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Coltan: Fact Sheet

Coltan is a black metallic ore from which the elements niobium and tantalum are extracted.

Tantalum from coltan is used to manufacture electronic capacitors, used in almost any kind of electronic device including consumer electronics products such as mobile phones, DVD players, video game systems and computers.

The exploitation of coltan in *legally protected areas* such as Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP) in the Democratic Republic Congo, poses a grave threat to gorillas and other species. Coltan mining has also been cited as helping to finance serious conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

KBNP is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was once home to approximately 8,000 Grauer's gorillas (also known as eastern lowland gorillas, *Gorilla beringei graueri*) along with thousands of other species. The KBNP population of Grauer's gorilla was contiguous with populations in adjacent Kasese forests, and together they represented 86 per cent of the world total for this subspecies.

Within the KBNP coltan is located in numerous sites both in the Eastern Highlands around the foothills of Mt. Kahuzi and Mt. Biéga and the Western Lowlands. The 'coltan boom' made the exploitation of these coltan deposits highly lucrative for the local communities around the KBNP. Thousands of people rushed into the area to mine both outside and inside the KBNP. At the peak it was estimated that there were around 12,000 artisanal miners working illegally within the KBNP.

Miners are far from food sources and have been hunting gorillas. The gorilla population has been seriously reduced and is now critically endangered. In Central and West Africa an estimated 3–5 million tons of so-called "bush meat" is obtained by killing animals (including gorillas) each year.

However, the Congolese people have been caught up in a fight over their country's vast natural resources with little benefit accruing to themselves. A UN report concluded that 'extracting the maximum commercial and material benefits' has become 'the primary motive' of the military and militia groups involved in this war. This plunder had developed into 'systematic and systemic exploitation'. The report concluded that plundering, looting, racketeering, and criminal cartels with worldwide connections have become commonplace in occupied areas and represent the next serious security problem in the region.

Devastated Biodiversity

Skulls of gorillas and elephants killed during the coltan boom (photo by Ian Redmond]. It remains to be seen how many - or how few - of Kahuzi-Biega's 3,600 elephants and 8,000 gorillas have survived the massacre in the lowland area, but it is hoped that relict populations could have retreated to, or survived in, the most inaccessible parts,

furthest from the mining areas. The only accurate data are from the highland area, which has lost all of its 350 elephants and half of its 258 gorillas (ICCN census funded WCS and DFGFI).

From indirect evidence, it appears that the KBNP and Kasese population of Grauer's Gorilla may have been reduced to under 1,000. The other nine populations listed by Hall et al (1998) numbered in the tens or hundreds a decade ago. The population in Maiko National Park is thought to have escaped the heavy poaching, but the sub-species as a whole may have been reduced from about 17,000 to only 2 – 3,000, a crash of 80-90 per cent.

Moreover, the indications are that the biodiversity of the Kahuzi-Biega region has been seriously, if not irreparably, damaged. If action is taken immediately, however, recovery in the long term may be possible even now. But if further procrastination and bureaucratic delays prevent effective and co-ordinated action, the word from the conservationists on the ground is that it will be too late.

Future outlook

When peace returns to the region, the successful gorilla tourism of the 1970s and 1980s should resume, financing the conservation work and bringing benefits to the surrounding communities. Revenue sharing schemes such as those already operating in South-west Uganda should also be introduced to benefit surrounding communities, which in turn should lead to acceptance and support for conservation work.

Significant human and financial resources in a state of peace and security and the presence of a legitimate and caring 'State' are necessary for success. There is also a need to convince the Government and NGOs to assist with other problems like access to water and food, affordable fuel and electricity, training, access to credit and linkages with legitimate and fair mineral buyers.

Awareness Raising & Mobile phone collection campaigns

Collection campaigns by numerous zoos and NGO are raising awareness of the problem while at the same time giving everybody the opportunity to become active. For every mobile phone collected, a certain sum is donated for gorilla conservation projects. Functional phones are resold, broken phones are recycled and the valuable mineral reused, thereby reducing the demand for coltan.

A good example of such an initiative is the campaign 'They are calling on you', organized by several Australian Zoos. Have a look!