



Environmental Conservation as a Tool for Post-War Recovery

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The environment has often taken a backseat in discussions about conflict, but an increasing amount of evidence suggests that environmental and wildlife conservation could and should be very useful to post-conflict recovery work.

The notion that the environment can play a useful role in peacebuilding has been around for a number of decades. The [environmental peacebuilding theory](#) emerged after research found that even while countries were engaged in armed conflict they were cooperating over water management. The theory was that water management could establish cooperation and lay a platform for wider peacebuilding initiatives. Peace Parks follow the same principles to use transboundary biodiversity conservation to support peacebuilding. While both are appealing projects, their failure to translate from environmental cooperation into wider scale peacebuilding processes suggest they are of only limited use for peacebuilding and post-war recovery.

While the above processes have been of limited effectiveness, the shared geography of many areas of armed conflict and biodiversity hotspots suggests that conservation could and should be useful to post-conflict recovery.

Guerrillas and Gorillas

[Research has found](#) that 80% of modern armed conflicts occurred in biodiversity hotspots, and 90% within countries containing biodiversity hotspots. The use of 'conflict timber' and the illegal wildlife trade to finance conflict, and the presence of many armed groups in and around protected

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areas, creates clear links between conflict and the environment. Conflict also often leads to widespread environmental damage, and the post-conflict period can cause even more damage as short term human needs lead to ungoverned and unsustainable exploitation of the environment. This destroys key ecosystem services, opens opportunities for banditry and corruption, and increases the risk of natural disasters.

Addressing these threats to security and protecting the environment in the aftermath of conflict is therefore vital to ensure a resilient recovery process. This creates an opportunity for conservation to support the post-conflict recovery effort by simultaneously addressing threats to security and protecting the environment to support economic development. Current approaches to do this are limited, but potential exists for much more work to be carried out. I have therefore proposed the umbrella term of ‘[Ecological Development](#)’ to create a framework of methods to actively use conservation as a tool for post-conflict recovery.

Environmental Peacekeepers



Mountain Gorilla in Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Image via [Wikimedia](#).

Some work has already been undertaken in this area, such as the proposal to create a ‘[green helmets](#)’ UN force, with a mandate for environmental protection. Whether funding for such a force could be obtained, and a mandate agreed upon, is doubtful; even if it was, it is unlikely to be an effective unit. Current UN peacekeeping missions have regularly failed in their roles to protect civilians, so are unlikely to be able to effectively extend their mandate to

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environmental protection. Peacekeepers have also been caught with illegal fauna and flora. While the UN Peacekeeping operations now have an environment department to reduce the footprint of missions and educate soldiers about the environment, their role in environmental protection is now, and will likely be for the foreseeable future, minimal.

Using a country's army to support conservation work has also been trialled, but with limited impact; for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo the army became involved in poaching ivory. Both this and the proposed green helmets UN force also take a combative approach to conservation, seeking to fight poachers and armed groups in protected areas rather than addressing the underlying causes of poaching and deforestation. A different approach is required.

Instead, I have proposed the conversion of rebel groups en masse into a 'Yellow Berets' force under UN, or other neutral, control; their role would be to support existing wildlife rangers to protect the environment and start to engage in ecosystem regeneration and sustainable exploitation projects. Such a scheme would form a significant contribution to post-conflict recovery in several ways: it would employ ex-combatants, reducing the risk of a relapse into conflict; it would protect critical ecosystems, species and carbon sinks vital for human populations (and arguably worth protecting in their own right); and it would support efforts to develop sustainable natural resource extraction businesses to bring in revenue and create jobs to support post-conflict recovery. Crucially, this process seeks to address security threats with dollars not bullets; engaging rebel groups as paid eco-guards rather than engaging them in battle.

The DRC provides an example of the necessity and benefits of such a programme. Work is already underway to ensure [Virunga National Park](#) brings multiple economic benefits to surrounding populations, including the development of hydropower electricity generation. Security threats remain a major concern in the park, however, and there are too few rangers to address these threats. The ecological development method would offer financial incentives to rebel groups to join the yellow berets unit. This would simultaneously increase the number of conservation personnel and decrease the security threat, opening the way for an expansion of development projects around the park. It would also enable the restoration of forest areas – which could be financed by carbon offset schemes – and the further development of a tourist industry centred not only on gorillas but multiple other attractions in the region. Such a process would not be without challenges: securing the long-term finance required to pay wages; coping with disruptive private interests intent on perpetuating insecurity; and avoiding conflict between Congolese army soldiers and police who receive their wages intermittently or not at all.

Nevertheless the project holds promise, even in such a difficult operating environment as the DRC. It could also be used in other parts of the world where rebel groups operate in protected areas, as a means to bring an end to conflict and deal with ex-combatants efficiently and at scale.

Conservation for Development

The Yellow Beret process would require a large amount of finance to pay the wages of several hundred or even thousand eco-guardians that would form it. While donor finance could be mobilised for such a process – combining conservation, security, humanitarian and carbon finance – this would be difficult both to obtain initially and also, critically, to sustain over the long term.

Protected areas must therefore become sites of revenue and job creation in order to finance such an initiative.

The work being undertaken in Virunga, described earlier, is an example of this, but more is required. Projects that support the livelihoods of local communities and also bigger schemes that can generate greater revenues and create jobs on a large scale need to be trialled and refined. Examples of community projects are livestock and micro-finance schemes to provide sources of protein and finance to start small enterprises. These projects alleviate communities' dependence on protected area natural resources by providing sustainable sources of sustenance and protein, and improving the perception of conservation.

At the same time, larger schemes are required that seek to create products for sale into international markets; this may be 'green gold' projects seeking to make gold mining both sustainable and ethical; sustainable timber exploitation and processing for sale; or the creation of 'wildlife-friendly' businesses that could create a range of products from tea to clothing, and help to grow the certification scheme into something akin to the size of the Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance schemes. The benefit of such schemes is two fold: firstly, they are profit making, so would not be reliant on hard-to-access donor funding; secondly, they would generate jobs and revenue around protected areas that could be taxed and support the yellow beret and other conservation initiatives.

Traditionally, tourism has been the main, and in many cases sole, commercial method used for conservation to support development. This narrow focus on tourism leads to a lack of innovation and a dependence on an unreliable industry. Particularly in regions of armed conflict, tourism can at best play a small role in development programmes; too few people are willing to visit a

dangerous area to make it a viable business model. The other methods described above are therefore necessary.

Justifying Conservation

Time and time again I have heard that ‘a hungry man is an angry man’. Indeed, groups of unemployed young men are particularly dangerous. To transition from conflict to a successful post-conflict recovery, peace must be more attractive than conflict; there must be good opportunities for secure, paid employment for actors in conflict. Conservation can and must play a role in providing those opportunities.

In short, for the environment – and protected areas in particular – to play a useful role in post-conflict recovery, they must be demonstrably beneficial to people. Most crucially, they must be able to help improve security and generate revenue from conservation quickly and to a value in excess of alternative uses such as agriculture. Protected areas must therefore become sites of revenue and job creation in the post-conflict period. This will help to improve security and support post conflict economic recovery while protecting key environmental assets and species; at the same time it would lay a platform for longer term commercial investment in eco-man friendly industries once security has been assured.

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