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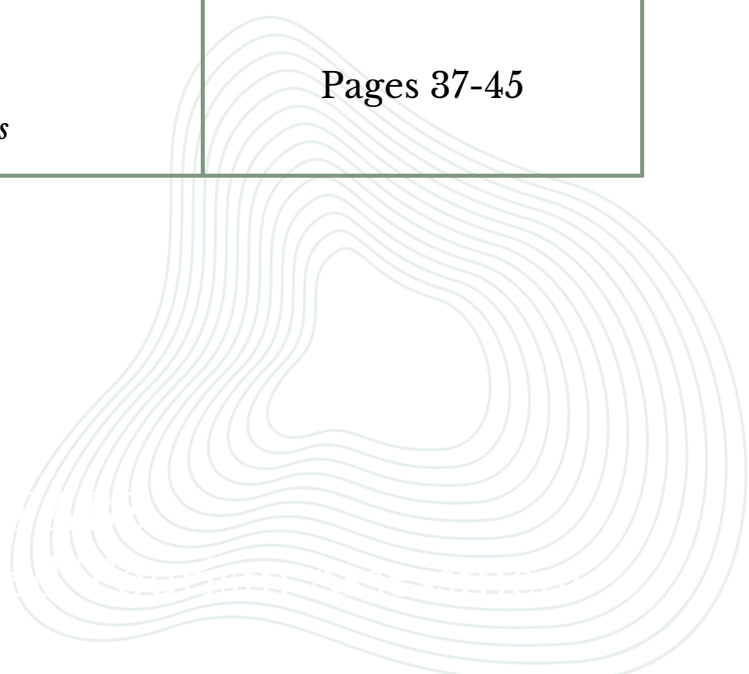
Congo Basin Nature-Based Tourism Assessment

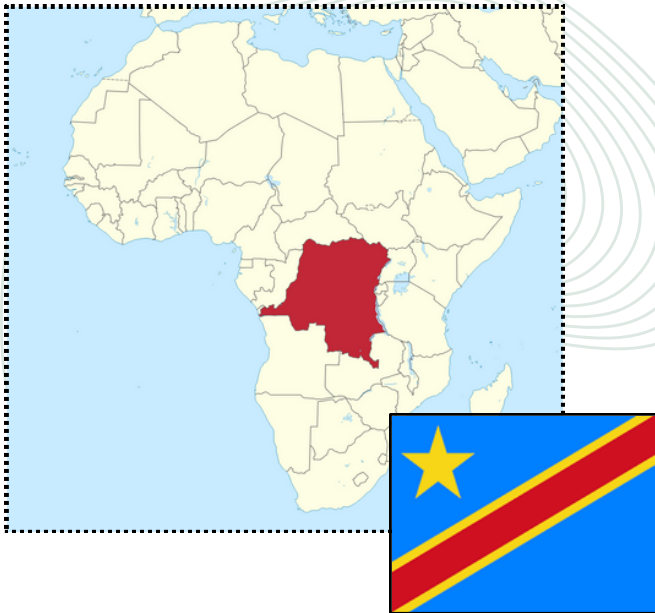
Democratic Republic of Congo



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Destination Snapshot:

Target Country Democratic Republic of Congo

National Tourism Strategies & Policy

In 2020, the Democratic Republic of Congo launched its National Tourism Policy. The Ministry of Tourism partnered with the UNWTO to develop the strategy, serving as a formal 10-year plan.

According to the DRC Embassy website, the government's primary interventions related to the tourism sector include:

- Promotion and preservation (of flagship wildlife and national parks)
- Green tourism promotion & environmental conservation
- Valuation and development of natural sites
- Tourist transportation & accessibility
- Development of accommodation sites and hospitality facilities (especially in emerging destinations)
- Creation of service agencies and tourist offices
- Support for the training & promotion of tourism (guide training, website editing, production of promotional materials, etc.)

Additionally, DR Congo has also developed an internal **Tourism Investment Master Plan (2013-2028)** as well as an 'Investing in Tourism Plan, 2016' for investors.

Tourism Visa Information

E-Visa: ✗
No.

Tourist Visa Cost:

- US Citizens: \$100 short stay visa (<1 month)
- UK Citizens: \$175 short stay visa (<1 month)
- EU Citizens: \$93 short stay visa (<1 month)
- *An additional \$75 Airport Transit Visa fee is required of all international travelers with round-trip airfare*

Supplementary Requirements:

- Letter of invitation
 - Booked return flight (with proof)
 - Booked accommodation (with proof)
- (These extra steps increase the burden on visitors and hosts)

Nuances of the visa process:

Visa applications are estimated to take approximately 21 days and require the passport at the Embassy during processing.

The ATOAV-RDC reports that for travelers visiting Virunga NP or Kahuzi-Biega NP, tourist visas can be granted through trusted tour operators or travel agencies.

National Tourism Associations



ATOAV-RDC Mission:

- To protect members' interests through advocacy and facilitate their access to national and international tourism markets
- To continually maintain a platform to establish guidelines, rules, operating mechanisms for tour operators and travel agencies to ensure quality service to customers
- To contribute to the protection of the environment, preservation of cultures and the economic rehabilitation of local populations through responsible tourism

The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2019

World Economic Forum

Overall Ranking: 136th of 140
Sub-Sahara Africa Ranking: 31st of 34

Tourism Policy & Enabling Conditions: 140th
Infrastructure: 137th
Natural & Cultural Resources: 53rd
Travel & Tourism prioritization: 140th
Safety & Security: 123rd
Environmental Sustainability: 115th
Tourist Service Infrastructure: 132nd

Inbound Arrivals:

No data

International Visitor Spending:
\$84.3M USD (2019), \$107M USD (2022)

Domestic Visitor Spending:
\$704M USD (2019), \$719M USD (2022)

Top Source Markets (2022):
Angola (#1), France, Belgium, India, Germany

The UNWTO Tourism Dashboard & WTTC's DRC Country Report

Estimated Travel & Tourism Jobs:
492,400, 1.7% of country total (2019)
491,500, 1.5% of country total (2022)

GDP Contribution:
\$1.0B USD/1.9% (2019)
\$1.0B USD/1.7% (2022)

Destination Snapshot: Democratic Republic of Congo

Target Country

Online Presence

TripAdvisor

514 properties listed, mod. volume
4,039 hotel reviews

Product variation:
Budget: 12, MidRange: 34, Luxury: 15

209 'Things to Do' listed
46 tours linked for booking



Lonely Planet

21 'Must-See Sights'
1 linked activity for booking

2 National Parks listed:
Virunga, Kahuzi-Biega

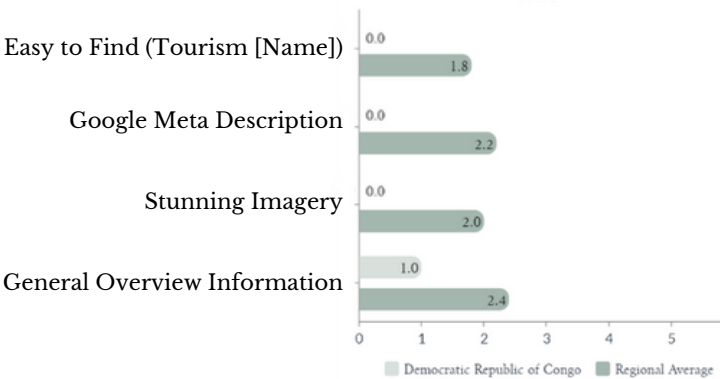


National Tourism Website: None

No site found in search engine top 60 results.
DRC Embassy website has basic travel information and visa notes.

Overall Score: 5%
Regional Average: 35%

Tourism Website Ranking Criteria: *No official website*



Major International Hubs

N'dijili International Airport (FIH)
Located in: Kinshasa, DRC's capital city

Flight Volume: 12 direct destinations

Lubumbashi International Airport (FBM)
Located in: Lubumbashi, second largest city

Flight volume: 5 direct destinations

Goma International Airport (GOM)
Located in: Goma, capital of DRC's North Kivu Province

Flight volume: 3 direct destinations

- Major routes:
- Brussels, Belgium
 - Paris, France
 - Casablanca, Morocco
 - Istanbul, Turkiye
 - Cairo, Egypt
 - Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire
 - Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
 - Johannesburg, South Africa
 - Luanda, Angola
 - Nairobi, Kenya
 - Entebbe, Uganda
- Non-major routes:
- Lome, Togo

- Major routes:
- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
 - Nairobi, Kenya
 - Johannesburg, South Africa
- Non-major routes:
- Lusaka, Zambia
 - Lilongwe, Malawi

- Major routes:
- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
 - Nairobi, Kenya
- Non-major routes:
- Bujumbura, Burundi



Top National Parks for Tourism, based on traveler content on TripAdvisor (2023)



Country Analysis: Democratic Republic of Congo

Overview

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has 53 protected areas covering 324,768km² of land and an additional 31km² of marine & coastal seascape. Of these, 9 are national parks, 12 are hunting areas, and 11 are nature reserves. DRC is mostly landlocked except for a few kilometers of Atlantic coastline to the west of the country [1]. Although boasting the world's second largest area of tropical rainforest, the country has a range of ecosystems including dry rainforests, woodland forests, savannah ranges, grasslands, mountains and cloud forests [2].

DRC ranks 16th on the global biodiversity index [3] and 10th for number of bird species by country, a leader among its Congo Basin peers [4]. DRC also ranks 50th in the world in the Biodiversity & Habitat category of the Environmental Performance Index on its efforts to protect natural land-and-seascapes, average for its regional peers [5]. The country hosts many endemic species such as the Western Lowland Gorilla (Grauer's gorilla), bonobos, okapis and eastern chimpanzees, and the conservation of its diverse habitats is critical for conservation.

The Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) is the agency charged with oversight and management of protected areas in DRC. There are collaborative management partnerships between ICCN and several international conservation NGOs for certain parks, for example there is a long-term co-management agreement over Salonga NP with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), for Upemba NP (with Forgotten Parks Foundation) and Kahuzi-Biega NP (with the Wildlife Conservation Society).

According to publicly available data (which is limited and out of date), the country received some 350,000 inbound visitors in 2016, with a 5-year average of 279,400 visitors [6]. This figure represents all international visitors, such as those traveling for business, visiting friends and family, etc. Leisure travelers are included in this figure but likely make up a small proportion of the total. Globally, DRC ranks 156th in the world in visitor numbers and 7th in Central Africa [7].

One of the principal reasons that DRC receives low visitor numbers is insecurity. Continuing tensions and fighting between armed and rebel groups, kidnappings and civil unrest in the east of the country and in parts of the south have prompted Governments to issue Level 3 and 4 'Do Not Travel/Reconsider Travel/Advise Against all But Essential Travel' warnings such as by the U.S. Department of State and equivalent warnings from other countries. There is also a general perception of insecurity and personal risk which deters travel among many potential visitors.

Another reason for the low visitation numbers may also be due to limited government commitment to tourism promotion and development, noted by studies prior to 2020. Although the first International Tourism Fair was hosted by DRC in December 2020 and the country launched a national tourism strategy & policy the same year, these events coincided with a period of protracted travel disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which many even established tourism destinations are still recovering from.

Country Analysis:

Democratic Republic of Congo

Nature-Based Tourism

The vast landscapes of the DRC, sizable protected areas and unique wildlife and habitats provide the raw materials to be a significant tourism draw. However issues of insecurity, access, operating environment and limited historic focus on the sector at a national level result in small amounts of tourism activity within the protected areas of the country at the current time.

Based on the screening process conducted by the assessment team, four protected landscapes have short and medium-term tourism potential in the country:

- Kahuzi-Biega National Park
- Salonga National Park
- Okapi Wildlife Reserve
- Virunga National Park

Other protected areas were identified as having tourism potential in the screening process, but ultimately not prioritized in the shortlist for further analysis. These include:

- Upemba National Park was not prioritized because of security constraints and the levels of overhunting that have significantly impacted wildlife numbers, although this may warrant further exploration in the future.
- Lomami National Park was not included in the shortlist of protected areas, as the site is still largely unexplored and requires more on-site research and wildlife inventories to assess its tourism potential.
- Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve was also not included in the shortlist due to very difficult accessibility for potential visitors. According to stakeholders, on a 10-day trip to the reserve, only 3-4 days are actually spent in the protected area. The rest are travel to and from the reserve.
- Ekolo ya Bonobo Community Reserve appears to be a site with potential, but was ultimately not included in this report due to lack of available information. However this park warrants further analysis.
- N'Sele Valley Park was not included due to concerns relating to land ownership and wildlife, much of which is brought in and is not native to the site.

[1] Protected Planet, [Democratic Republic of Congo Country Profile](#)

[2] <https://www.adaptation-undp.org/explore/africa/dr-congo>

[3] [The Swiftest Biodiversity Index](#)

[4] Data from BirdLife International. summarized at MongaBay.com <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/03birds.htm>

[5] Wolf, M. J., Emerson, J. W., Esty, D. C., de Sherbinin, A., Wendling, Z. A., et al. (2022). 2022 Environmental Performance Index. New Haven, CT: Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy. [Epi.yale.edu](https://epi.yale.edu):

[6] https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo/tourist_arrivals/

[7] <https://www.worlddata.info/africa/congo-kinshasa/tourism.php>

Country Analysis:

Democratic Republic of Congo

Enabling Environment

Infrastructure, Access, & Services

International air access to DRC is relatively good, notably from Kinshasa's N'djili International Airport (with direct flights to Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, etc.) and to a lesser extent to regional hubs including from Lubumbashi and Goma airports (with flights to Addis Ababa and Nairobi for example). Within the Congo Basin region however connectivity from the DRC is poor with direct flights only to the Republic of Congo, which may influence development of tourism circuits in the region.

Generally, the road and water network in most of the country has limited utility for visitors accessing more remote parks due to the extreme time it takes to move along these arteries. Although in some parts of the country, boats and pirogues are the primary way to access the more remote areas. Other exceptions include roads that connect parks near to the eastern border with Uganda and Rwanda, which are reportedly in relatively good condition, and those around major urban hubs.



Owing to the size of the country and poor condition of the road network, the domestic aviation sector could play a significant role in improving access to PAs. However domestic airlines in DRC have a poor safety record - UN Agencies and international NGOs often avoid using domestic commercial carriers - and all of the country's domestic airlines are on the EU blacklist.

Work to raise the standard of the domestic aviation sector will mean setting up reliable charter flights from the major airports, well-maintained airstrips in proximity to the PAs, investment in equipment and trained personnel. However the cost of investment here is a deterrent, and in the near term it is likely that only small-scale, high net worth markets will be able to access more remote parks and therefore a focus on these markets will be needed while wider work to increase air access is assessed at the national level. Work here could be modeled on Gabon that has significantly improved its domestic aviation sector in recent times.

For PAs in the east of the country, road access is critical (e.g from Goma, Bukavu, etc.) as a significant proportion of visitors fly to Uganda or Rwanda and cross into DRC. Facilitating the visa and border crossing process at these key hubs will be critical to attracting more visitors.

Doing Business

On most measures the DRC scores extremely poorly on 'ease of doing business,' (183/190 countries) although it is relatively easy to open a business compared to other countries in the region (ranked 7th in Africa). Challenges include poor access to basic services and infrastructure, corruption, and the tax system. The tourism sector in the country is currently small and centered around historically popular attractions such as Virunga National Park or urban hubs including Kinshasa.

Country Analysis: Democratic Republic of Congo

Enabling Environment

Security

As previously discussed the security situation in much of the country is poor, and especially in the east around Virunga NP and other parks in the area. For tourism to flourish at any scale the security situation needs to improve and be sustained before significant investment and visitation can be achieved. In the shorter term domestic, resident and regional markets hold the greatest opportunity for small scale tourism activities.

Visa Process

The other key constraint to tourism development is the visa process. This is typically an international traveler's first experience with a country they are considering visiting and can significantly influence their willingness to travel there. Countries that have a focus on attracting visitors often make this as easy and painless for visitors as possible. The visa process for DRC is burdensome, with no e-visa or visa on arrival system for most international markets and a lengthy application procedure requiring one's passport to physically be at the embassy during the process.

The national tourism association (ATOAV-RDC) does however report that for travelers visiting Virunga or Kahuzi-Biega National Parks tourist visas can be granted directly through trusted tour operators or travel agencies. This would justify further exploration at a national level, but is not properly documented or explained on any websites and it is likely few visitors are currently aware of this. There is also no national tourism website promoting tourism or protected areas in the country, a gap that would be one of the first steps to start to position the DRC as a nature tourism destination.

Community Development

Stakeholder interviews emphasized the need for community engagement as a critical enabler to conserve nature and develop the nature-based tourism sector. Local education programs that build awareness, understanding and seek to provide economic opportunity for communities are vitally important for the long-term success of parks and tourism within them. Expansion of programs that support education, skills development as well as local entrepreneurship, through tourism and other economic opportunities should be prioritized at a site or landscape scale, and supported through efforts at the national level.

Country Analysis: Democratic Republic of Congo

Recommendations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

** The DRC government has shown interest in and given greater priority to tourism in recent years with the development of the National Tourism Strategy & Policy in 2020. Supporting this initial step there is a need for the development of a national tourism website that highlights the visitor opportunities in the country, especially its natural assets. The website would also be a venue to provide clear information on the security situation in different locations and how to travel around the country.

The development of the website could be coupled with the development of a marketing and communications strategy and content creation (video, imagery and text) that can be used to help promote the country. Initially this could also include influencer / content creator trips to position the country as a place to travel within targeted domestic, regional and international markets.

** Help establish a 'Tourism Working Group,' that includes representatives from relevant stakeholder groups, notably government, private sector and civil society. This group would help to guide the activities proposed in the Government's Tourism Strategy as well as recommendations in this document. This would also provide a venue for government and stakeholders to discuss needs, issues and opportunities as well as collectively plan actions to address them.

One organization should be identified as the 'facilitator' and play this role for at least 3-years to organize meetings, coordinate among representatives and share information with the broader network of tourism stakeholders in the country. This organization could also provide training to build the capacity of those working in tourism (e.g. government, NGOs and the private sector) and share data on tourism trends, models and case studies that are relevant. The goal would be to foster greater awareness, networking and collaboration within the sector.

Country Analysis:

Democratic Republic of Congo

Recommendations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

Support the government, private sector and NGOs working in the tourism sector to review the current visa and immigration procedures with the goal to streamline the visa/immigration process and ideally move it online (e-visa) and at the border (visa on arrival). An initial model may exist with the national tourism association (ATOAV-RDC), which reportedly can grant visas for visitors to Virunga or Kahuzi-Biega National Parks. Review this process and look to expand it to a national level program. Through the same process review the overall visa and border crossing process to streamline a visa and broader crossing procedure that is more streamlined and welcoming for visitors.

As the regulatory and business operating environment is significantly burdensome, each business is forced to commit significant staff time and resources in understanding and managing the regulatory environment in which they operate. Changing these bureaucratic systems will take time and require the government's willingness to push them through. There is therefore a need in the short/medium term for individuals or organizations that can understand the systems as they relate to tourism and help businesses navigate them. A 'Tourism Business Coach/Facilitator' who can help investors navigate the systems, understand what's needed and have a full understanding of the sector, rather than each business figuring it all out themselves each time could play a key role here. They would act as a tourism business coach and 'fractional-staffer,' supporting and navigating the regulatory and operating environment for multiple businesses, rather than each one having to dedicate staff to this role.

A program could be established to competitively recruit and train local 'Tourism Business Coach/Facilitators,' and help them establish this as a support service for businesses in the sector (as well as NGOs operating tourism facilities). Experts would work with the local tourism coaches to ensure they fully understand all tourism related taxes, regulations and requirements as well as who's doing what and the tourism 'universe' of the country. They would be supported for a fixed period of time (3-4 years) to supply these services to current and potential investors in the sector to smooth the process of investing by helping to facilitate all of the steps required for tourism investment as well as for tourism operators in the sector.

Their role would also be to make connections and build networks (as a facilitator) in the sector. This role would help reduce the number of 'unknowns' for investors, taking on responsibilities that distract investors from their primary objectives. Once established the 'Tourism Business Coach/Facilitator,' can also offer these services to future tourism businesses (or other businesses) on a commercial basis after the initial funding is finished.

Country Analysis: Democratic Republic of Congo


Recommendations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

Given the present security situation, there is a significant need to ensure communities around the protected areas are supportive of the conservation efforts being implemented and feel they benefit from activities in the area. Education is a critical part of this, to build awareness and skills as well as stimulate local entrepreneurship. A program could be established that provides programming and support to engage communities around protected areas as well as local 'business incubators' to support local enterprise, some of which might be community led tourism activities.

Through the 'Tourism Working Group' described earlier, a small number of priority tourism circuits should be identified that link priority protected areas in logical packages for visitors. A plan should be developed detailing each circuit and what the gaps/needs are. These may be entirely within DRC or include neighbors such as Uganda and Rwanda. These priority routes should then be the focus of a tourism product development push, including the identification of investment costs and needs (public or private), connection modalities and training (especially where communities can be involved). This would be followed by investment promotion to engage with public and private funders to realize the establishment of the priority circuits.

Building on the website and initial 'storytelling' actions described in the short-term recommendations, a more sustained, 5-year branding and marketing campaign will be needed. This should initially focus on attracting more domestic and regional visitors who are easier to access and more familiar with the regional context as well as business travelers that may be encouraged to stay additional days. Once momentum has been built with these markets, the campaign could expand to focus on specific international tourism niches, such as adventurous nature-based travelers, birdwatchers and nature-based educational markets.





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Democratic Republic of Congo: Priority Protected Areas

Destination Snapshots, Scorecards, Site Analyses, & Recommendations



Destination Snapshots Key

Accessibility:

International Air = The closest &/or most popular international airport for tourists to the park

Domestic Air = The closest domestic airports or local airstrips for travelers to the park

Ground & Water = Details roads and waterways used to access the park, including route information from airports and nearby cities

Within Parks = How travelers move within park boundaries, including relevant roadways, waterways, hiking paths, and relevant modes of transportation

Destination Maturity Scale:

None = No tourism facilities or tourist infrastructure in the park

Basic = Only simple, self-service facilities in the park

Limited = One serviced tourism facility operating in the park

Diverse = Multiple serviced tourism facilities & touristic infrastructure in the park

Destination Maturity Definitions:

Nearby park headquarters = Within 5-10km of park boundary

Self-serviced accommodations = no staff, basic facilities. **Serviced accommodations** = Comes with some type of formal touristic service (i.e., staff, a restaurant, etc.)

Visitor activities special request =

They need to be organized through an NGO or other organization and are not readily commercially available

Visitor activities openly available =

They are commercially available to visitors, without the need for special connections

Geographic Features:

Standout, iconic, or distinctive geographic features in or around the park

Wildlife:

Key species that can be found in the park

Human Capital:

Description of the technical expertise available in and around the park (i.e., conservation partners & NGOs) as well as the tourism capacities of local communities and residents.

Seasonality Icons:

Sun = Dry season(s)

Rain = Wet/Rainy season(s)

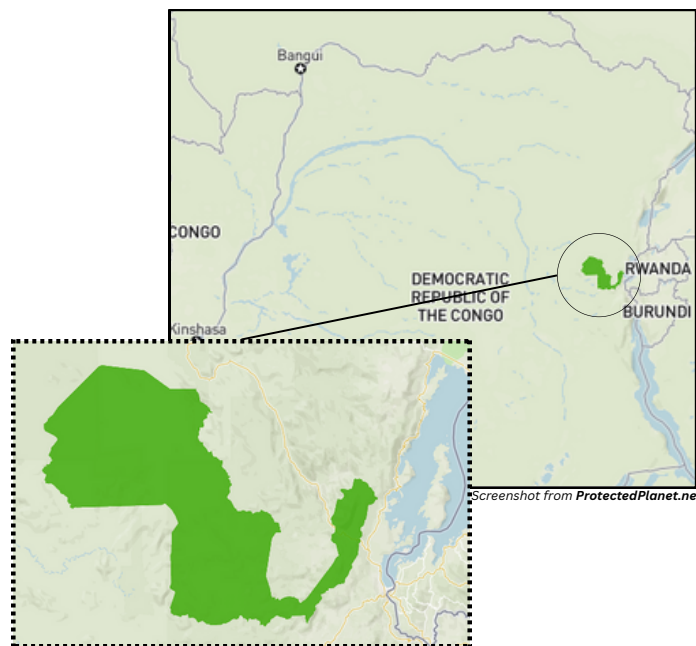
When relevant, also includes important wildlife seasons and/or the 'best' time to visit.

Destination Snapshot:

Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Quick Facts:

- 600,000 Hectares
- Primary Tropical Forest and Volcanoes
- IUCN Category - Not Applicable
- UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site
- Park Entry Fee: Not known
 - Activity fees for international travelers:
 - Mountain hiking: 35USD, Camping: 50USD
- Gorilla Habituation: Multiple Successful Families
 - Trekking fee: 400USD for foreigners
- Seasonality:
 - ☀ June-September, December-February
 - ☔ October & November, March-May



Accommodations & Facilities

Within the Park:

Multiple campsites near park headquarters, recommended for travelers to stay in on their second day of gorilla trekking.

Sites are mainly located along Lake Kivu, tents are "nice," and mattresses are included.

Plans for an on-site lodge.

Outside the Park

In Bukavu, wide variety of accommodations.

Upper luxury, standard luxury, mid-range, and basic accommodations available at multiple market price-points.

Lodge options, links, and recommendations are compiled on an independent website.

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	Kigali Int'l Airport (Rwanda) is the most popular arrival airport. 257 km to Bukavu (7hrs)	Goma Int'l Airport: 198 km to Bukavu (7hrs)
	Most tour operators have formal pick-up services from these airports. Kigali transport services are especially popular, as the guides/drivers can help facilitate Rwanda-DRC border crossing as well.	
Domestic Air	Kamembe Airport (Rwanda): Receives charter flights between DRC on an irregular schedule, 5km north of Rusizi	Kavumu Airport (DRC): Light aircraft & charter flights, 25km north of Bukavu
Ground	Drive from Bukavu: 40 km of good roads to the park entrance at Tshivanga (eastern side)	Good ground accessibility from multiple locations: From Kigali: 7 hrs From Burundi: 3 hrs Driving possible, but not recommended: From Uganda: Route is much longer From Goma: Unsafe
	Ferry from Goma: There are speed boats and public ferries that cross Lake Kivu, ranging from 3-5hrs	
Within Park	A road bisects the park, facilitating an easier process to reach the trailheads and Gorilla camps. Travelers can rent 4WD trucks and 4x4 safari vehicles in Kigali for competitive rates.	

Transportation Infrastructure

Good

Park Headquarters

Onsite

Availability of Accommodations

Self-service

Accommodation Product Variation

High (nearby)

Visitor Activities

Openly Available

Activity Product Variation

High

None

Basic

Limited

Diverse

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Geographic Features:

Dominated by two extinct volcanoes (Kahuzi and Biega) and rainforests.

West of Lake Kivu (*outside park boundaries*).

Luka, Lugulu, and Lualaba Rivers.

Small part of park lies in the Mitumba Mountain range of the Albertine Rift.

Considered one of the most important sites in the Rift-Albertine Valley.

Close to Rwanda and Burundi borders as well as neighboring Virunga NP - *major cross-border tourism circuit potential.*

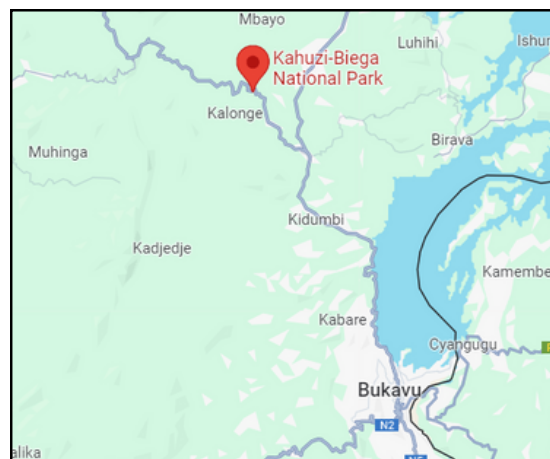
Wildlife:

Unique: Contains one of the last groups of **Eastern Lowland Gorillas**.

Eastern Chimpanzees, Forest Elephants & Buffaloes.

~350 bird species,

Designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.



Google Maps (2023) Kahuzi-Biega National Park.

Human Capital

WCS: Management authority & funding through a PPP

Under this agreement, WCS has committed to using a human-rights based approach to park management, especially regarding the Indigenous **Batwa communities**.

There are a handful of highly **reputable tour guides** and travel companies working in/around the park.

Compiled lists of recommended operators can be found [online](#).

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
110 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●
66 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Reviews 2022 - 2023

"All the rangers and guides were friendly and greatly appreciative of your visit to the park."

"[Bwindi & Virunga] have charms, but I do recommend this the most."

"...So long as folks like the team at [KBNP] create personalized experiences like we had, they deserve more visitors."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2018 - 2021

"The 5 stars is for the people that run the show... The lodges and camp sites on scene are also fantastic."

"I implore anyone that can to go to this magical place to do so."

"Security was good, everything was guarded and you never felt like it was dangerous."

"This is, in every sense, the best value for money to see gorillas."

"A welcome in the chaotic world of travel to DRC."

TripAdvisor Reviews 2019 - 2021

Destination Scorecard:

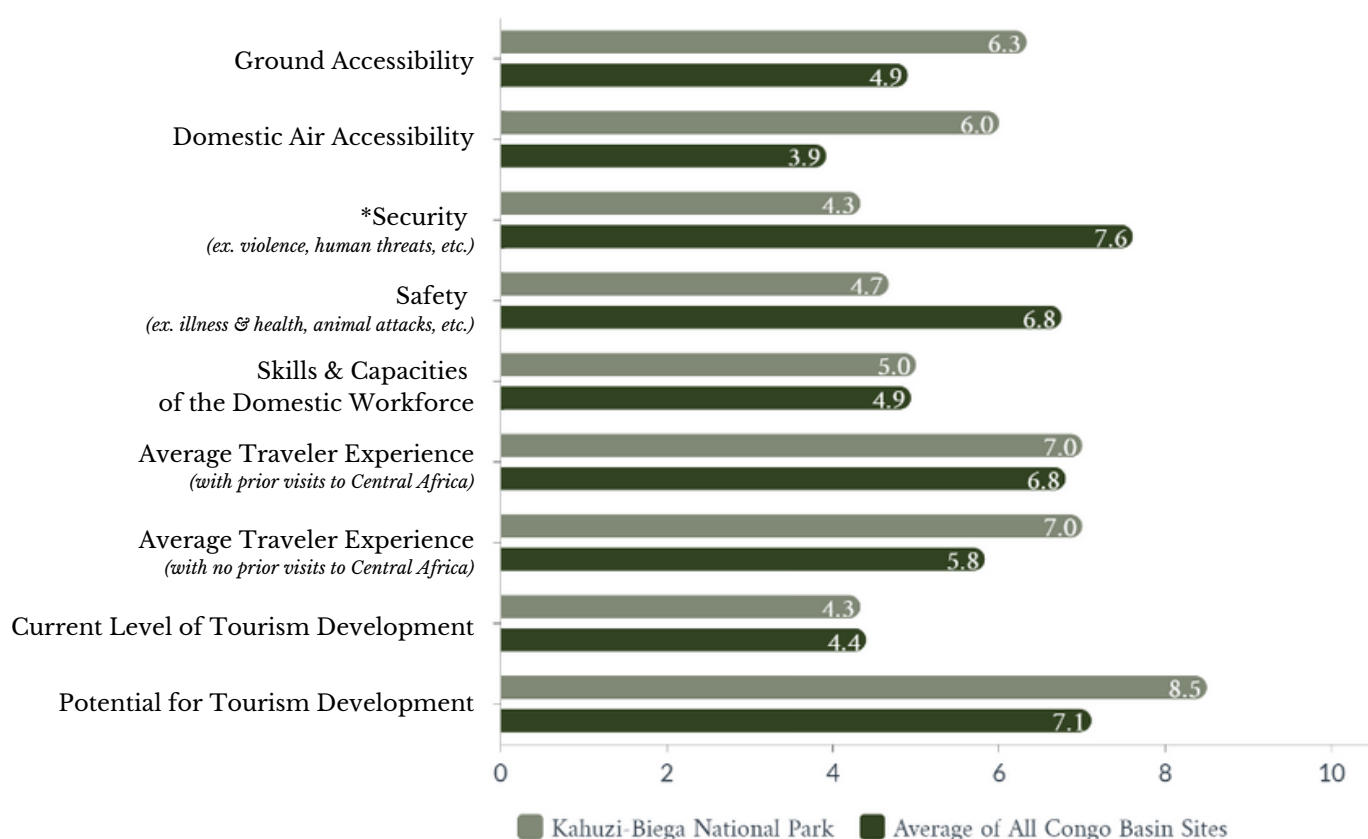
Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

‘1’ represents relative weakness in the field and ‘10’ represents strength in the field.

Kahuzi-Biega National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is some interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Kahuzi-Biega NP.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Virunga National Park
 - Nyungwe National Park (Rwanda)

Key Takeaways:

- Both ground and domestic air accessibility to the site rank higher than the regional average.
- Safety and security fall below the regional average, signaling a need for support on these enabling factors for tourism development.
- Though the current level of tourism development aligns with the regional average, the potential for further development exceeds the regional average, signaling this park as an opportune site for investment.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis: --- --- Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Overview

Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP) is located in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in the border region with Rwanda. The park lies roughly 20 kms west of Lake Kivu and covers 600,000 Hectares [1]. Unlike some other parks, KBNP lacks a designated buffer zone. The park is one of five protected areas that make up the much larger Maiko-Tayna-Kahuzi Biega Landscape, a prioritized site for global conservation efforts [2].

The landscape features dense lowland rainforests, interspersed with montane forests, bamboo forests, and sub-alpine prairies. Roughly 10% of the park encompasses mountains in the Mitumba Mountain Range, part of the broader Albertine Rift landscape [3]. Named after the prominent dormant volcanoes Mount Kahuzi and Mount Biega, reaching 3,308 meters and 2,790 meters high respectively [4], the park showcases a notable altitude range. This unique feature makes KBNP one of the few sub-Saharan African sites where the transition from lowland to highland vegetation is observable.

The "stars" of Kahuzi-Biega National Park are the roughly 1,200 Eastern Lowland Gorillas [5] (also known as Grauer's Gorilla) in the park, the largest number in the world [6]. The Park and surrounding landscape support an estimated 84-91% of the global population of this ape subspecies. Alongside gorillas, the park is also home to 13 other primates and other emblematic Central African wildlife such as forest elephants, buffalo, and bongo. Recognized as one of the most biologically significant areas within the Albertine Rift, KBNP harbors the highest diversity of mammal species in the region [4]. Furthermore, it lies within a crucial endemism zone for birds, with nearly 350 species recorded, 42 of them endemic.

Eastern DRC is less secure than other parts of the country, with the U.S. Department of State categorizing the immediate area around the park as 'Level 4: Do Not Travel' [7]. This is due to violent crime and the presence of armed groups in the landscape. Civilians have been targeted in attacks. The areas of the park which are used for tourism are considered by stakeholders working in the landscape to be safer, but other areas of the park have armed groups from time to time. One stakeholder explained that "there have been no incidents with tourists in and around Tshivanga and gorilla viewing sites, but nearby there are regular incidents involving local people." The general instability of the area and complexity to access the site for gorilla trekking relative to similar mountain gorilla trekking experiences in Uganda and Rwanda (although these cost more) mean that only the most intrepid travelers are likely to seek out travel to the park in the short-term.

[1]<https://www.protectedplanet.net/4328>

[2]https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1860/CAFEC_Maiko-Tayna_Fahuzi-Biega_Fact_Sheet.pdf

[3]<https://www.naturalworldheritagesites.org/sites/kahuzi-biega-national-park/>

[4]<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/137/>

[5] *Estimates of Ape Abundance in Kahuzi-Biega and Oku Community Reserve* - Kirkby, A.; Plumptre, A.J.; Spira, C.; Mitamba, G.; Kivono, J.; Ngoy, E.; Nishuli, R.; Maisels, F.; Buckland, S.; Kujirakwinja, D. ([wcs.org](https://www.wcs.org))

[6] <https://www.wcs.org/our-work/regions/central-africa-gulf-of-guinea/kahuzi-biega>

[7]<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis: Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

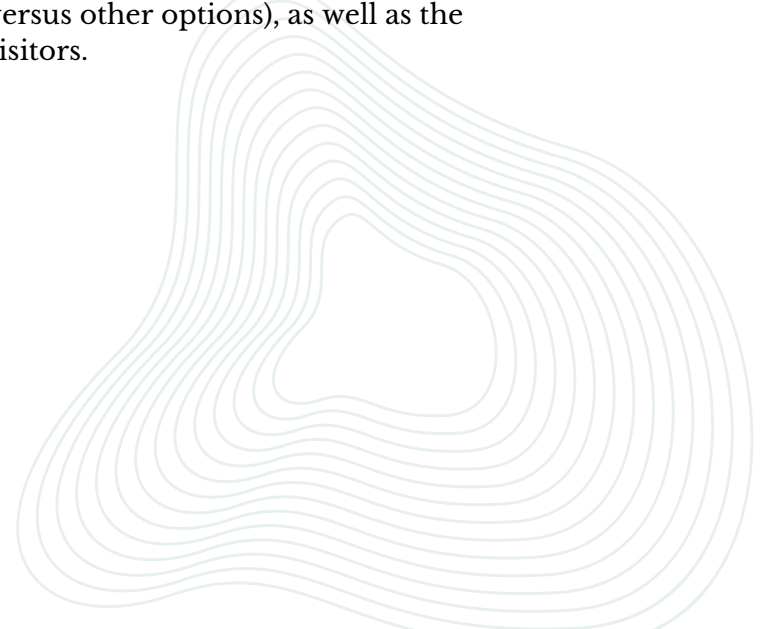

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

In April 2022, The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and DRC's national Protected Area Agency (ICCN) signed a public-private-partnership for the management of KBNP [8]. This new agreement prioritizes the rights of the nearly 6,000 Batwa Indigenous peoples living around the park, as well as members of the other adjacent local communities. The WCS Vision for the Kahuzi-Biega National Park is to turn “a history of injustices against Indigenous Peoples into a model for effective rights-based conservation” [9], with a new management paradigm to begin addressing the long history of injustices, insecurity, and violence faced by the Batwa in the region. Central to this vision is WCS's commitment to tourism development guided by community-based and rights-based principles, focusing on equitable benefit-sharing and sustainable tourism practices.

Within the park, the tourism sector would be considered relatively ‘mature’ compared to other parks of Central Africa, although current tourism levels today are a fraction of what they have been historically. Anecdotally, KBNP receives approximately 2,000 visitors a year, but in the 1990s received tens of thousands of visitors.

Currently there is no dedicated tourism marketing by WCS, but various websites operated by different entities promote the park as a tourism destination including www.kahuzibieganationalparkcongo.org, www.kahuzibieganationalpark.com, and <https://www.kahuzi-biega.org/>. On these sites, potential visitors have access to a breadth of information including tour operators and contact information, information on access, activities and accommodation, gorilla trekking etc. The history of tourism in the area, established operators, transparent activity rates, and clear itineraries, act as a strong foundation to re-invigorate tourism in the park.

A detailed tourism assessment and strategy for the park is needed, specifically to determine which operators are still active, what each one is doing, where they need additional support, and where partnerships and additional funding could be facilitated. The study should also look at the security forces and systems that would ensure safe visitation to the region, training and product development needed to engage communities, define the competitive advantage of tourism at the site (why a visitor would come versus other options), as well as the communications campaign needed to attract visitors.



Site Analysis: --- --- Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

Described as "the wild frontier of gorilla tourism [10]," Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP) is well positioned to further develop to capitalize on these assets. There are currently three habituated gorilla groups, and it is widely acknowledged among stakeholders that gorilla tourism holds the greatest potential for tourism growth in the park. Presently, the gorilla trekking fee in the DRC stands at \$400 USD for international visitors, significantly lower than neighboring Uganda and Rwanda, who charge \$800 (starting July 2024) and \$1500 respectively. Although it should be recognized that the cost to get to KBNP is more expensive than to Uganda or Rwanda, so this price difference may not be a significant competitive edge.

Beyond gorilla trekking, Kahuzi-Biega National Park offers promising opportunities for other nature-based tourism activities, including birdwatching (with its large number of endemic species), volcano hiking, and wildlife safaris. However, in line with the WCS vision, prioritizing the integration of rights and community-based initiatives with nature tourism should be paramount. Development of each of these tourism experiences should be done with the community as owners and/or having a significant role.

Accommodation options within the park currently fall short, leading many travelers to prefer staying outside in nearby Bukavu. In the short-term this will remain the reality of tourism to the park, as day trips from Bukavu are probably perceived as the safer and easier option given the security issues in and around the park. In the medium and longer-term, if the security of the area improves, there is an opportunity to attract more visitors by offering overnight stays within the park. Whether through upgrading existing campsites or establishing a new on-site lodge.

[8]<https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/17462/New-Management-Agreement-Signed-for-Kahuzi-Biega-National-Park-in-the-DRC.aspx>

[9]https://cdn.wcs.org/2022/02/10/7i78anfy3c_Vision_for_Kahuzi_2.10.22_FIN_1.pdf?_ga=2.223371419.1007892787.1711393871-798286711.1704147646&_gl=1*750em2*_ga*Nzk4Mjg2NzExLjE3MDQxNDc2NDY.*_ga_BTXX9HXMYSX*MTcxMTM5NzM1My40LjAuMTcxMTM5NzM1My42MC4wLjA

[10]<https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-promote-gorilla-tourism-first-you-have-to-convince-the-gorillas-1497885801>

Site Analysis: --- --- Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Enabling Environment Constraints

Security

Security is the primary factor influencing tourism in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, given the tumultuous history of insecurity and violence in eastern DRC. This reputation not only dissuades global visitors but also concerns local operators and guides. Numerous sources advise against solo travel in the park, recommending instead that visitors travel with operators who may still cancel trips due to sporadic violence [11]. While tourists are generally not considered at immediate risk according to regional stakeholders, security concerns persist as a significant barrier to travel to KBNP. Recent attacks on tourists in Uganda from armed groups within the DRC have heightened this concern, although there have been no incidents since WCS took over management of the Park and according to available information from stakeholders, there has been no targeting of tourists by rebel groups in the landscape in the past 5-10 years.

To address this challenge, well equipped and trained security forces for the park are essential, both for protection of wildlife as well as visitors and communities. Currently the Park is relatively well-equipped with 300 active ecoguards, prioritizing patrols in the highland sector.

The establishment of transparent communication networks to inform park staff, tourism operators and visitors of potential issues could partially address some visitors' concerns. This would be established alongside a risk management plan for tourism in the park that would define roles and responsibilities, evacuation plans, etc.

Accessibility

In addition to security concerns, access emerges as a critical facilitator for tourism in KBNP. Multiple driving routes (i.e., from Goma to KBNP), though possible, are discouraged due to safety concerns. International travelers often opt to fly into neighboring countries like Rwanda as an entry point into DRC for KBNP visits. Upon reaching Bukavu, visitors have a relatively straightforward 40km journey to the park on well-maintained roads. However, accessing Bukavu necessitates careful planning. Streamlining accessibility to Bukavu and KBNP stands as a pivotal factor for tourism development. Potential opportunities include rehabilitating the Kavumu Airport, located 25km north of Bukavu, and facilitating smoother border crossings for travelers from neighboring countries.

Competition

Competition emerges as an additional hurdle for tourism development in KBNP. Despite its lower gorilla trekking fees, many travelers opt for safer and more developed parks in neighboring countries due to KBNP's security concerns and challenging accessibility. To capitalize on this opportunity, comprehensive analysis is required to identify the park's unique selling points for international travelers. These differentiating factors must be amplified and effectively marketed to establish a compelling value proposition in the global market. Pricing and value proposition strategies, encompassing accommodations, activities, and transportation, should be carefully crafted to attract visitors.

[11] <https://www.kahuzibieganationalpark.com/park-security.html>

Site Analysis:

Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Develop a detailed tourism assessment and strategy for the park that embraces community engagement and ownership in the tourism activities around the park as well as providing a roadmap for the development of tourism in the landscape. This will include a thorough assessment of the security situation and forces; community engagement, ownership and benefit sharing structures; market demands and dynamics (including engagement with tour operators); investment and product development needs; training and capacity building efforts as well as marketing and communications. Beyond the park the strategy should also look at the flow of international visitors to the park and where actions can be taken to streamline the process to get visitors from their home to the park.**

****Community tourism product development and skills development could also be initiated to work with the Batwa on the development of community led activities in the park. This would target the existing travel market initially but with the vision for future markets. Actions would include initial conceptualization of tourism experiences and the practical implementations of developing a tourism experience; a training bootcamp to develop the skills of Batwa members to host and engage with visitors; specialty training (guiding, birdwatching, etc.); pricing and costing; network development with lodging and tour operators that will be sales channels; testing/refinement, soft launch and then follow refinement and improvement. The experiences that are developed may include a similar experience to the Batwa trail that was established in Uganda, birdwatching and forest exploration and cultural experiences (craft, dance, etc.). Guides could also be trained to participate in gorilla trekking activities.**

Establish a risk management plan for tourism in the park alongside a transparent system of communication for the sharing of information, especially the current security situation.

Strengthen and support ongoing security efforts and security forces to ensure a safe environment for wildlife, communities and visitors

Continue to engage with donor organizations to support and scale efforts in the park (e.g. USAID, EU, private philanthropy, etc.).

Site Analysis: Kahuzi-Biega National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Engage with tour operators selling trips to KBNP or interested in doing so to provide them with the resources they need to scale their sales. This will be guided by the tourism strategy, but may include marketing and communication materials and campaigns, addressing specific 'pain points' in the transfer process (e.g. border control), improvements to the experience, etc. This activity may also include strengthening and promoting itineraries with nearby attractions such as lake Kivu and Nyungwe Forest National Park in Rwanda (as many travelers come through that way).**

****Implement an influencer and media campaign to attract highly visible individuals to explore the park and tell their audience about the experience.**

Establish birdwatching itineraries and activities with a focus on sightings of the endemic species in the park. Develop materials and content that showcases this activity and then work with local tour operators to help them engage with speciality birdwatching operators in source markets.

Improve camping facilities and other tourism infrastructure in the park as well as establish the groundwork for a potential lodge investment (identification of potential sites, concession agreements and structures as well as prospectus). If the security situation is stable, initiate direct outreach to potential investors/operators to promote the opportunity.

Destination Snapshot:

Salonga National Park, DRC

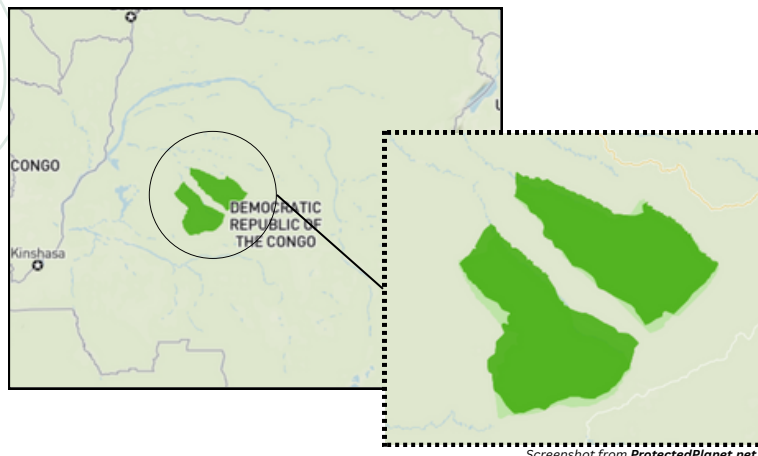
Quick Facts:

- 3,334,600 Hectares
- Africa's largest tropical rainforest reserve with additional dryland forest, grasslands, and wetlands.
 - The park is divided in 2 sectors (northern and southern) by the 45km-wide Monkoto corridor.
- IUCN Category - Not applicable
- UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown
- Bonobo Habituation underway

Seasonality:

Best time to visit (and best for wildlife viewing: June - August

Dry Season)



Screenshot from ProtectedPlanet.net

This park's TripAdvisor page has no reviews or ratings

Accommodations & Facilities

Within park: Basic wilderness camping

Most operators who bring travelers into Salonga NP provide tents and camping kits for this portion of the itinerary.

Additionally, a new lodge is under development.

It is expected to open in Summer 2024 - no additional details known.

Outside park: Variation

Due to the very long journey to reach the park, there is a variety of accommodation options along the way - ranges from riverside camping, basic touristic hotels, and village homestays.

Park HQ:
Located in Monkoto

Accessibility:

Accessibility:		
Int'l Air	N'Djili International Airport (Kinshasa) ~800-900 km from park, however there are no direct roads.	
Domestic Air	Chartering a flight to a nearby city from Kinshasa is considered the only viable access option to reach Salonga NP. Mbandaka is the closest major city (~750km), and the most common charter flight destination for park visitors.	Mbandaka Airport Serving the regional capital city of the Equateur District Kinshasa to Mbandaka: ~1.5 hour flight, operates 3x per week. <i>However, flight cancellations occur often.</i>
	There are a few airstrips throughout the park. <i>WWF has airstrip expansion and development plans, hopefully to be complete by early 2025 (unwritten, loose plans).</i> Small plane charter from Kinshasa: ~3.5 hours into one of the park's airstrips	
Ground & Water	To actually get into the park, it is only accessible via water. Lokoro River: Flows through the center & northern side of park. Lula River: Flows in the south.	From Mbandaka: Visitors can arrange a boat or canoe ride to the park's entrance. This is an extremely long journey with multiple stops along the way in local villages for overnight camping.
	The most common itinerary: Arrival in Kinshasa > charter flight to Mbandaka > 6 days from Mbandaka to Monkoto along three rivers > Receive the necessary papers for park entry in Monkoto (HQ) > Luliaka River takes travelers to park entrance.	
Within Park	There are no developed roads within the park and infrastructure for tourism is considered currently nonexistent. Hiking jungle trails and canoeing the Congo River are the main transportation types within park boundaries.	

Transportation Infrastructure

Poor

Park Headquarters

Offsite

Availability of Accommodations

None

Accommodation Product Variation

Low

Visitor Activities

Special Request

Activity Product Variation

Medium

None

Basic

Limited

Diverse

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Forest Elephants, Bonobos, Giant Pangolins, and the Congo Peacock.
~150 bird species,
Designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Covered almost entirely by tropical moist forest, **considered the largest rainforest park in the world.**

Park boundaries mostly formed by river systems:

Southern sector: Luliaka & Lula Rivers, Northern sector: Lomela & Loile Rivers.

Also found in the park are the Salonga River, Yenge River, and Lososy River.

The presence of large, navigable rivers creates a unique natural asset with tourism potential.

Human Capital

WWF

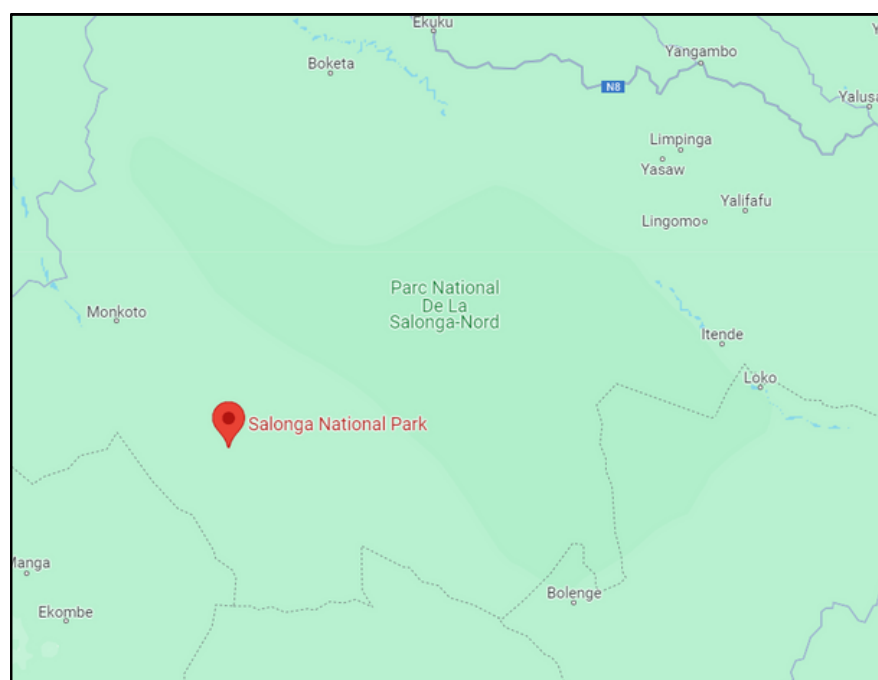
Since 2005, WWF has supported the ICCN in managing Salonga NP and engaging with local communities.

In 2015, WWF signed an official co-management agreement for the park.

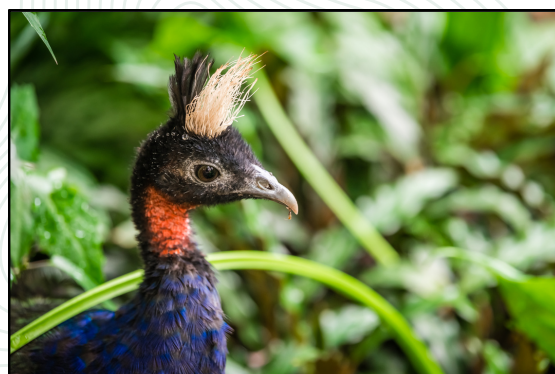
WWF is investing significantly in Salonga NP's tourism development.

Most of the local populations live in the Monkoto corridor between the Northern and Southern sections of the park.

In general, the density of human populations in park peripheral areas is relatively low compared to some other sites.



Google Maps (2023) Salonga National Park.



Destination Scorecard:

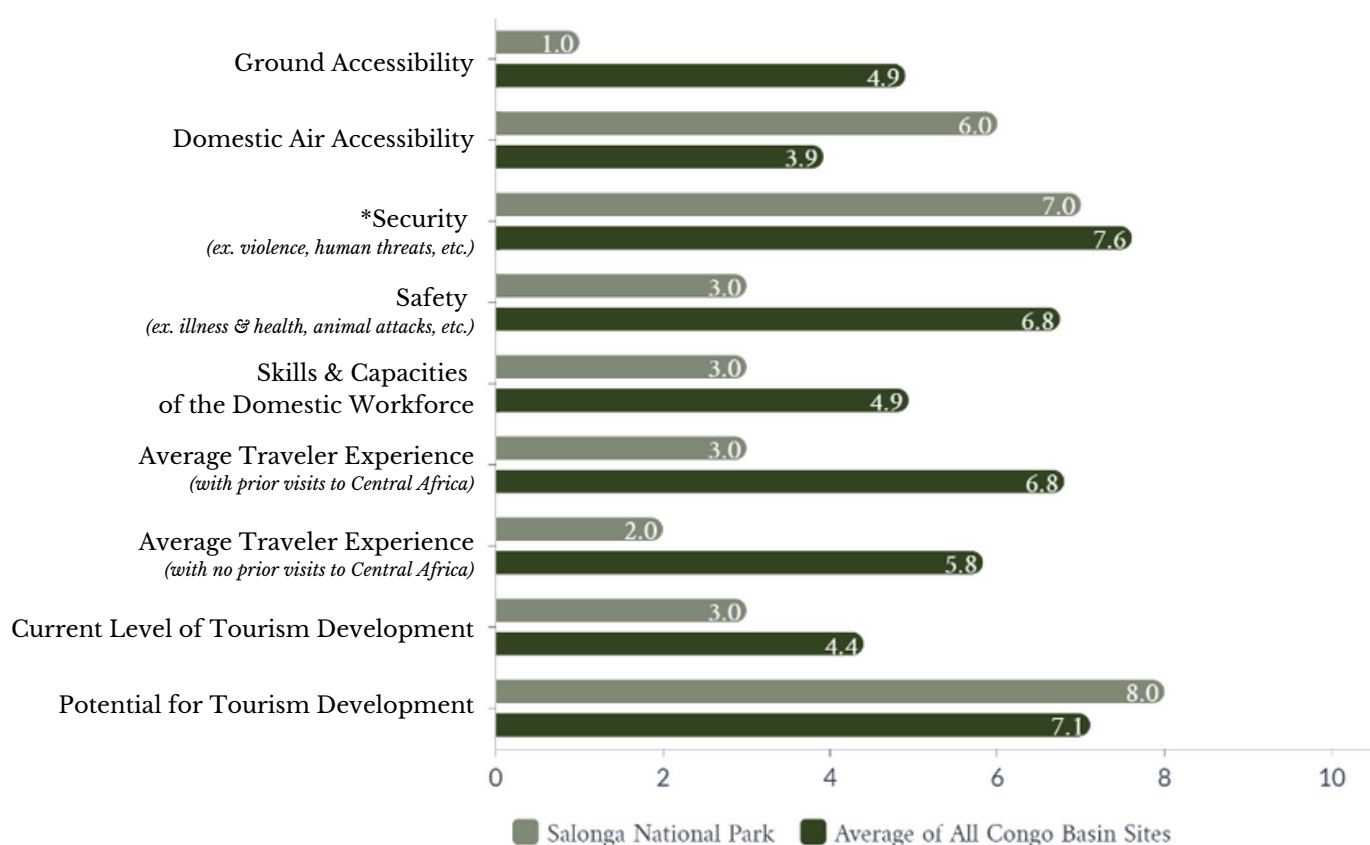
Salonga National Park, DRC

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Salonga National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results**



Key Takeaways:

- Despite the site's significantly low rating for ground accessibility, the site received a much higher rating for domestic air access compared to the regional average. Good air access is key to this site's success.
- Average traveler experience ranks much lower than the regional average, signaling a need for investment in the tourism experience and services offered.
- The potential for tourism development ranks higher than the regional average.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is formal interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Salonga National Park.
- The three words used to describe the site's natural assets for tourism were '*Bonobos, Large, and Pristine.*'
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Dzanga-Sangha Complex
 - Nouabale-Ndoki & Odzala-Kokoua NPs

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

**Analysis based on limited data

Site Analysis:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Overview

Salonga National Park (SNP) is located in central DRC, in the heart of the central basin of the Congo River. Covering over 3.6 million hectares, this is the largest protected area of dense rainforest on the African continent [1]. The park is divided into two sectors, the northern and southern blocks (1.7 million and 1.9 million hectares, respectively [2]), separated from one another by the 45-km wide Monkoto corridor [3]. The park is surrounded by a 10km-wide buffer zone [4]. The park lies within the larger 'Salonga Landscape,' an over 10 million hectare priority landscape for conservation. Of the five protected areas in DRC recognized by UNESCO as world heritage sites, SNP is the only one that is not categorized as 'in danger' [5].

SNP is one of the most isolated protected areas in Central Africa, comprising the region's last and largest fully intact block of evergreen lowland rainforest [6]. Vast marshlands, gallery forests, and savannah islands are also found in the landscape. Seven important riverways can be found in SNP: The Luilaka and Luila rivers form the southern sector's boundary, and the Lomela and Loile Rivers form the northern sector's boundary [7]. The Lokolo, Yenge, and Salonga Rivers can also be found, the latter of which gives the park its name [8].

SNP is home to the world's largest population of bonobos (13,000), endemic to DRC as well as 1,400 elephants in the core of the landscape [6][9][10][11]. Pangolins, congo peacocks, leopards, forest buffalo, bongo, and other common species are also found in the park. There are at least 220 species of birds found in the park, with a full inventory yet to be carried out [12].

The U.S. Department of State has issued a '*Level 4: Do Not Travel*' advisory for multiple regions in the DRC, including the Kasai Occidental province, which overlaps with roughly a third of SNP's southern block [13]. The rest of the park is subject to the nation-wide Level 3 advisory. The park's incredible remoteness acts as both a natural protector and enabler of illegal activities; most instability cannot reach the park due to its remoteness, but people who do make their way into the park to conduct illegal activities are shielded by the remote landscape. As a proactive solution, the DRC government reported in 2020 that a small military company was stationed in Monkoto to protect against future instability and a monitoring strategy, which covers 63% of the site, has been in place since 2018 [6]. Additionally, park representatives emphasize that within the park, conditions are considered safe in the context of tourism development.

[1] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/280/>

[2] <http://world-heritage-datasheets.unep-wcmc.org/datasheet/output/site/salonga-national-park/>

[3] <https://www.wwf.org/en/our-work/landscapes/salonga-landscape/>

[4] <https://dopa-explorer.jrc.ec.europa.eu/wdpa/10906>

[5] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/cd>

[6] <https://rris.biopama.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Salonga%20National%20Park%20-%202020%20COA%20-%20en.pdf>

[7] <https://labaafrica.com/salonga-national-park/>

[8] https://carpe.umd.edu/sites/default/files/documentsarchive/Salonga_SOF2006.pdf

[9] https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TP4Z.pdf

[10] https://usfscentralafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Assessment-of-Protected-Area-Management-Partnerships-in-Central-Africa_USFS_2021.pdf

[11] <https://www.wwf.org/en/?27322/Salonga-National-Park-Survey-Confirms-Encouraging-Figures-of-Bonobos-and-Elephants>

[12] https://salonga.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2018_factsheet-Salonga-English-final.pdf

[13] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

Salonga National Park is co-managed between ICCN and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Both parties signed the formal co-management agreement in 2015, and work together on initiatives guided by the national park's 2016-2025 management plan [14]. One of the priority intervention strategies is 'Sustainable tourism project preparation,' in which management recognizes the opportunities of tourism development on local revenue streams and sources of pride [15]. Further, representatives explain that the ultimate vision for tourism in SNP will be modeled off Dzanga-Sangha PA in CAR. This management sentiment itself should be seen as a prime opportunity to continue supporting these initiatives, facilitating additional investment, and fostering partnerships related to the goals of preparing the park for tourism development.

Though there is no organized tourism currently [16], two plans outlined by management for tourism development are hiking Salonga & Bekali Bai (forest clearings). Starting at the patrol post in Lokofa, which is accessible via a 45 minute canoe ride down the Luilaka River from Monkoto, travelers can embark on an 11km hike to the Bekalikali bai, an impressive forest clearing in Salonga National Park. Portions of the walkway between Lokofa and the bai were renewed in early 2019 to facilitate access for researchers, but now has potential as a touristic activity. The path, thanks to the recently constructed footbridges, is known to be relatively easy, visually stunning, and educational when accompanied by a local guide [17]. At the bai, a two-tier observation platform was built in 2019 and can accommodate up to 10 people for wildlife viewing. Similar to the walkways, the platform was built originally for researchers, though it also has tourism potential [18], with the opportunity to develop overnight options for travelers as a unique activity.

Another significant opportunity are Bonobos within the park, with some groups already undergoing the habituation process, projected to be completed within 2-3 years according to park representatives. Developing Bonobo tourism not only promises much-needed revenue for this remote region but also serves as a powerful incentive for species conservation, bolstering efforts on local and national levels. Stakeholders concur that Bonobo tourism, along with supporting primate and wildlife viewing activities, will be the primary driver for tourism development in Salonga National Park.

Other opportunities exist in developing community-based and cultural activities, exploring the newly-coined 'virgin forest-tourism [19]' demand, and researching the viability of river-based tourism activities. More studies should be conducted on the viability of sports fishing in the various rivers within Salonga National Park, with opportunities in the short & medium-term to develop similar offerings as Chinko Nature Reserve in CAR, where seasonal sports-fishing camps host wealthy, fly-in travelers on the small scale. Coupling boating with wildlife-viewing is also a great opportunity, and strategic planning of these activities should be done to determine the best routes for wildlife viewing.

[14] <https://salonga.org/partners/>

[15] <https://salonga.org/our-work/>

[16] https://usfscentralafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Assessment-of-Protected-Area-Management-Partnerships-in-Central-Africa_USFS_2021.pdf

[17] <https://salonga.org/field-stories/a-culinary-hike-in-the-park/>

[18] <https://salonga.org/bekalikali-bai-now-has-an-observation-platform/>

[19] <http://world-heritage-datasheets.unep-wcmc.org/datasheet/output/site/salonga-national-park/>

Site Analysis:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Enabling Environment Constraints

Access

Accessibility to the park poses a truly significant challenge for tourism development. There are no roadways connecting the park with other parts of the country, so stakeholders report access options as either flying in on a private charter, or utilizing the riverways. The most common access route is to travel first via small plane from Kinshasa to Mbandaka, the closest major city to Salonga National Park. From Mbandaka, actually reaching the park is only possible via riverways, a journey that can take up to 6 nights. Thus, the only viable option for any significant scale of tourists to access the park will be an on-site airstrips and private charter flights. It's reported that WWF plans to build and expand airstrips within SNP, as well as have plans for purchasing a small plane for management of the park as well as potentially tourism. They also plan to purchase a barge for the transport of supplies. If successful, these plans will be an important enabler first for stronger park management, and then for eventual tourism development.

Accommodations & Infrastructure

Infrastructure for tourism in the park is currently non-existent. There are plans to expand lodging options for staff in the short-term, which would be a key enabler for future tourism developments as well. WWF is reportedly starting to build some initial tourism infrastructure with the goal of hosting visitors in the medium to long-term. The development of accommodation and touristic infrastructure will take time to develop but is needed to enable tourism in the park. This could be modeled on the type of development that has occurred in Dzanga-Sangha National Park in the Central African Republic, also facilitated by WWF.

Tourist Activities and Services

At present, SNP lacks any formal tourist activities or services, reflecting the nascent stage of tourism development. Surveys and a tourism strategic plan should be conducted to assess SNP's assets in relation to international travel demand and develop a roadmap for the future. This should be followed by a feasibility analysis for specific activity and service development to understand the specifics of how they would operate and the management/operational modality. Once lodging and activities are established, there are proposals to link SNP with broader circuits and itineraries, allowing activities from other destinations to complement the park's offerings.

Site Analysis:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

**A survey of touristic assets and opportunities, that feed into a broader tourism strategic plan for the park is needed. This study would assess SNP's assets in relation to international travel demand and local context and then compile WWF and other stakeholder ideas and needs into a roadmap for tourism development and operations in the park. This would help define the competitive advantage of the park and its niche in the market as well as include the foundation for structures and standard operating procedures for managing and operating tourism in the park.

**Following on from the tourism strategic plan, a site specific feasibility analysis should be conducted that would drill deeper into the requirements, costs and financial feasibility for developing airstrip, lodging and tourism services/activities within the park. This more detailed analysis will help provide the foundation for fundraising or investment promotion around specific tourism development projects.

Assessment of the potential for sport fishing in the landscape and carrying capacity for such an activity, possibly in collaboration with the sport fishing operator African Waters, who have camps in Cameroon and Gabon.

Site Analysis:

Salonga National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Develop and enhance airstrips in the park for management as well as tourism potential (based on tourism strategic plan).**

****Building on the feasibility analysis, produce an investment prospectus for potential investors (donor as well as private sector) and promote the investment opportunities to these investor types. This may also be a mix, including donor support for base infrastructure and possibly a portion of lodging facilities and then private investors to compliment donor funds. In the case where donor funds support the development of a private operation such as a lodge, it is recommended that the component that is funded by donors be 'on behalf of the community or park' and that this constitutes an equity stake or bond interest in the facility (i.e. the grant is the equity or bond investment on behalf of the community/park).**

Site preparation for lodge, plus any additional infrastructure, such as trails, viewing platforms, etc.

Training and capacity building for staff and community members to host and manage tourism at the sites designated for tourism. On the management side, training will be needed for park staff to plan and manage tourism activities as well as for those hosting visitors such as guides (ideally in partnership with local communities) hospitality staff (if lodging is run by WWF as in Dzanga-Sangha National Park), etc.

Risk management plan that defines security and safety procedures for tourism activities in the park, including provisions and steps for managing emergencies

Once there is a basis of tourism infrastructure and services, a media, influencer and marketing campaigns that highlight these opportunities will be needed. The marketing campaign will focus on generating awareness about the park to targeted, higher-end adventure and nature based markets.

This may include:

- A content and storytelling component to generate high quality content by gathering engaging images, videos and text about the park and visitor activities,
- Establish a website and social media channels
- A travel trade outreach campaign to specific tour operators that specialize in bespoke and small group, high-end nature based adventures
- Familiarization trips for tour operators and media influencers

Earlier efforts could be made to capitalize on Bonobo habituation or other conservation activities through the pitching of stories to media outlets like Netflix, Discovery, etc. for documentaries news/travel publications for stories. This proactive approach can generate initial awareness that can then be built on with marketing once tourism facilities are established.

Destination Snapshot:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Quick Facts:

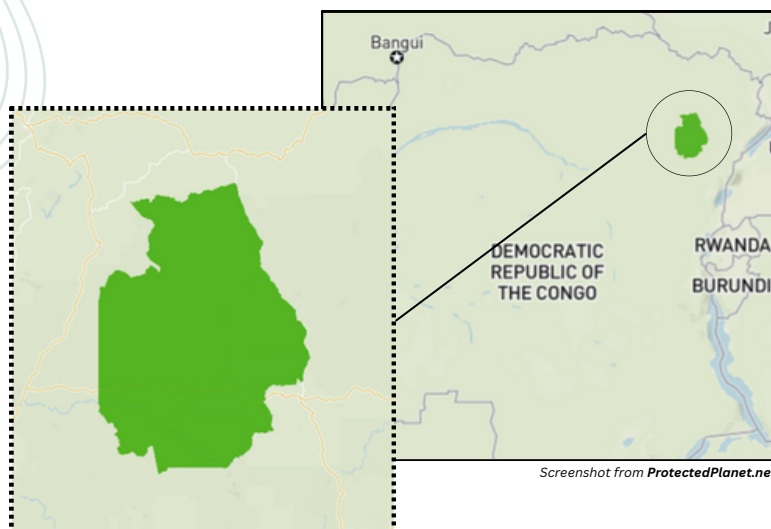
- 1,372,625 Hectares
- Ituri Forest: Dense tropical rainforest
- IUCN Category - Not applicable
- UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site
- Park Entry Fee: None
- Home to 17% of all wild Okapi
- 17 species of primates

Seasonality:

☀ June - September, January & February

Best time to visit

🌧 October - December, March - May



Accommodations & Facilities

Park HQ:

Located in Epulu, towards the center of the park.

Limited accommodation is available here for travelers.

Basic camping, usually along the Epulu River, is the most common accommodation type in the park.

Other accommodation information is unknown, including if there are other options, or any permanent accommodation facilities within park boundaries.

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	N'Djili International Airport (Kinshasa)	Goma International Airport (Goma)
	Some stakeholders have explained that park managers have begun flying in travelers directly from Uganda, with a visa-on-arrival procedure within the park.	
Domestic Air	Bunia Airport	Kisangani Airport
	Kinshasa to Bunia: No direct flights, ~4 hours in air (excluding stopovers) Goma to Bunia: Direct flight, ~1.5 hours	Kinshasa to Kisangani: Direct flight, ~2 hours Operates 1x per week Goma to Kisangani: Direct flight, ~1 hour Operates 5x per week
Airstrip within park boundaries: Unknown		
Ground	From Bunia to Epulu:	From Kisangani to Epulu:
	~7 hours via N27 & N4, much longer in rainy season. 4x4 vehicle required.	~8-10 hours via N4, much longer in rainy season. 4x4 vehicle required.
Within Park	Park HQ in Epulu is only accessible by 4WD vehicle.	

Transportation Infrastructure

Poor

Park Headquarters

Onsite

Availability of Accommodations

Unknown

Accommodation Product Variation

Unknown

Visitor Activities

Openly Available

Activity Product Variation

Medium

None

Basic

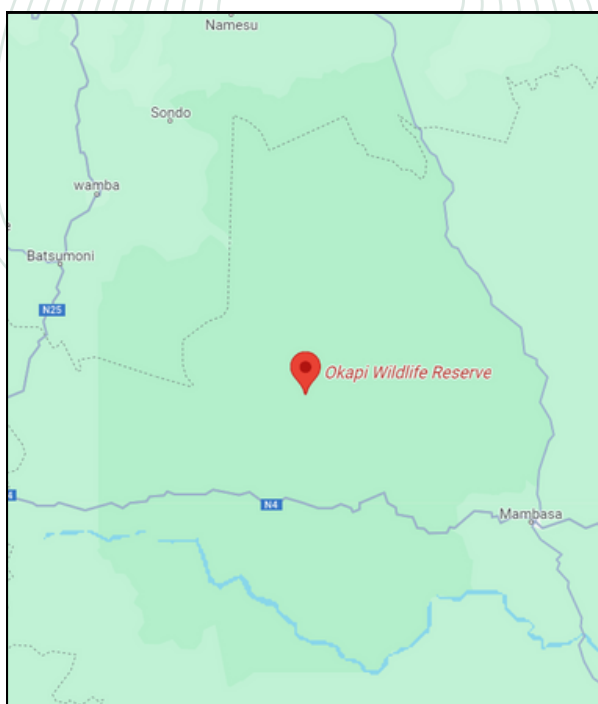
Limited

Diverse

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC



Google Maps (2023) Okapi Wildlife Reserve.

Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Most notably: park provides refuge for ~5,000 of the estimated 30,000 Okapi surviving in the wild (*one-sixth*).

17 species of primates (the highest number for an African forest), including Chimpanzees.

14 species of forest ungulates.

~380 species of birds,

Designated an **Important Bird Area** by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Occupies ~one-fifth of the Ituri forest:

Mostly moist, semi-evergreen forest.

Features unique, dramatic scenery such as **waterfalls along the Ituri & Epulu rivers**.

Other notable features: **Nepoko River & Mbiya Mountain**

Human Capital

The Reserve is governed by a management agreement between WCS and the ICCN.

Okapi Conservation Project ('OCP'):

Works in three main intervention areas: Wildlife protection, community assistance, and conservation education.

OCP operates all of their programs under a Contract of Collaboration with the ICCN and WCS.

The ICCN ecoguards work under the Reserve Director, who is appointed by WCS. In turn, OCP supports the ecoguards in community relations, supplying rations, and logistical support.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★

68 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●

2 Total Reviews

"First the feeling was it's expensive, That feeling was replaced with joy in the first 5 min."

"[We] had a friendly tour guide with the name of Ed, well trained and great with the guests."

"For so long I wanted to see the Okapi so I booked a safari and soon I was on the brink of fulfilling my dreams [...] I took hours watching [the Okapi] and feeding it the exotic leaves that they chew."

"The road trip was long but exiting features to see enroute."



TripAdvisor Reviews
2010 - 2015



Destination Scorecard:

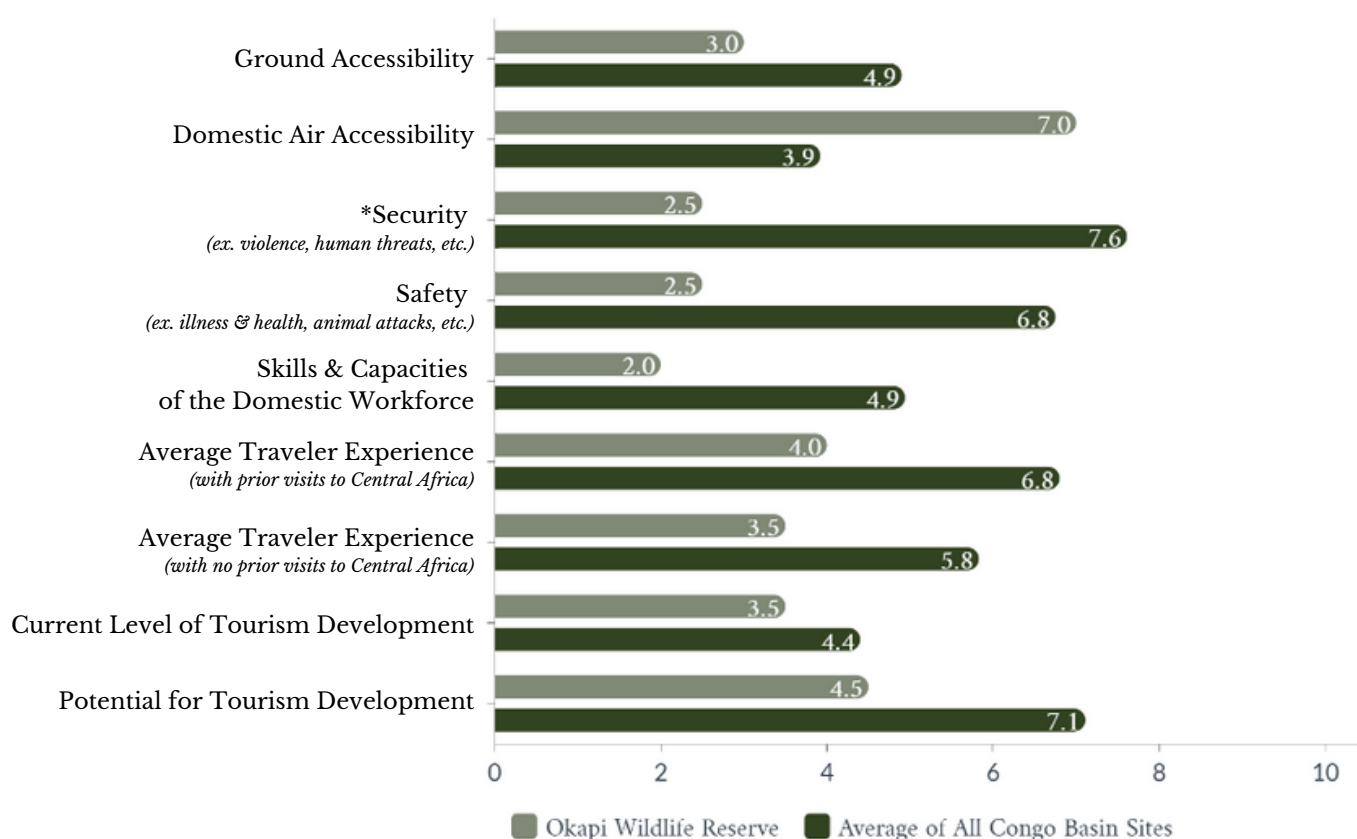
Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Okapi Wildlife Reserve Tourism Assessment Survey Results



Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is currently no interest from tourism investors in Okapi Wildlife Reserve.
- Primates and Chimpanzees were noted as additional natural assets of the park, in addition to the large presence of Okapi.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Garamba National Park
 - Kahuzi-Biega National Park
 - Salonga National Park

Key Takeaways:

- Security and safety received a much lower score compared to the regional average, signaling the need for stabilization of the security situation before tourism can be successful at the site.
- Stakeholders report that both the potential for tourism development and the average traveler experiences at this site are significantly lower than the regional average.

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

Site Analysis: --- --- Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Overview

Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR) is located in northeast DRC. Though the entire area extends over 1.3 million Hectares, the core protected area zone where hunting is prohibited is 282,000 Hectares. An additional 950,000 Hectares allows for traditional use, including self-regulated hunting using traditional methods for local community subsistence. An additional 18,000 Hectares is delineated as a development zone with permanent installations and agricultural clearings. The whole Reserve is surrounded by a 50-km wide buffer zone [1]. OWR is one of five protected areas in DRC recognized by UNESCO as a natural world heritage site [2], due to its outstanding ecological importance, as a refuge for threatened species, and the Indigenous peoples and culture within its boundaries.

OWR covers approximately one-fifth of the iconic Ituri forest, an area dominated by dense evergreen and semi-evergreen rainforests. The Reserve also features swamp forests and some dramatic natural features, including waterfalls along the Ituri and Epulu rivers and views of Mount Mbiya.

The Reserve is renowned for its most notable species, the Okapi, often referred to as the "forest giraffe" which is endemic to the Democratic Republic of Congo. This species holds both cultural and ecological significance and is classified as endangered by IUCN. With an estimated 30,000 individuals remaining in the wild, the reserve shelters approximately 5,000 [3], making it a critical landscape for Okapi conservation efforts. In addition to Okapi, the reserve is a sanctuary for other iconic species, including one of the largest populations of forest elephants and chimpanzees in the country [4]. It also boasts 16 other primate species, representing the highest diversity of monkeys found anywhere in Africa, along with Bongo antelope, forest buffalo, leopards, red river hogs and other species [5]. Moreover, the reserve hosts 376 documented species of birds, solidifying its status as one of the most important protected areas in Africa for bird conservation [1].

OWR falls mostly within the Iruti Province of DRC, a region which has been given a heightened '*Level 4: Do Not Travel*' advisory by the U.S. Department of State [6]. This region faces persistent violent crime, with road travelers often targeted in attacks. Additionally, the presence of terrorist and other armed groups further compounds security concerns. Stakeholders echo these sentiments, highlighting that as of early 2024, several areas within the forest remain unsafe due to the presence of armed groups. The entry route to the park is deemed unsafe for travelers, and beyond the headquarters and its immediate vicinity, the rest of the protected area is considered 'potentially insecure'.

[1] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/718/>

[2] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/cd>

[3] <https://ielc.libguides.com/sdgg/factsheets/okapi/population>

[4] <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/13167/New-hope-for-the-Okapi-Wildlife-Reserve-a-wildlife-haven-under-threat-in-the-heart-of-the-Congo-rainforest.aspx>

[5] <https://www.okapiconservation.org/animals-of-the-reserve>

[6] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-travel-advisory.html>

Site Analysis:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities


In 2019, the Wildlife Conservation Society in DRC (WCS-DRC) and DRC's National Protected Area Agency (ICCN) entered into a public-private partnership to manage the Okapi Wildlife Reserve [7] [8]. Additionally, the Okapi Conservation Project (OCP) operates within the park under collaborative arrangements with both ICCN and WCS [9], focusing on conservation, wildlife protection, education, and community development. Despite the current lack of emphasis on tourism development by these entities, a press release from OCP in late 2023 suggests that a revival of tourism could be on the horizon following increased protection and conservation efforts for Okapi populations [10]. Furthermore, a press release in April 2024 indicates that DRC's President Tshisekedi is urging ICCN to reintroduce tourism to the Reserve, another positive signal that tourism might be reprioritized in the future [11].

The development of tourism is not a short-term possibility for the reserve, with security and access being the primary constraints. However longer-term, if these two critical factors improve, there is opportunity and a strong foundation exists in the natural assets of the reserve as well as the partners working in the landscape.

Continued work on enhancing the security of the landscape is needed in the short-term to provide an environment in which tourism can be contemplated. Once security is improved, a comprehensive analysis of potential tourism assets and a tourism plan for the reserve are needed to provide a roadmap for tourism development. Case studies of other parks in the Congo Basin should be included in this planning effort to understand how other parks have addressed security concerns and development tourism in their landscapes.

One of the most compelling opportunities for tourism development in the park lies in its iconic Okapi. This unique animal is captivating and charismatic and can provide a distinguishing draw for the reserve. Opportunity may also lie in partnerships with international zoos that house Okapi, such as Disney's Animal Kingdom. Existing collaborations are detailed in OCP's 2022 Annual Report, showcasing support from over 25 zoos [12]. Developing cross-promotional materials highlighting Okapi conservation and tourism in the reserve presents a unique marketing opportunity for global markets.

Local Indigenous populations, such as the Mbuti and Efe pygmies, have already engaged in community-based tourism activities facilitated by park authorities [13]. Activities include traditional hunting activities and forest walks, offering travelers (mainly domestic) an authentic cultural experience. The Reserve has also provided job opportunities to these groups, recognizing their unique forestry knowledge and environmental stewardship [14]. Continuing to strengthen these relationships and co-developing additional community-based tourism activities with local communities presents an opportunity for the tourism sector and local communities in the future.



Site Analysis:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Enabling Environment Constraints

Security

Security is a critical enabling factor for tourism development in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Despite its significant potential, the park has never, nor will ever, fully realize tourism in the park until the poor security situation is resolved [15]. Stakeholders working in the landscape emphasize that this is a national security issue beyond the park management's control. To address this challenge, stakeholders across sectors must collaborate. In March 2024, CorPPN (a cooperative partnership between ICCN, the Congolese Army, local police, and park wardens) conducted an assessment visit to OWR to prepare for further interventions [16].

Additionally, OWR is designated a reserve, despite its world heritage site status and significance from a conservation perspective. Upgrading the status of the reserve (at least the core area) as a National Park would give the park more prominence on the national and global arena as well as afford the core zone greater protections.

Accommodations

Presently, the park offers only two accommodation options: lodging at the guest house in Epulu near the Park HQ and basic river-side camping. While these options suffice for any small-scale tourism currently occurring, the ultimate aim for OWR is to accommodate a larger number of visitors, including international travelers who seek higher-quality lodging. Therefore, initiatives such as renovating the existing guest house and camp-sites, along with plans for developing a new lodge, should be pursued once the security situation is stabilized.

Access

Stakeholders have highlighted the insecure conditions of the road leading into the park, often targeted in attacks. Even before these security threats, the journey from the closest airports to the park would entail a lengthy 7-10 hour drive. While feasible for some domestic travelers, it's a constraining factor for many visitors. Although there is an operational airstrip at the Reserve headquarters in Epulu, this is not routinely used for tourism purposes. Without fly-in, fly-out capabilities, accessibility will persist as a significant barrier to tourism development in OWR.

[7] <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/19284/Fatal-Attack-on-Eco-guard-in-DRCs-Okapi-Wildlife-Reserve-English-and-French.aspx>

[8] <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/13167/New-hope-for-the-Okapi-Wildlife-Reserve-a-wildlife-haven-under-threat-in-the-heart-of-the-Congo-rainforest.aspx>

[9] <https://www.okapiconservation.org/wildlife-protection>

[10] <https://www.okapiconservation.org/news/press-release-world-okapi-day-2023>

[11] <https://www.okapiconservation.org/news/corppn-visit-to-the-reserve>

[12] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6268179a604ef713029d9b80/t/659ebcd4d522830afc7ca435/1704901845622/2022+WCG_OC_P+Annual+Report_WEB+%281%29.pdf

[13] <https://www.silverbackgorillatours.com/congo/okapi-wildlife-reserve>

[14] <https://rris.biopama.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Okapi%20Wildlife%20Reserve%20-%202020%20COA%20-%20en.pdf>

[15] <https://rris.biopama.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Okapi%20Wildlife%20Reserve%20-%202020%20COA%20-%20en.pdf>

[16] <https://www.okapiconservation.org/news/corppn-visit-to-the-reserve>

Site Analysis:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

****Supporting and scaling the efforts already underway relating to collaborative security actions to improve the security situation in the landscape. Specifically support CorPPN with coordination and logistics, planning and equipment to strengthen security forces in the region and expand patrolling.**

Through the collaboration of partners working in the landscape, engage with government to upgrade the core areas of the reserve to National Park status

In parallel to the above, design and implement a communications campaign that highlights the unique aspects of the reserve and its long term potential to government and national stakeholders to support its designation as a national park and promote greater awareness. If the campaign is successful a follow-on campaign could then celebrate the new designation as a national park nationally and internationally.

Site Analysis:

Okapi Wildlife Reserve, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

******Once the security is stabilized, conduct a comprehensive analysis of potential tourism assets and infrastructure in the landscape and develop a tourism plan for the reserve to provide a roadmap for tourism development. This should be followed with a feasibility analysis to understand the costs and structure of specific priority projects identified in the plan.

******Develop case studies of other similar protected areas and conduct staff study tours to understand what other locations have done to develop their tourism and how it is managed. Case studies should prioritize sites which also have emblematic species, such as the Okapi.

Engage with donors and partners that may underwrite the infrastructure development needs for tourism in the landscape as well as engage with potential private sector operators to gauge their interest and needs.

Enhance current infrastructure, including airstrips, lodging and activities/attractions in one priority location within the reserve to foster greater visitation.

Training and capacity building for staff and community members to host and manage tourism at the sites designated for tourism. On the management side, training will be needed for park staff to plan and manage tourism activities as well as for those hosting visitors such as guides (ideally in partnership with local communities), hospitality staff, and so forth.

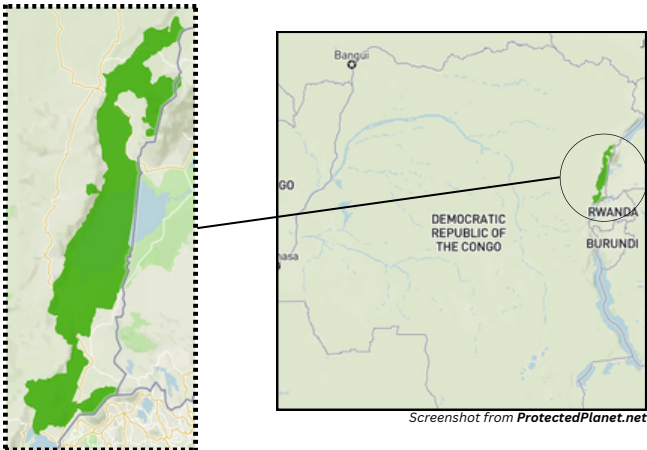
Once there is a basis of tourism infrastructure and services, media, influencer and marketing campaigns that highlight these opportunities and build awareness about the park will be needed.

Destination Snapshot:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Quick Facts:

- 790,000 Hectares
- Mixture of rainforests, savanna, mountains, and lakes.
- IUCN Category: Not Applicable
- UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site
- Park Entry Fee: Unknown
 - Special ICCN tourist visas for Virunga visitors: 105USD
- Activity fees:
 - Nyiragongo Hiking Permit: 300USD
 - Ruwenzori Multiday trek: starts at 200USD
- Gorilla Habituation: ~6 successful families
 - Trekking fee: 400USD for foreigners
- Seasonality:
 - ☀ June-September, December-February
 - Best time to visit: July - September
 - 💧 March-May, October & November



Accommodations & Facilities

Variety of Options Within Park:

Kibumba Tented Camp:
Classic mid-range tented camp with ensuite bathrooms and onsite dining/bar.

Mikeno Lodge:
12 luxurious, spacious, and private bungalows, built of unique lava stone and mahogany. Main lodge features dining and hang-out spaces for guests.

Lulimbi Tented Camp:
Comfortable canvas tents along the Ishasha River shoreline. Shared mess tent, shared lounge tent, and 8 ensuite sleeping tents.

Ngila Lodge:
Brand new luxury tented camp in the Gorilla Sector of the park. 8 tents on platforms and a main dining facility.
Not confirmed if this lodge is fully operational yet.

Outside Park:

Bukimia Tented Camp:
Semi-luxury accommodation for trekkers, just outside of park boundaries.

Tchegeza Island Tented Camp:
Along the northern shore of Lake Kivu. 8 comfortable, standard safari-style tents.

Park Tourism Office:
Located in Goma, in the Grande Barriere border post building, across from the passport control office.
For all travel packages, travelers start and end their trips here.

Accessibility:

Int'l Air	N'Djili International Airport (Kinshasa) Then, transfer to: Goma Airport (Goma)	Kigali International Airport (Kigali, Rwanda) Then, transfer to Goma Airport or drive into DRC
	Park management can arrange private transport for travelers arriving by air at Goma airport.	
Domestic Air	Airstrip within park boundaries: Unknown	
Ground	Accessing the park via roadways within DRC is most viable from Goma, Virunga's main hub for tourists. ~32km from the park, roughly 1 hour drive.	From Bukavu, DRC: Travelers combining Kahuzi-Biega NP with Virunga NP can travel to Goma via road (~194kms) or boat across Lake Kivu. Daily boat transfers available: ~3 hour ride. Ferry ride option: ~7 hours.
	From Kigali, Rwanda: First, travelers must reach Gisenyi town along Rwanda's western border, ~150kms from Kigali. Then border crossing on 'Le Grand Barrier' to reach Goma (DRC), ~8km dirt road. In total, ~4 hours from Kigali to Virunga NP	From Uganda: First, travelers must reach Kisoro town, along Uganda's southern border. Then, border crossing at Bunagana to reach DRC. From Bunagana, ~90kms to Goma. <i>As of Dec. 2023, park management advises against this border crossing/method of access due to the area's instability.</i>
Within Park	Travel into, from, and within the park must be organized with official Virunga transportation (usually convoys). <i>This can be done ahead of time or at the Virunga Tourism Office in Goma.</i>	

Transportation Infrastructure

Fair-Good

Park Headquarters

Offsite

Availability of Accommodations

Serviced

Accommodation Product Variation

High

Visitor Activities

Openly Available

Activity Product Variation

High

None

Basic

Limited

Diverse

Site Destination Maturity
Relative to the Congo Basin Market

Destination Snapshot:

Virunga National Park, DRC

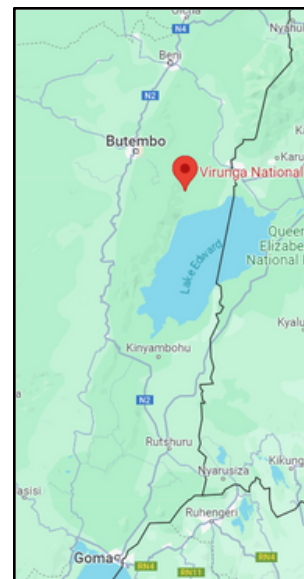
Current & Potential Natural Tourism Assets:

Wildlife:

Named Africa's most biodiverse protected area.
Contains nearly a **third of the world's Mountain Gorillas** as well as Eastern Lowland Gorillas and Eastern Chimpanzees.
African Bush Elephants, Hippos, Okapi, & Lions.
700+ bird species,
designated an **Important Bird Area**
by BirdLife International.

Geographic Features:

Standout features: **Rwenzori Mountain Range, Lake Edward, and the Nyiragongo Volcano.**
Mosaic of rainforests, grasslands, wooded savanna, bamboo forestts, peatlands, and high-altitude habitats.
Is largely **contiguous with other national parks:** Semuliki, Rwenzori Mountains, Queen Elizabeth, & Bwindi (Uganda), as well as Volcanoes NP in Rwanda.
Cross-border tourism circuits exist.



Google Maps (2023) Virunga National Park.

Google Reviews Rating: ★★★★★
466 Total Reviews

TripAdvisor Rating: ●●●●●
243 Total Reviews

"We finally decided to visit the mountain gorillas in Congo since the gorilla permit was cheaper compared to [Uganda & Rwanda]."

"Arrived in a convoy of park jeeps and truck with an armed escort of soldiers!! Lovely accommodation, very special. [...] Unforgettable experience. But beware! The roads are full of rocks and potholes- bone jarring drive in and out."

"The professionalism of all the Park Staff (rangers, tourism office, lodge managers, etc) is second-to-none. You will not regret going; in fact, it will most likely be one of the most positive and memorable experiences of your life."

"Beyond amazing is what I can say to such experience. [...] The hospitality of Kibumba camp was very detailed. [...] Next day, we trekked the Gorilla. The team of rangers made sure you get to experience of a lifetime."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2019 – 2020

"We appreciated the little touches from the staff, who were very welcoming and attentive.
As for the food, it is worthy of that of great restaurants!"

"A breathtaking landscape, a very very steep climb and descent but nothing to fear thanks to the help of the porter."

"The whole experience, from the Gorillas to the Nyiragongo Volcano was just ridiculously good! Really, I'm not sure where we could go to top it. The Rangers, the porters, the staff at the lodge were all excellent! Food and accommodation too.
Absolutely nothing was too much trouble."

"Any hesitations I had regarding safety and health were quickly dispelled - the park rangers run a tight ship making sure that their guests are safe and comfortable at all times."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2020

Human Capital

The Virunga Foundation

A UK-based charity, dedicated to protecting and managing Virunga's resources, as well as engaging with the local communities.

As of December 2023, Virunga has 770+ male & female Rangers. All are from local Congolese towns and are extensively trained by the ICCN & Virunga Foundation.

It is unknown if there are any formal hospitality or tourism trainings/education opportunities in Virunga, like there is in the neighboring Bwindi NP & Volcanoes NP.

"Any hesitations I had regarding safety and health were quickly dispelled - the park rangers run a tight ship making sure that their guests are safe and comfortable at all times."

"Extraordinary adventure, magical place with people filled with quality of heart. Welcome, exceptional supervision. Magnificent lodge, clean and spacious with all possible comfort.
Organization of gorilla treks very, very well done with very, very professional guides."

"Don't let the outdated travel warnings deter you. The hospitality and service was exceptional, from the lodging and food to the staff, park rangers and porters. It's hard to choose the biggest highlight."

"It's an honour to be able to contribute in some small measure to bettering the lives of those dependent on the park by visiting the Virunga."

TripAdvisor Reviews
2019

Destination Scorecard:

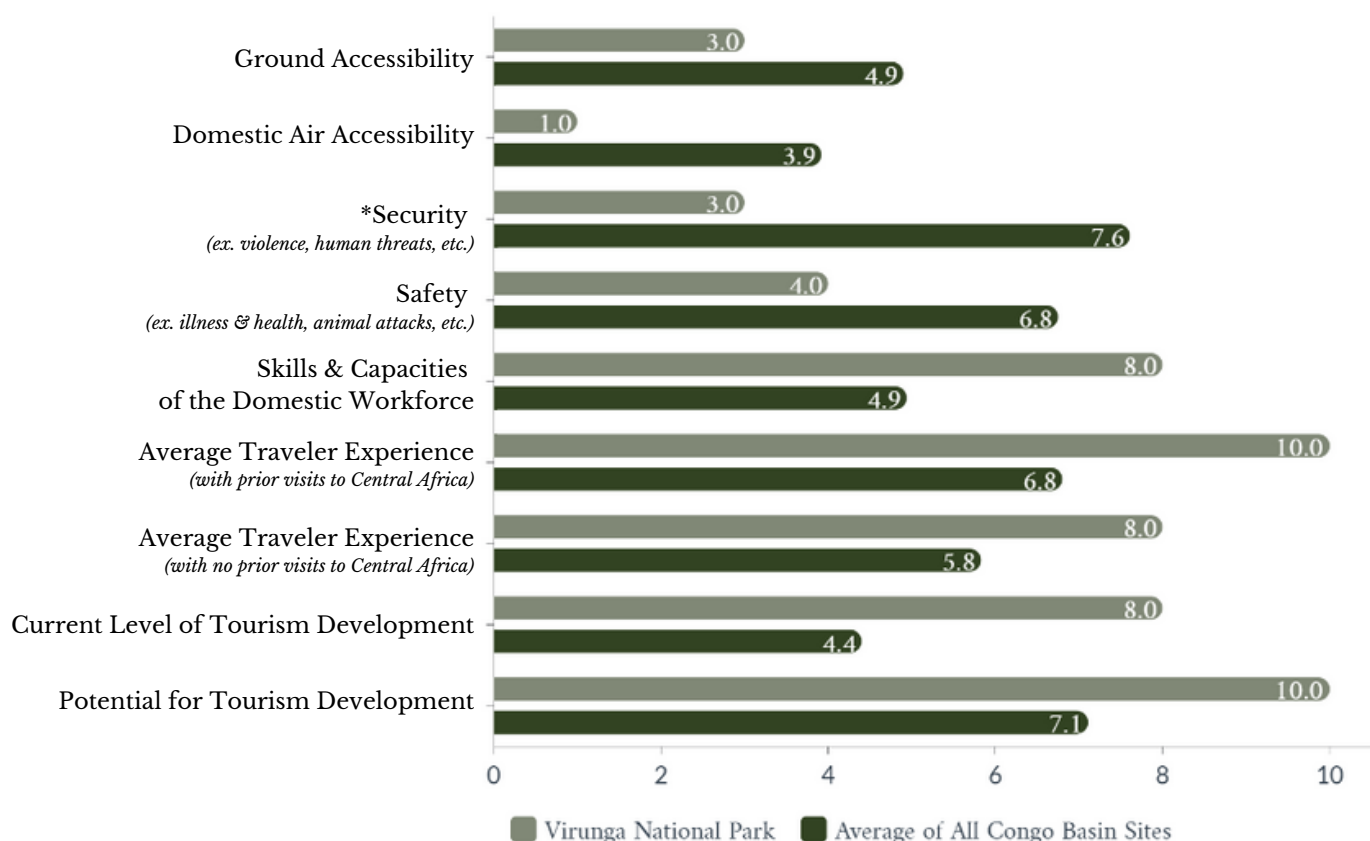
Virunga National Park, DRC

Stakeholders with firsthand knowledge of the park were asked to rank different aspects of tourism in and around the landscape.

Ranking is based on a 1-10 scale:

'1' represents relative weakness in the field and '10' represents strength in the field.

Virunga National Park Tourism Assessment Survey Results**



Key Takeaways:

- Ground access, domestic air access, and security all rank below the regional average, and would be considered top enabling factors for successful tourism development in Virunga National Park.
- Average traveler experiences and potential for tourism development all exceed regional averages, signaling this park as an opportune site for investment if key enablers such as security can be stabilized.

Additional Insights from Survey:

- There is tentative interest from tourism investors and opportunities for expanded tourism in Virunga National Park (pending a more stable security situation).
- Stakeholders explain that accessibility and security are closely linked in this park.
- Tourism circuit opportunities & site linkages, as suggested by expert stakeholders:
 - Volcanoes National Park (Rwanda)
 - Kahuzi-Biega National Park

Responses collected via Qualtrics surveys, from October 2023 - March 2024

*For additional information on security, see site analysis below.

**Analysis based on limited data

Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Overview

Virunga National Park (VNP) sprawls along the eastern border of DRC with Uganda and Rwanda, covering 790,000 hectares [1] and is encircled by a buffer zone approximately 10 km wide [2]. Divided into four sectors—northern, central, southern, and lake—the park boasts diverse landscapes and ecosystems [3]. Notably, it holds historical significance as Africa's first National Park, initially named the 'Albert' National Park before being renamed Virunga in 1969 [4]. Recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, VNP is recognized by numerous international entities for its ecological importance and conservation potential. It forms part of a contiguous network with other key protected areas such as Semuliki, Rwenzori Mountains, Queen Elizabeth, and Bwindi National Parks in Uganda, as well as Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda.

The park lies at the heart of the Albertine Rift, stretching from the Rwenzori Mountains in the north to the Virunga Massif in the south. The park has a reputation for offering “the most spectacular montane landscapes in Africa” [1]. Vegetation includes rainforest, montane forests, grasslands, savannahs, lava plains, marshes, swamplands, and the Rwenzori snowfields [5] [6].

The park also boasts impressive and diverse wildlife, including three taxa of great apes: Mountain Gorillas, Eastern Lowland Gorillas, and Eastern Chimpanzees, making it the only protected area in the world to host all three. Virunga is home to over one-third of the global Mountain gorilla population [7]. Beyond primates, the park supports a plethora of iconic species such as forest elephants, with their population currently at its highest in 30 years at 800 individuals [8], as well as the Okapi, endemic to DRC [9]. Avifauna is also remarkable, with over 700 bird species found throughout its varied landscape, including 24 endemic to the park [10].

The security situation in eastern DRC is less secure than other parts of the country with the U.S. Department of State categorizing the region with a ‘Level 4: Do Not Travel’ advisory [11]. This is due to violent crime and the presence of armed groups that target civilians and government organizations in the area. In the past, armed groups have kidnapped tourists, with the aim at sabotaging the park’s tourism potential [12]. However, there are various safety measures taken in and around the park to ensure the safety of visitors.

The park has over 600 rangers with military-style training, have installed electric fences around portions of the boundary, and have formed partnerships with other stakeholders, including the military and local communities, who support security efforts. Additionally, there are daily protected convoys on National Road 2 which have reduced the numbers of attacks and kidnappings [13]. This service is offered to VNP tourists, where convoys will escort visitors into the park [14].

Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities

The Virunga Foundation, a UK-registered NGO, was established to support the park's biodiversity and local communities. In 2011, it signed a 25-year Public-Private Partnership agreement with DRC's National Protected Area Agency (ICCN), granting it management responsibilities for Virunga National Park [15]. Through the Virunga Alliance, initiated by the Foundation in 2013, a sustainable development agenda is pursued with a focus on renewable energy, infrastructure, agriculture, and tourism. The Foundation views nature-based tourism as a key economic driver, and it relaunched tourism in 2014 with this in mind [15]. Due to the region's complex security challenges, private companies face significant barriers to tourism development, leading park management to undertake all tourism development in the Park [16].

As outlined in the Virunga Foundation's 2022 Annual Report, the tourism sector in VNP faced significant challenges due to Covid-19, the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano, and security issues, resulting in park closures [17]. However, efforts are underway to rehabilitate the sector, including staff training, lodge maintenance, and facility reconstruction. Key short-term priorities highlighted in the report include funding for renovations on Tchegeza Island and the Mikenso Lodge, as well as projects focused on preserving natural assets and developing tourism activities. Additionally, medium-term strategies involve creating a new Tourism Master Plan and fostering partnerships with international tourism investors.

As of 2022, the tented camp and tourism experiences on Tchegeza Island in Lake Kivu represented the sole operational tourism activity in VNP. Despite relatively low international visitor numbers (369), the island attracted over 3,000 domestic/resident visitors, 70% Congolese nationals [17]. Tchegeza Island presents opportunities for both day visits and weekend getaways for the domestic/resident market, particularly from Goma. This underscores the importance of prioritizing marketing and development efforts for the domestic market in the short-term, while also strategically planning tourism development for international markets in the medium and longer-term.

[1] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/63>

[2] <https://dopa-explorer.jrc.ec.europa.eu/wdpa/2017>

[3] <https://virunga.org/about>

[4] <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/2018/09/these-are-the-worlds-first-national-parks-0>

[5] <https://virunga.org/habitats/>

[6] <http://world-heritage-datasheets.unep-wcmc.org/datasheet/output/site/virunga-national-park/>

[7] <https://virunga.org/wildlife/primates/mountain-gorillas/>

[8] <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/80e6467f74.html#page/24>

[9] <https://virunga.org/wildlife/mammals/>

[10] <https://virungagorillanationalpark.com/top-bird-species-in-virunga-national-park-congo/>

[11] <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-travel-advisory.html>

[12] <https://www.berggorilla.org/en/gorillas/protected-areas-for-gorillas/protected-areas-for-gorillas/why-rangers-in-the-virunga-national-park-are-under-attack/>

[13] <https://virunga.org/news/virunga-national-park-responds-to-human-rights-watch-report/>

[14] <https://virungagorillanationalpark.com/is-virunga-national-park-safe/>

[15] <https://virunga.org/alliance/>

[16] https://usfscentralafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Assessment-of-Protected-Area-Management-Partnerships-in-Central-Africa_USFS_2021.pdf

[17] <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/80e6467f74.html#page/31>

Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Nature-Based Tourism Development Opportunities, *continued*

Considered a bucket-list destination for gorilla tourism, VNP represents a prime opportunity for safeguarding, expanding, and marketing this sector. Though gorilla tourism has brought in impressive revenue, around \$11 million USD since 2015, stakeholders working in the landscape note that this number “is only a fraction of Virunga’s potential: in Rwanda, gorilla tourism generates over \$15 million a year” [18]. This should however be taken in context as the security situation in and around VNP is very different from that in Rwanda and Uganda and the tourism product is far more developed in these countries.

Presently, the gorilla trekking fee in the DRC is \$400 USD for international visitors, significantly lower than neighboring Uganda and Rwanda, which charge \$800 (as of July 2024) and \$1500 respectively. Capitalizing on VNP’s reputation for providing high-quality gorilla experiences at a lower cost should be a focus as tourism is re-established, complemented by investment in expanding habituation, marketing, and product development projects in the medium-term. This will all be dictated by improvements to the security situation however.

VNP offers numerous nature-based tourism opportunities. The park is renowned as the premier bird-watching destination in the country, boasting a vast array of species, including endemics, and spectacular landscapes. To capitalize on this potential, ongoing analysis and product development should be prioritized. Initiatives such as specialized birding itineraries, VNP bird checklists for travelers, targeted marketing campaigns, and partnerships with international birding tour operators should be pursued. Furthermore, hiking and trekking opportunities abound within the park, with diverse vegetation and landscapes to explore. Developing hiking trails in both the glacial north and volcanic south, possibly linked in a “fire & ice” branded itinerary, along with forest walks led by local guides, presents another avenue for exploration. Additionally, potential activities include elephant observation platforms, photographic tourism itineraries and water-based activities on Lake Kivu.

During VNP’s tourism rehabilitation phase, there is a need for an updated tourism plan and an opportunity for a destination rebranding and storytelling initiative. Leveraging its standout natural assets—three types of great apes and the distinctive “fire & ice” landscape—could create a compelling new destination brand for international markets. This would be coupled with awareness and image building activities to reposition the park as an engaging place for adventurous travelers to explore.

[18] https://usfscentralfrafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Assessment-of-Protected-Area-Management-Partnerships-in-Central-Africa_USFS_2021.pdf

Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC



Enabling Environment Constraints

Security

Security stands as a critical enabling factor for tourism development in Virunga National Park. Periodically the Park closes to tourists in response to the evolving security situation and level of threat. Although the Park has incredible potential, noted by one of the stakeholders as “Could be the absolute best,” the volatility, uncertainty, and globally negative perceptions (image) of the region’s insecurity will remain the chief constraint for tourism development, for both domestic and especially international markets until the situation stabilizes in the region. This leads to very limited short-term opportunity for tourism in the park until the security situation stabilizes. Once this occurs opportunities abound.

Image building, Marketing & Promotion

Marketing VNP presents challenges due to the aforementioned security issues. While the park does attract resident travelers, especially from Goma, it is far less recognized within the ‘consideration set’ for travelers seeking ape and similar wildlife tourism experiences compared to neighboring Rwanda and Uganda. The park and its landscape, especially when compared to other parks in the Congo Basin as a whole, is relatively well known and documented for its conservation work and for tourism. Yet it is less frequently part of the consideration set for travelers when booking travel due to its perception of insecurity.



Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Lower Cost & Short-Term Actions:

Develop a strategic plan to further engage resident markets, mainly from Goma, in travel experiences within the park. This will include improvements to infrastructure and tourism activities/experiences that local markets can engage in to connect with the park.

Renovate tourism infrastructure and facilities on Tchegeza Island and the Mikenso Lodge to host visitors mainly from Goma but also intrepid international visitors.

Design and implement a communication campaign, possibly in partnership with local radio and other media/social media outlets or local influencers, to promote the park's tourism activities/experiences, package them and promote greater travel.

Site Analysis:

Virunga National Park, DRC

Recommendations & Considerations

Higher Cost & Medium-Term Actions:

****Once the security is stabilized, develop a tourism master plan for the park to provide a roadmap for tourism development. This should be followed with a feasibility analysis to understand the costs and structure of specific priority projects identified in the plan (e.g. new lodge, tourism activities, etc.).**

****Support the Virunga Foundation to engage with donors and partners that may underwrite the infrastructure development needs for tourism in the landscape as well as engage with potential private sector operators to gauge their interest and needs. This should include investors in the DRC, but also internationally. Internationally, investors that are already involved in tourism in Rwanda and Uganda may be a good target as they have operational experience in the region and can package trips together with their other operations.**

Develop a risk management plan for tourism in the park, including security operations and procedures while visitors are on-site and plans for emergency situations that may arise. This will also include equipment needs, training procedures, and a schedule for regular training.

Enhance current tourism infrastructure, and lodging facilities. To attract investors it is likely that a portion, if not all, of the physical structures will have to be built with non-private sector funds and these structures are concessioned out to the operator as this is a less risky proposition for the investor.

Continue with training and capacity building for staff and community members to host and manage tourism at the park (building on previous and ongoing efforts).

Design and implement a phased media, influencer and marketing campaign that highlights the positive tourism experiences that can be had in the park and addresses concerns with security (*influencers are good for this they are respected by their audiences and demonstrate to them that they have had a great time and were safe*). The campaign should target resident and regional markets initially (e.g. those in Kampala, Kigali, Nairobi, etc.) as they are more open to regional travel. The campaign can then expand to broader nature-based international markets once momentum is established.

Part of this phased strategy is so that some visitors, who are potentially a little more accepting of the local context, start to experience the destination and post online about their trips (blog posts, social media, tripadvisor, etc.). This then generates recent and relevant user-generated content for other travelers to see that people are traveling to the region and are therefore more likely to consider it in the travel planning. Momentum is built and the potential markets expand.