another example of militarized conservation being perceived as a potential provider of basic law and order: a local chief requested ICCN to establish a camp for park guards and increase the number of patrols between the park and his village. The chief saw this as an opportunity to provide a buffer between his community and the park from where non-state armed groups frequently come to loot. He described the impact of this on security in the area:

53. Focus group, territory of Kabare, 14 April 2021.

54. Interview with peasant farmer, territory of Kabare, 9 July 2022.

I pleaded for ICCN to begin the patrols at the edge of the park. Even though it is not their job to protect the local population, the population feels that the armed groups are less likely to leave the forest to loot if the park guards are doing patrols. There were some clashes. When rebels tried to come down into the village, the park guards shot at them. This has greatly reduced the incursions of armed groups in the villages here.⁵⁵

The defunding of militarization could therefore serve to aggravate insecurity for some people living at the edge of KBNP, since militarized conservation guards can, at least in certain instances, act as a deterrent to the operations of non-state armed groups. It is also worth considering what would happen to the park's 200 or so park guards should militarized conservation be abandoned altogether. Perhaps they would become peasant farmers like the majority of people living in the wider region? Or perhaps they would seek alternative forms of arms-carrying work, such as in the national army or non-state armed groups? In other words, the demilitarization of conservation would not necessarily produce an outcome which leads to the demilitarization of the wider Kahuzi-Biega landscape. In fact, based on the evidence we have provided above, the defunding of militarization could serve to aggravate insecurity for some people living at the edge of KBNP's highland sector. In other words, the effects of militarized conservation are not unidirectional or homogeneous and can include different security impacts for different groups of people at different points in time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have analysed the factors driving the persistence of armed groups in and around a militarized conservation enclosure in eastern DRC. The case of KBNP forces us to reconsider analyses which present conservation conflicts as grounded in a domination/subjection dualism (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2015; Holmes, 2007; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Peluso, 1992; Simpson and Geenen, 2021; Witter and Satterfield, 2019). This is not to suggest that previous work is incorrect, and especially not where states maintain stronger conditions of domination around protected areas. However, the lack of state authority and the presence of numerous armed actors makes it difficult to characterize much of the violence and illicit resource extraction in KBNP as 'resistance' to conservation regulations. Although this observation is not necessarily new to the literature (see Lombard, 2016), we believe our theoretical approach and empirical data still provide several novel insights.

Social structures dictate the practice of militarized conservation in KBNP as the only feasible form of conservation which in turn contributes, but only marginally, to the broader political economy of armed mobilization. In other words, militarized conservation by itself does little to

55. Interview with acting local chief, territory of Kabare, 12 July 2022.

strengthen the structural conditions that lead to conflict and violence. Although militarized conservation does to a degree directly shape human agency by engendering defiance and resistance (Witter, 2021), the decision to join and collaborate with non-state armed groups and engage in illicit resource extraction is primarily influenced by wider political-economic structures. These structures produce motivations ('grievance') for armed mobilization through historical conflict dynamics and a scarcity of economic options, while opportunities ('greed') for rebellion are produced by the geography of the park and entrenched illicit economic networks. As per the theory of structuration, some of these structures are reproduced — and/or reshaped — through the unintended consequences of individual agency. Our goal here is not to cast aspersions on people's legitimate grievances against conservation projects or the human rights abuses that have been committed by rogue park guards and government soldiers (see Flummerfelt, 2022; Simpson and Geenen, 2021). Neither do we dispute that these grievances can provide fertile ground for local collaboration with armed groups to occur (e.g. Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018). Rather, our intention is to show that coercive conservation is not a prominent driver of violence or militarization in KBNP. If conservationists are responsible for engendering such dynamics, it is because they play by the rules of the game rather than change them, thus serving to perpetuate systemic reproduction.

The features of the landscape produced through the designation of KBNP probably play a more important role in the structuration of armed mobilization than the violence of militarized conservation itself. In a war-afflicted part of eastern DRC, these features include the creation of a large and relatively unpopulated space close to national borders, with dense forest cover, harsh topography and abundant (lootable) biotic and abiotic resources. From this angle, the 'friction' of protected area terrains (Scott, 2009) leaves them open not only to the use of military tools and technologies by the state and state-like actors (Lunstrum, 2014), but also to the proliferation of non-state armed groups (when they are already present) inside national parks. Where other commentators argue that conservation projects extend state sovereignty into frontier regions (e.g. Massé and Lunstrum, 2016; Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Woods and Naimark, 2020), we thus propose the opposite: that over time and in conjunction with broader conflict dynamics, the designation and maintenance of protected areas can contribute to the fragmentation (rather than consolidation) of government authority. This chimes with recent work on how Virunga National Park, also in eastern DRC, has become a patchwork of partly disputed and partly overlapping political forests controlled by various state and non-state actors (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2020). Where the state is already, or over time becomes, weak or absent, protected areas could therefore increase the feasibility of rebellions occurring by creating 'staging grounds' (Gaynor et al., 2016) for broader conflicts play out. Certain geographical features are an intentional bioproduct of protected area designation yet also inadvertently render

these areas mostly outside of state control, increasing their appeal to people engaged in illegal activities or opposed to an incumbent government. The above observations have important implications for conservation policy.

Critical commentators encourage strategies to be developed to demilitarize conservation (Duffy et al., 2019; Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018). Based on our research, we question the feasibility of pursuing conservation through any means other than militarily in violent frontier contexts like eastern DRC. To paraphrase Marx (2015), conservation authorities make their own history in violent frontier regions, 'but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'. Even though they would likely rather find alternative means and methods, they must find ways to operate in regions where politics typically takes place through the barrel of a gun; or in the words of Lombard and Tubiana (2020: 8), where there are 'very few other possibilities for being taken seriously'. In fact, militarized conservation (just like poaching) is itself a symptom of deeper structural dynamics (see Duffy et al., 2019: 68). Despite claims that protected areas 'limit the life chances of people living in and around them' (Ybarra, 2018: 6), the defunding of militarized conservation areas in conflict-afflicted regions may also serve to aggravate conditions of insecurity, as well as remove some of the (licit and illicit) benefits that communities living in the vicinity of protected areas have access to. Such benefits could include security, employment and development, as well as access to resources inside park boundaries through informal arrangements with park guards (for the latter, see Kelly, 2015).

The potential desirability of military conservation, as a source of stability and possible contributor to the establishment of less violent structures, has been overlooked in the political ecology literature. To maximize the potential for this in KBNP, we strongly urge ICCN and its international partners to urgently establish mechanisms for abuses to be reported and acted upon so that the offending individuals are disciplined and held accountable for their actions, and victims are compensated. Efforts also need to be made to train park guards in non-violent methods of de-escalation and to improve the recruitment process to prevent the employment of individuals who are likely to go on to commit abuses in the future. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the enforcers of militarized conservation are not only abusers and are viewed by some people as protectors for people as well as for nature. This specific finding is not unique to our case (see Kelly, 2015; Kelly and Gupta, 2016; Titeca et al., 2020), although the full implications are yet to be fully emphasized in the literature.

To conclude, our evidence serves to dispute broad statements that 'militarized conservation as a model, even when it might result in conserving some animals and enforcing some protected areas, is fundamentally unjust' (Duffy et al., 2019: 67). The effects and justness of militarized conservation

are contextual and depend on the underlying social dynamics specific to the site at hand. At the same time, we acknowledge that militarized approaches alone are never going to deliver environmentally sustainable and socially just conservation at violent frontiers over the long term. Environmental managers must therefore also strive to improve conservation outcomes by addressing the structural inequalities that drive illicit resource extraction and — in conflictual regions like eastern DRC — armed mobilizations inside national parks. This will inevitably include the development of alternative livelihood and employment opportunities for people living around protected areas. In other words, there is no reason why conservation practices cannot simultaneously strive to prevent destructive resource extraction and its underlining causes.

APPENDIX A

Table A1. Non-state Armed Groups Surrounding Kahuzi-Biega National Park

Number	Name
33	Mai-Mai Kifuafua
52	Raia Mutomboki Soleil
53	Mai-Mai Kirikicho
54	Nyatura Kalume
55	Raia Mutomboki Shabani
56	<i>Conceil national pour le renouveau et la démocratie (CNRD)-Ubwiyonge</i>
57	Group JKK / CCCRD
58	Raia Mutomboki Mungoro
59	Raia Mutomboki Blaise
60	Raia Mutomboki Bralima
61	Raia Mutomboki Butachibera
62	Raia Mutomboki Bipopa
63	Raia Mutomboki Hamakombo
64	Raia Mutomboki Lance
65	Raia Mutomboki Lukoba
67	Raia Mutomboki Mabala
68	Raia Mutomboki Donat aka FPP
69	Raia Mutomboki Walike
70	Raia Mutomboki Kazimoto
71	Raia Mutomboki Kabazimia
72	Raia Mutomboki Musolwa
73	Raia Mutomboki Charles Quint
74	Raia Mutomboki Kabé

Note: Names corresponding with the numbers shown in Figure 1
Source: Kivu Security Tracker (2021: 26–36)

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