The counterinsurgency/conservation nexus: guerrilla livelihoods and the dynamics of conflict and violence in Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

The growing militarisation of nature conservation has refocused attention on the relations between counterinsurgency and conservation. This contribution analyses how these two phenomena entwine in Virunga National Park, located in the war-ridden east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It examines how this entwinement relates to dynamics of conflict and violence, and how these dynamics shape and are shaped by the livelihood and resistance practices of local inhabitants. As it shows, a particularly important form of resistance is 'guerrilla livelihood' activities, or cultivation, (prohibited) fishing and logging within the boundaries of the park, which often take place under the protection of armed groups. By studying the interplay among such unauthorised exploitation of natural resources, different types of conflict, and insurgent mobilisation, it is demonstrated that strict law enforcement and joint operations of the Congolese army and park guards fuel, rather than mitigate, the dynamics feeding into armed mobilisation.

Key words: militarisation; nature conservation; counterinsurgency; natural resources; rural livelihoods; peasant resistance; DR Congo; Virunga National Park

Introduction: The proliferation of 'green militarisation'

In recent years, 'green militarisation', defined by Lunstrum (2014, 817) as 'the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation', has been intensifying at an unprecedented rate. This is particularly the case in protected areas (PAs) immersed in violent conflict, or in PAs that are confronted with a rise in illegal activities such as commercial wildlife poaching or drugs trafficking. Park guards in such areas are routinely trained by private security companies and foreign military instructors, have increasingly advanced surveillance equipment and arms at their disposal, and in some cases, collaborate closely with national armed forces similarly enlisted in the 'war for biodiversity' (Devine 2014; Duffy 2014; Humphreys and Smith 2014; Lombard 2015;

Ojeda 2012). These developments have strengthened the link between conservation and counterinsurgency practices (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Ybarra 2012), fostering a convergence between environmental and military governance that leads to overlapping, mutually reinforcing, violent enclosures (Dressler and Guieb III 2015).

Militarised conservation and counterinsurgency share violent rationalities and practices such as 'shoot-on-sight' and 'shoot-to-kill' policies, property destruction, threats, evictions, displacements, patrolling, surveillance, and the construction of informant networks (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016; Devine 2014; Humphreys and Smith 2014; Lunstrum 2014). Moreover, as highlighted by Dunlap and Fairhead (2014), there is a convergence between 'community-based' variants of conservation and 'soft approaches' to counterinsurgency, which are characterised by community-oriented projects designed to 'win hearts and minds'. In either case, interventions are geared towards extending social control over 'recalcitrant communities' and making them internalise hegemonic values (see also Ohja *et al.* 2009), or in the words of Neumann (2001, 326), 'to create a different kind of peasant consciousness toward wildlife'.

The literature on 'green militarisation' analyses several dimensions of the convergence of counterinsurgency and conservation. These include the discourses and rationalities that construct and legitimise this process (Duffy 2016; Neumann 2004; White 2014) as well as its *effects* in terms of the production of enclosures and other forms of territorialisation, like the separation of nature from agriculture, or the extension of state sovereignty (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Ybarra 2012). Another dimension examined is how these enclosures relate to processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2005; Massé and Lunstrum 2016), which are often informed by dynamics of 'green grabbing' (Fairhead *et al.* 2012) that stem from the growing commodification of nature (Kelly 2011).

What have received less attention until now are the effects of overlapping counterinsurgency and conservation practices on the dynamics of conflict, violence and armed mobilisation. Several authors have suggested that green militarisation fuels further violence (e.g. Duffy *et al.* 2015), notably by contributing to its normalisation and legitimisation (Neumann 2004). As shown by Ybarra (2012, 482), 'sedimented counterinsurgency practices' inscribed in successive territorial projects, including conservation, generate landscapes that 'connect a violent past to a violent present', in part as these projects draw on threat narratives and social categorisations that legitimate violence. Additionally, Lunstrum (2014, 829) argues that militarised conservation methods may enkindle a 'poaching-anti-poaching dialectic' that amounts to an 'arms race', and that leads to the further deterioration of relations between park(ranger)s and communities.

While this work makes important contributions to understanding the interplay between violence, conflict and conservation, including via the policies and activities of state (para)military actors, it does not analyse in detail how green militarisation affects the presence and practices of insurgent groups. An exception is Lombard's (2015; 2016) work on the Central African Republic, which demonstrates how the military training of anti-poaching guards augmented 'their purchasing power in the

threat economy' (2016, 224), and 'in the process caused new conflicts and rebellion to arise' (2015, 143). Nevertheless, the relationship between green militarisation and the mobilisation of insurgent groups in other contexts has rarely been studied. This question merits further attention, not only as green militarisation is justified precisely (and ironically) by its supposed contribution to quelling armed violence (Duffy 2016; White 2014), but also as it can illuminate the drivers of violent conflict, including how it relates to rural inhabitants' access to livelihoods.

In this contribution, we analyse the effects of overlapping counterinsurgency and conservation practices in Virunga National Park, located in the conflict-ridden eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Virunga Park, 'hard' counter-insurgency approaches, such as violent law enforcement operations conducted by mixed units of armed park guards and the Congolese armed forces, combine with 'soft' counterinsurgency approaches to conservation, which in this case take the form of 'development' schemes driven by private investment. To understand how these practices shape and are shaped by conflict and armed mobilisation, we adopt a relational approach that draws inspiration from Lombard's study of 'interactional dynamics of armed conservation' (2016, 218). Thus, we examine conflict and collaboration between and among rebels, population, the park management, rangers, the army and local authorities. Particularly, we analyse how rural populations respond to and resist armed conservation efforts, and how their repertoires and discourses of resistance are shaped by their access to livelihoods and a long history of successive and overlapping processes of violent enclosure and agrarian change. As we demonstrate, a key strategy of rural resistance is to engage in 'guerrilla agriculture' (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015) and other prohibited livelihood-generating activities in the park, commonly under the protection of armed actors. Furthermore, we show how the protection dynamics surrounding these livelihood activities, and their interplay with conflicts related to conservation and land, feed into armed mobilisation, and how this renders counterinsurgency approaches to conservation largely counterproductive.

Our conclusions are based on, in total, eight months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by each author individually between 2010 and 2015, mostly in and around the southern and central sectors of the Virunga National Park (see Figure 1). During field trips to villages in these areas, we held individual and group interviews with local authorities, various categories of economic operators such as peasants, fishermen, and small-scale traders, civil society associations, and members of the security services, including park guards. Furthermore, we contacted park authorities in the headquarters of the park in Rumangabo and Rwindi, and representatives of aid donors sponsoring projects in the Virunga area. The fieldwork data were triangulated and complemented with academic literature, news articles, reports of agencies of the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the park's own communications and policy documents of organisations working in the Virunga area.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first review the relations between counterinsurgency and conservation, and then discuss how these phenomena have merged in the case of the Virunga Park. We then analyse different historical enclosure

regimes and interrelated processes of agrarian change in the Virunga area, and how these informed popular perceptions and practices towards the park in the past. This is followed by a detailed analysis of contemporary forms of resistance and conflict and how these shape and are shaped by the variegated links between armed actors and civilians. Subsequently, we analyse the effects of militarised conservation approaches on the dynamics of conflict and violence, particularly the processes feeding armed mobilisation. We end by discussing the implications of our findings for the study of green militarisation.

The counterinsurgency/conservation nexus
Although the extent to and the mechanisms by which conservation and counterinsurgency converge are context dependent (cf. Lunstrum 2014), the existing literature nevertheless suggests that this convergence displays four similarities across cases. These relate to first, processes of framing, notably the labelling of spaces, actors, processes and practices in ways that amount to their securitisation and criminalisation; second, changes in patterns of control over, access to and the use of land and other natural resources; third, the institutionalisation of a wide range of types of violence; and fourth, contestation by inhabitants of enclosed areas in response to, and as shaped by, the previous three processes. Below we further elaborate on what these four dimensions entail.

In respect of the discursive dimension, both counterinsurgency and conservation drive and are driven by framings that draw boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate forest dwellers, legitimate and illegitimate resource and land use, and legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence. For Peluso and Vandergeest (2011), this discursive convergence results in part from the shared territorial project of separating wilderness/nature from civilisation/agriculture. This project entails the double discursive move of: first, the social construction of 'the jungle' (or, in African contexts more often 'the bush', cf. Roitman 2005) as a space filled with danger and subversive people; and second, 'taking the forest out of the jungle' (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011, 595), implying the legitimisation of the practical, political, institutional and territorial separation of forests and agriculture, and the severing of ties between insurgents and 'jungle residents'. Such multidimensional boundary-drawing is generally grounded in mutually reinforcing processes of criminalisation and Othering, which often lead to the creation of 'spaces of exception' where different moral codes apply and violence becomes legitimised (e.g. Neumann 2004). As shown by amongst others Ybarra (2012), such processes often draw upon racialised hierarchies, thereby contributing to the (re)production of social inequalities. For Neumann (2004), moral boundary-drawing may also be informed by 'scarcity-oriented' explanations for the unauthorised use of forest resources, which ascribe such use primarily to material deprivation (cf. Roe 2008), and often have Neomalthusian undertones.

The second dimension common to conservation and counterinsurgency is that both profoundly transform control over and access to land and forest resources. The creation and reproduction of PAs strongly affect (entitlements to) livelihoods, being

frequently accompanied by the displacement and dispossession of populations, and restrictions on cultivation, fishing, hunting, grazing, logging, and the collection of firewood, insects and plants, including natural medicine (Anderson and Grove 1987; Brockington 2002; Neumann 1998). Similarly, counterinsurgency efforts often involve controlling populations and their movements and livelihood practices, albeit with a different objective, namely to block insurgents' access to income (e.g. Anderson 2005; Cann 1997). Regardless of the objective, for rural dwellers, the loss of (access to) land generally implies much more than merely lost income and resources. For instance, like in other parts of the Congo, land in the Virunga area has spiritual and identity dimensions, being seen as communally owned and guarded by the spirits of (collective) ancestors, with whom the lineage head managing land use is in privileged contact. Therefore, the notions of private ownership and exclusive user rights upon which the park were founded were initially ill understood (Vikanza 2011).

Due to the diverging significations and uses of land and forest resources, conservation-related efforts to change existing regimes of access are often accompanied by efforts to control and transform the attitudes of rural inhabitants (Peluso and Lund 2011). Counterinsurgency involves similar socialisation and disciplining, aimed at inducing civilians to distance themselves from insurgents and what they represent (Thompson 1966). Therefore, in both cases, 'hard' approaches focusing on strict law-enforcement are generally complemented by 'softer' efforts at community-oriented social engineering (Dunlap and Fairhead 2014). The ultimate aim of these 'softer' policies is to establish a form of 'inclusionary control' that, in the words of Dunlap and Fairhead (2014, 945), is designed to keep 'conflict in its most manageable phase – "peace"'. This chimes with the language of 'stabilisation' that dominates current policy approaches to conflict-affected areas, which promotes the fusion of counterinsurgency and wider 'development' objectives (Collinson *et al.* 2010). A similar merging of military and 'development' activities can be discerned in the revenue-generating schemes that are increasingly adopted to finance PAs, as propelled by the commodification of biodiversity conservation (Büscher *et al.* 2014; Fairhead *et al.* 2012; Igoe *et al.* 2010). While these schemes are often branded as 'participatory' and/or 'development' projects, they commonly intensify or are enabled by militarisation, for instance where military deployment has to ensure that areas are safe enough for ecotourism, or where security rationales are invoked for measures productive of marketisation (Devine 2014; Ojeda 2012). Consequently, green militarisation may lead to a growing role for private actors and new partnerships in 'conservation-security apparatuses' (Massé and Lunstrum 2016, 234).

A third commonality is that conservation and counterinsurgency both rely on violence, whether in its narrow conceptualisation as intentionally and directly inflicted bodily harm, or as more broadly interpreted, in the sense of 'structural' (Galtung 1969) or 'symbolic' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970) violence. For instance, Büscher and Ramutsindela demonstrate how efforts to save South Africa's Peace Parks involve a host of actors and mechanisms producing what they call 'green violence', understood as denoting 'material and non-material aspects of violence and the ways in which violence takes social and linguistic form' (2016, 10). As our field

research in a setting of ongoing violent conflict shows, there is a continual interplay between these different types of violence, which tend to be mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, we also found that the processes, enactment and effects of (threats of) physical violence differ in important ways from those of structural and discursive violence, calling for disaggregated analysis.

The fourth dimension shared by counterinsurgency and conservation projects is that both provoke and are co-constituted by popular resistance. Such resistance tends to be driven by multiple rationalities. Inhabitants of counterinsurgency/conservation spaces do not only protest their exclusion from access to land and natural resources, or the violence inflicted upon them, they also cast doubt on the *legitimacy* of the objectives pursued by counterinsurgency/conservation and the policies adopted to realise these projects (e.g. Anderson 2005; Norgrove and Hulme 2006). The discursive and physical shape that such resistance assumes is deeply informed by worldviews, beliefs, and wider socioeconomic and sociopolitical relations. As stated by Dressler and Guieb III (2015, 340): '"local people's" sense of rightful access to resources for livelihood, and any resistance to those denying it, emerges through historically situated political economies involving unequal property relations, broad representations and contested interventions'. Particularly powerful expressions of resistance against (militarised) conservation are wildlife killings (e.g. Mariki *et al.* 2015) and engagement in unauthorised forms of livelihood generation, such as 'poaching', logging and fishing and what Cavanagh and Benjaminsen (2015) define as 'guerrilla agriculture', or cultivation in spaces where it is forbidden. As they highlight, resonating with Scott (1985, 295): 'by their very nature, these tactics blur the contours between subsistence and "improvement", or between economic opportunism and political grievance – not least because the overarching context of dire poverty renders the distinction rather narrow' (2015, 735). This observation is of particular importance where armed rebellion and unauthorised resource exploitation are framed as primarily driven by scarcity/poverty, as is the case with Virunga. As we demonstrate below, such framings render the dimension of resistance against hegemonic projects and the importance of grievances related to past and present violence and injustice all but hidden.

'Hard' and 'soft' counterinsurgency/conservation in Virunga
The Virunga National Park, a UNESCO world-heritage site and Africa's oldest national park, is famous for being a hotspot of both biodiversity and armed activity, as reflected in frequent headlines alluding simultaneously to 'guerrillas' and 'gorillas' (e.g. Jenkins 2009). The park, and the wider area in which it is located, host a fluctuating number of foreign and Congolese armed groups, which conflict and collude both with each other and with the Congolese military. According to a persistent narrative in media, policy and conservation circles, it is no coincidence that the park has become a sanctuary of armed groups. In the words of the park's chief warden, the Belgian national Emmanuel de Merode: 'These wars, this incredible level of violence is tied to the illegal extraction of natural resources in eastern Congo' (Hogg 2015). A recent United Nations report further explains this state of affairs:

'After years of weakened state authority in the eastern DRC […] increasingly insurgency appears to be predominantly economically motivated' (UNEP *et al.* 2015, 3). Viewed through the prism of 'resource wars' (e.g. Klare 2001), insurgent activity in the park is criminalised and 'exogenised' or placed outside the 'normal' social and moral order. Consequently, only the (all too real) violent and predatory aspects of insurgency and civil-rebel relations are highlighted, while the livelihood and political dimensions are routinely downplayed. For example, in a recent media interview, the chief warden described Mai-Mai groups (a generic term for rural militias) as 'originally a peasant uprising, which has degenerated into a group that is involved in general banditry' (Weaver 2015). This quote reflects how present-day armed mobilisation is not recognised as being informed by the grievances of peasants, therefore becoming primarily 'criminal'.

Similar reductionism dominates portrayals of unauthorised resource exploitation within the park's boundaries. Virunga is located in one of the most densely populated areas of the Congo, with over 300 inhabitants per km2 (Kujirakwinja *et al.* 2010), and over four million people living within a day's walking from the park's boundaries (Interview, park authorities, Rumangabo, 2014). The vast majority of these inhabitants are peasants, or small-scale farmers engaged in petty commodity production on a household basis geared towards simple reproduction (subsistence) (Bernstein 1977, 63). As a result of a long history of rural governance skewed towards furthering elite interests, these small-scale cultivators face the interrelated difficulties of a shortage of arable land, bad quality soils due to erosion, and rampant land tenure insecurity (Fairhead 1992). The 790,000 hectares of the park, however, contain 500,000 hectares of extremely fertile land, and a lake with substantial amounts of fish (see Figure 1). To a population perceiving that land to be 'theirs' and to have been unjustly and violently expelled, it appears legitimate to redress these social injustices by violating the park's regulations and cultivate, fish and log on its territory. The park authorities commonly portray such activities as primarily driven by 'scarcity'. The following description of a community project on the website of the Virunga Foundation, the British-registered NGO that manages the park, captures this well: 'The villages in which we are building these schools form a frontline against the desperation that pushes people north from Goma to wreak havoc on Virunga's forests and animals' (Virunga Foundation n.d).

Figure 1: Virunga National Park, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

This narrow economically oriented vision on prohibited resource exploitation, which is mirrored in explanations for armed mobilisation, appears to deeply inform the policies of the park management. When people are believed to enter the park primarily due to material deprivation, a combination of cracking down on their presence and economic development should suffice to guard Virunga's natural resources base. Similarly, when armed actors are understood as criminal, exogenous elements that are mainly motivated by the desire to exploit natural resources, military operations by the Congolese army to push them out of the park and cut them off from their sources of income would appear an adequate solution. Indeed, the current approach of the park management is characterised by a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' counterinsurgency/conservation practices. In some parts of the park, the guards of the *Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN), the Congolese state agency for nature conservation with a paramilitary statute, operate in mixed battalions with soldiers of the Congolese army, which has the primary responsibility for tackling armed groups operating in the park area. The activities of these battalions regularly lead to armed confrontations, especially during patrols and operations to dismantle illegal settlements that are 'protected' by armed groups.

Such military activities merge with the park's strict law enforcement approach, aimed at arresting and fining people cultivating in the park and other offenders. This strict approach was initiated by the new management of the park that took over in 2008, following the conclusion of a public-private partnership (PPP) between the African Conservation Fund (later named the Virunga Foundation) and the ICCN in 2005. The PPP was renewed in 2010, when the entire responsibility for the management of the park was transferred to the NGO. Before the PPP, the park was governed by the ICCN, whose management and guards generally closed their eyes to illicit activities in exchange for payment, and who were often actively involved in unauthorised resource exploitation themselves. In 2008, when Emmanuel de Merode, the director of the Virunga Foundation, was appointed as chief warden of the park, he started a reorganisation of the guard service, as a first step toward stricter law enforcement. In 2010, he reduced the number of guards from 1000 to 270 to remove 'negative' elements and initiated new recruitment, organising nine months of training for the future guards conducted by Belgian ex-military personnel (Interview, de Merode, Rumangabo, 2014). Furthermore, the new guards were subjected to strict military discipline and a policy of zero tolerance for corruption. At the same time, ranger patrols were stepped up, resulting in more arrests and fining. These measures were mostly implemented from the top down, as dialogue with surrounding communities seems not to have been high on the new park management's priority list (Kujirakwinja *et al.* 2010; Interviews, park authorities, 2014–2015).

Low priority was initially also accorded to 'development' projects, which only became visible several years after the new management had taken over. To promote 'development', the Virunga Foundation has pinned its hopes on facilitating private investment. To this end, it has initiated a donor-funded public-private initiative called The Virunga Alliance*,* which develops hydro-electricity plants in the area and commercialises the generated energy. This should help attract private investors to

start agro-industrial business initiatives, and together with a surge in ecotourism, is hoped to create 100,000 jobs (Interview, Alliance partners, Goma, 2015). Such large-scale job creation is in turn believed to contribute to ending violent conflict. As stated by the chief warden: 'It's by creating employment that you can move out of this chronic state of civil war' (Hogg 2015). An added advantage of these investment schemes is that they enable increased control over people, in this way reducing resistance against the park and encroachments on its territory. When asked how the park intends to solve ongoing land conflicts with the adjacent population, de Merode replied: 'It all depends on the economic development we will create, this will automatically change the perception people have of the park and will solve the land conflicts as well' (Interview, Goma, 2015). This quote clearly reveals that the proposed projects have a pronounced 'hearts and minds' dimension. Indeed, when a journalist visiting one of the hydro-electricity plants told de Merode how much the project resembles the counterinsurgency strategy of 'winning locals' support by building roads and water wells', de Merode commented: 'It's nicer to do it this way than to shoot people' (Tabor 2015).

In sum, both the 'hard' and 'soft' counterinsurgency-style approaches to conservation adopted by the management of the Virunga Park are strongly geared towards addressing economic drivers. Thus, they ignore that people also resist the park and support armed groups due to feelings of historical injustice related to the creation of the park (as further developed in the next section), different visions on land ownership and use, and deep distrust towards the Congolese state, including the army. A brief glance at the Virunga area's history provides further insight into the roots of these conflicts and grievances.

A history of enclosure and resistance

Neither militarisation nor violent conflict is new to the Virunga area, in particular the chiefdom of Bwisha (in Rutshuru territory), which borders Rwanda and the southern and central sectors of the park (see Figure 1). During the First World War, the Rwandan king, formerly in control of the area, contested the emerging Belgian dominance with the help of German forces, but was beaten back by British and Belgian units around Kibati (Nzabandora 2006). In the 1920s, many WWI veterans established coffee plantations in Bwisha, which introduced profound socio-economic and demographic changes. Large tracts of land became private property, but exclusively of Europeans, since 'natives' were barred from having plantations. Furthermore, the Belgian colonial authorities introduced coercive labour policies and encouraged migration to address labour shortages. Thus, thousands of Rwandans and Banande from neighbouring Lubero territory moved to the area (Fairhead 2005). The effects of these past movements continue to be felt today, as the Banande are sometimes framed as non-native to Bwisha, while the Banyabwisha (inhabitants of Bwisha), who speak Kinyarwanda (a language also spoken in Rwanda), may be portrayed as 'Rwandan immigrants' rather than 'native Congolese'.

Aside from the emergence of the plantation economy, another driver of profound socio-economic transformation was the creation of the Albert (later renamed

Virunga) National Park in 1925, named after the then King of Belgium, Albert I. While at first, the park only comprised the living area of the charismatic mountain gorillas (see Figure 1), Virunga's flagship species, it was incrementally vastly extended, including into inhabited areas (Nzabandora 2006). Due to the park's 'fortress approach' to conservation (Brockington 2002), most inhabitants lost access to their lands and livelihood, which provoked resentment. Another source of antagonism was that measures to consult with local chiefs to obtain consent and offer compensation were not always (correctly) implemented (Nzabandora 2011; Van Schuylenberg 2006). For instance, in the southern sector, the *mwami* (paramount customary chief) of Bwisha, Daniel Ndeze, ceded large tracts of land without permission from his sub-chiefs and without sharing the received compensation with the population. Having been handpicked by the colonisers, rather than enthroned based on stemming from the royal lineage, this further undermined his already weak legitimacy (Fairhead 2005).

The antagonism resulting from the way the park was created and managed sparked widespread resistance. Displaced populations regularly reoccupied parts of the park and continued to cultivate, hunt and fish on its territory (Vikanza 2011). Furthermore, in particular in the second half of the 1950s, acts of aggression against park guards, park installations and wildlife, or what Van Schuylenbergh (2009, 39) calls *'braconnage de résistance'* (resistance poaching), were frequent, as part of wider hostility against (symbols of) what was seen as unjust land occupation and the colonial regime. In response, surveillance was increased and a military-trained and arms-bearing corps of park guards was recruited, including from among ex-soldiers of the colonial army (Van Schuylenbergh 2009).

After the Congo's independence in 1960, the strict approach to conservation developed in the colonial era was continued, befitting the ultra-authoritarian regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko. This was visible in the practices of the park guards, who were given blanket permission to use armed force against poachers (Verschuren and Mankoto Ma Mbaelele 2006). When the state agency responsible for the management of the park started to crumble from the mid-1970s onwards, mirroring the decay of the state apparatus as a whole, the park guards became an increasing danger to the population. Accustomed to brutal methods, but decreasingly controlled and paid, they started to aggressively commercialise their authority by protecting and organising poaching, illegal fishing and charcoal production. At the same time, the population's dependence on park resources for livelihood generation sharply rose due to ongoing economic decline and the degeneration of rural infrastructure (Fairhead 2005). Hardship was aggravated by the legal ambiguity surrounding land tenure resulting from changing land legislation, which enabled the accumulation of large tracts of land in the hands of elites (Van Acker 2005). As landholdings fragmented and demographic pressure grew, peasants took to cultivating on less fertile soils. The resulting economic insecurity merged with physical insecurity stemming from multiple sources, including the increasingly arbitrary, violent and predatory behaviour of local authorities, a spike in banditry and the multiplication of ill-paid soldiers living off the land. Landlords and employers profited from this instability by

developing mechanisms of protection racketeering, whereby control over land and security was exchanged for control over labour (Fairhead 1992). These developments laid the basis for a system in which insecurity is manipulated as a means to establish control and enable accumulation, which remains in place today (Verweijen 2013).

The growing hardships to which the inhabitants of the Virunga area were exposed created fertile ground for agitation towards the park. In 1990, Mobutu announced a transition to multiparty democracy, causing politicians in anticipation of elections to stir up sentiment against the park to reinforce their popularity (Vikanza 2011). At the same time, ethnic rhetoric intensified, due to the interplay of elite agitation and growing tensions at the grassroots level, where land conflicts intersected with intercommunity and intergenerational tensions. Since having access to land of one's own signals young men's capacity to maintain a family and be a full member of society, increasing land scarcity produced a class of landless young men with a low income and low social status, being stuck between adolescence and adulthood. When rural militias in various areas of North Kivu multiplied at the beginning of the 1990s, it was particularly this group that filled up their ranks (Vlassenroot and Van Acker 2001). These militias were at the forefront of a first wave of violence that erupted in 1993, and that would soon be followed by larger episodes of violent conflict, in the form of the First (1996–1997) and then the Second (1998–2003) Congo War.

On the eve of and during these wars, the park became a sanctuary for both foreign and domestic armed groups and displaced populations. This did not fundamentally change after the adoption of a peace accord that officially ended the Second Congo War in 2003. While the accord heralded the formal re-establishment of central state authority over the park area, the vast number of people who depended on its resources for survival were reluctant to move out or change their livelihood patterns. The heavy-handed methods adopted to expel them appear to have only hardened their resolve, rendering conflict between park and population seemingly intractable (Vikanza 2011).

Contemporary conflict, resistance and armed mobilisation
Seizing upon the changing political context introduced by the adoption of the peace accord, the inhabitants of the Virunga area started to engage in political and judicial activism to regain access to disputed parts of the park, often aided by politicians trying to gain votes for the 2006 elections. The grievances expressed in this activism included uncertainty about the boundaries of the park, which according to many inhabitants no longer correspond to those established by the colonial decrees, and claims from customary chiefs that the ancestral lands belonging to their community have been expropriated in an illicit manner. Formal channels of protest, such as lawsuits against the ICCN, addressing letters of concern and demands for land restitution to provincial and national authorities, and issuing petitions (as further discussed below), were complemented by more direct acts of resistance, including property destruction and attacks on guards and park infrastructure (Vikanza 2011).

It should be emphasised that this resistance does not imply a total rejection of the park. While in the course of the fieldwork, some inhabitants voiced the opinion

that the park should be dismantled; others said they are proud of the park and see it as their heritage. For instance, some emphasised that, despite being in conflict with and feeling marginalised by the current park authorities, they were still committed to defending the park. As an inhabitant of Vitshumbi told, referring to the new park management: 'We are now completely excluded, but we will still protect the park' (Interview, Vitshumbi, 2014). Yet other people did express appreciation for the current management, such as (legal) fishing communities around Lake Edward, who lauded the fact that the quantity of fish had improved: 'We now have an expression in Vitshumbi, '*pêche Emmanuel de Merode*' which means, when you catch a large quantity of fish in one day, we thank de Merode, that this is possible' (Interview, Vitshumbi, 2014). Hence, popular attitudes towards the park are ambivalent and display important variations per place and per social group, depending on such factors as perceptions of history, connection to the land, means of livelihoods generation, and the distribution of (anticipated) costs and benefits related to the park and its policies (cf. Tumusiime and Svarstad 2011). Despite these variations, most informants agreed that the park should better accommodate the livelihood needs of the population, the far-out majority of whom continue to live in dire poverty.

The emphasis on peoples' rights to livelihood is also reflected in the salience of 'guerrilla agriculture' or unauthorised cultivation on the park's territory (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015). Such cultivation occurs both on an individual basis and as an organised form of collective resistance, such as via the peasants' organisation *Syndicat Alliance Paysanne* (SAP), which represents mostly Nande peasants living adjacent to the park. Led by a member of the North Kivu parliament, Simisi Njala Zabulon, SAP has tried a range of different strategies to claim back parts of the land they argue is illegally occupied by the ICCN. For example, they organised a petition to the ICCN and the government listing all the disputed land claims, which was signed by over 100,000 people. When they did not receive an official reply, 'we assumed that we could enter the land' (Interview with Simisi, Goma, 2014). SAP subsequently mobilised a group of peasants to cultivate around Kahunga in the *Domaine de Chasse de Rutshuru* (DCR; see Figure 1), which forms an ecological corridor for elephants. However, this caused tensions with the Hutu community, whom the mostly Nande SAP accuse of freeriding on their efforts to 'secure' land. The Hutu community, for their part, including the *mwami* (customary chief) of Bwisha, believes that SAP mobilises Nande from Lubero to move to Rutshuru (Tegera 2013). This again, has reinforced antagonism towards the *mwami*, the grandson of the contested Ndeze I installed by the colonisers. In the words of Simisi, the president of SAP:

> The *mwami* accuses us of ethnic politics, because we show the people that the *mwami* [his lineage] was complicit with the ICCN for the transfer of land [to create the Virunga Park]. Because we challenge his authority, he accuses us of ethnic politics (Interview, Goma, 2014).

The example of SAP illustrates the multi-layeredness of conflict dynamics in

the Virunga area, demonstrating how conflicts between park and population intersect with intercommunity conflicts, land conflicts, and historical grievances (like the complicity of the Ndeze family with the expropriation of land for the creation of the park); and how this interplay is fed by both top-down manipulation by politicians and more grassroots tensions. Moreover, it shows how these multidimensional conflict dynamics and associated grievances inform practices and discourses of resistance.

The imprint of the Virunga area's history and political economy on justifications of contestation is also evidenced by statements of informants that they felt unjustly deprived of the means of livelihood in the face of rampant poverty, in particular in the light of the park's genesis as a colonial creation and the continuing strong involvement of 'Westerners' in its management. In the words of one inhabitant: 'The park was created by the *muzungu* [white person, here: people], for the *muzungu* and it still is. In Europe they do not have any nature anymore to protect, but why do they need to control our land?' (Interview, Kahunga, 2014). Another informant stated that:

> We are in conflict with our neighbour, the park, since Albert came to establish the park [*sic*]. The convention our grandparents signed with the Belgians to create the park is not respected. It says we would get 1500 *Francs* a month as compensation for that we cannot enter the mountains Shopfe and Kabuhi, where our ancestors went to collect salt. But we never got it. They also promised electricity, schools, and a hospital. All promises so we would not disturb the park. That is why we are at now war with the ICCN because they did not fulfil any promises (Interview, Nzulo, 2015)

The perception of the park as controlled by powerful Western organisations also affects the ways in which initiatives to mitigate conflicts are interpreted by the population. Notably, it creates the feeling that there is no level playing ground and that the park always manages to impose its will. For instance, in 2002 the park launched together with the World Wildlife Foundation a 'participatory demarcation process' (in 2010 joined by UNHABITAT) to gain clarity over the position of the boundaries. This initiative created high expectations among the population but quickly stagnated due to ongoing distrust between park and population: 'They call it participatory demarcation, but they come and tell us what they think the boundaries are and leave […]' (Interview, Nzulo, 2015). An employee of the project, which ran till 2015, was clearly disappointed with the results: 'We need to modernise the limits but the park is not happy to do so, they are very conservative about the issue, they just say "this is the law", but people will revolt one day' (Interview, Goma, 2016).

Aside from the colonial past and continuing heavy external involvement, distrust towards the park also results from distrust towards the Congolese state more generally. Despite the influence of external actors, the ICCN continues to be seen as a part of the Congolese state apparatus, therefore being associated with its predatory and violent dimensions. Such representations, which have been formed over the *longue durée*, are (re)produced by negative everyday interaction with soldiers and park guards, often related to harsh law enforcement interventions such as burning

down of houses and fields in illegal settlements, arrests, the imposition of fines, and the expropriation of agricultural tools (CIDDHOPE 2015; Vikanza 2011). Additionally, the guards are not always perceived to protect the interests of peasants. In certain areas like Kahunga, animals from the park regularly destroy fields and crops, which forces peasants to stay on their fields at night. When contacted, many peasants said that the park guards do not help them to chase away the elephants. Others had experienced the destruction of their fields when fires lit by the guards, a common practice to improve the quality of the grass for the elephants and avoid their migration to Uganda, had gone out of control (Interviews, Kahunga, 2014). These irritations likely contributed to antagonism towards a donor-funded project to create a green belt to delimit the DCR, which was moreover considered to be located on the territory of the *chefferie* (chiefdom)*,* hence 'their' land. In reaction, they destroyed 20 hectares of trees planted in the green belt in 2009–20110. This event not only testifies to the diversity of repertoires of resistance, but also illustrates how contentious action is informed by multiple factors, including discontent with the park (guards), suspicion vis-à-vis donor-funded projects, livelihood considerations and particular meanings attached to land.

Civil-rebel relations: protection and predation

A similar diversity of factors, including: livelihood generation; distrust towards the state, in particular the security services; resistance against the park; and personal benefits, motivate both elite and non-elite actors to forge ties with armed groups. However, these ties are not always maintained on a voluntary basis: they oscillate on a wide spectrum between coercion and persuasion, as many armed groups do not hesitate to commit grave abuses against civilians. Nevertheless, in contrast to the dominant image of these groups as 'exogenous' evil, armed groups are deeply embedded in the local social order, through intermarriages, business ties and patronage-based relations with authorities and businesspeople. Moreover, due to local recruitment, many members of armed groups originate from communities in the area, and are thus relatives and neighbours of the population. During interviews, informants highlighted that the ranks of these groups are in part filled with peasants and fishermen expelled from illegal fishing areas or plots of land located within the park. Moreover, they believed that the aim of what they called 'auto defence groups' was to assist their parents to return to their former locations within the park (Interviews, 2013–2015).

Indeed, armed groups, but sometimes also members of the national army, shield 'guerrilla agriculture' and other unauthorised livelihood activities, like gathering firewood, poaching and unregulated fishing, in exchange for protection fees. For example, in certain parts of the park, the Rwandan rebel movement *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) allows farmers to cultivate in exchange for the payment of a *jeton* (token) of 500 *Francs congolais* (approximately USD 0.5) per passage. This is part of wider civil-rebel collaboration whereby the population hopes to avoid attacks and the FDLR tries to gain access to medicine and other goods (Interviews, Kibirizi, 2015). Another important protection market is

clandestine fishing. In 2010, the owners of a *dingué* or small canoe paid USD 10 a week to armed protectors (from both the Congolese army and armed groups) to fish illegally, while bigger canoes were charged USD 25. Larger-scale operators employing *ngurura* (finely meshed dragnets), and those fishing in the breeding grounds, which is strictly forbidden, reportedly paid up to USD 350–500 a week (UNSC 2010). According to local sources, armed actors also organise the transport and trade of fish, allowing for partial control over much of the commodity chain. Similar intrusive armed actor involvement is found in the production of *makala* or charcoal, a crucial source of livelihood for many households that lack access to land. An estimated 80 percent of the 'black gold' produced in the park is consumed in the city of Goma, representing a total annual value of USD 28–30 million (UNSC 2010).

Protection arrangements with armed actors can also be found in sectors other than natural resources exploitation, such as cross-border trade, with transporters paying protection fees to armed groups to avoid being ambushed or attacked. Additionally, similar to members of the state security services and local gangs, these groups derive significant income from the rampant banditry in the Bwisha area, which encompasses practices like ambushes, armed robberies, and kidnappings (Hamuli-Birali 2011). Perversely, the various armed actors involved all benefit from the resulting insecurity, as this stimulates people to solicit their protection, for instance to avoid being kidnapped or robbed. This shows that armed groups have an array of income-generating activities, being by no means solely dependent on natural resources exploitation, as claimed by the dominant narratives on armed mobilisation in Virunga outlined above.

These narratives also tend to downplay the political dimensions of insurgent activity. These relate both to the fact that armed groups mobilise and gather support because they are inspired by certain political visions, such as discontent with the current order and historical grievances, and to political actors' tendency to seize upon armed mobilisation to reinforce their position in the political arena. Due to the militarised nature of power politics in the Congo, political elites support armed groups in part to gain popularity in their constituencies and leverage at the national level. Local authorities, for their part, harness such groups to enforce decisions, intimidate opponents, and settle local conflicts (Verweijen and Iguma Wakenge 2015). Within this mixture of motives, resistance against the park may also play a role, with political actors supporting armed groups not only as these share the same anti-establishment views, but also as such support increases their leeway to ignore or hinder unpopular park policies. Moreover, they may try to capitalise on the fact that certain armed groups have a measure of popularity as they facilitate livelihoods provision or are seen to defend particular communities. Thus, some of the politicians known as staunch opponents of the park have been associated with support for armed groups. An example is national Member of Parliament Muhindo Nzangi, a native of Mwenda, a contested village in the park, who has not hesitated to attract votes by promising to revise the boundaries of the park (UNSC 2011). Similarly, certain customary chiefs who contest the boundaries of the park, or claim to have never been compensated for the loss of their land, maintain links with armed groups (Interviews, 2013–2015).

It can be concluded that far from uniquely stemming from 'scarcity' or 'greed' connected to 'natural resources plunder', hence 'criminal motives', armed group mobilisation should be seen as a complex political project that is deeply informed by the political economy and history of the Virunga area. This does not necessarily imply that armed groups have coherent political platforms, enjoy unlimited popular support or treat civilians well; they generally do not. Nevertheless, these groups do draw upon and are shaped by changing livelihood options, distrust towards the state, and past and current conflicts with the park, factors that inform thinking on entitlements to livelihoods and the legitimacy of the use of violence. As we will outline below, the park's counterinsurgency-oriented approach to conservation seems to only reinforce these drivers of armed mobilisation.

Militarised responses fuelling militarisation

As described above, the current management of Virunga National Park puts a strong emphasis on law enforcement, trying to crack down on poaching, and unauthorised fishing, agriculture and charcoal production. This has caused the park guards to adopt an increasingly strict approach towards the population, which seems to fuel further antagonism. As one inhabitant said: 'When they [the guards] arrive in their trucks, we are afraid. We know it means that bad things will happen. The guards confiscate the *makala* (charcoal), arrest people, make people scared and sometimes also shoot on people in the park' (Interview, Rusayo, 2014). Moreover, due to their commando training and the military discipline to which they are subjected, and as they are better equipped and controlled than in the past, the guards now leave open less space for negotiation with the population (see also Mwamba 2014). As an inhabitant of Vitshumbi said:

> The guards of the park are now there to create fear and the population is increasingly frustrated, and does not want to collaborate with the ICCN anymore […] the old guards of the park are better than the newly trained ones, because the new ones do not engage in dialogue (Interview, Vitshumbi, 2014)

Another factor that seems to have reinforced distrust towards the guards is their growing collaboration with the Congolese army, the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC). In 2009, the FARDC launched massive military operations against armed groups in the Virunga area, which overlapped with the park's vamped-up law enforcement efforts, although stemming from different policy considerations. Together these 'hard' counterinsurgency/conservation projects unleashed massive instability in Bwisha and surroundings. The operations pushed armed groups deeper into the forests of Virunga, away from the strategic axes and commercial hubs, which now largely fell into the hands of the FARDC. However, competition between different armed factions remained fierce, in part because they all vied for a share of the protection market. The FARDC sometimes took over protection rackets formerly run by armed groups, for instance relating to charcoal production and clandestine fishing, which provoked fierce contestation. The resulting

insecurity was further fanned by a sharp rise in violent score settling and violent crime (Verweijen 2015).

This convoluted military landscape prompted the park authorities to lobby the military hierarchy for measures enabling reinforced control over the FARDC deployed to the park, including by removing FARDC infantry positions and replacing them by mixed FARDC-ICCN battalions (Interviews, Goma, 2010; Rwindi, 2012; UN 2010). This process was initiated in 2010, as part of a campaign labelled the 'demilitarisation' of the Virunga Park (Radio Okapi 2010). Henceforth, infantry soldiers would only operate in the mixed battalions, under the overall command of the ICCN conservator based in Rwindi. However, the newfound collaboration between rangers and army soldiers provoked tensions with the FARDC navy in Vitshumbi. The latter was denied the better service conditions that the infantry now enjoyed, being granted the same benefits packages as the rangers, as financed by the park's operating budget. More importantly, the navy feared that intensified controls would undermine its main source of income, the protection of illegal fishing. To prevent this, it allegedly stepped up collaboration with a number of armed groups, while also providing clandestine fishermen with arms and ammunitions. In November 2011, navy soldiers even attacked the ICCN-infantry camp in Vitshumbi, burning down one of the buildings and emptying the depot (Interview, ICCN conservator, Rwindi, 2012). This shows how due to internal competition within the military, and conflict and collusion between state and non-state armed actors, the mixed FARDC-ICCN operations caused considerable instability.

More recent operations by the mixed units have highlighted further drawbacks. In 2015, the park decided to destroy a number of farms located within the area of Kibirizi (on its territory, see Figure 1), sending a unit of around 30 soldiers and nine park guards to patrol the vacated area. As many of the former residents depended on cultivating in the park for their livelihood, they found themselves in difficulty. In response, some people ventured even further into the park, in a zone controlled by the Rwandan rebels of the FDLR, who 'rent out' small plots of land to civilians. The reinforced ties with the FDLR resulting from this arrangement later hampered military operations against this group, as the population refused to collaborate with the Congolese army. The army did manage to disperse the rebels, which reinforced insecurity along the Kibirizi – Rwindi road. As a consequence, the population developed negative feelings towards the mixed FARDC-ICCN unit located there, believing it only chases peasants out of the park, and does little to protect civilians. For instance, one woman owning a small restaurant in the area recalled how youngsters discussed a plan to attack the neighbouring FARDC-ICCN patrol post, out of anger (Interview, Kibirizi, 2015). Indeed, the joint operations sometimes provoke counterattacks, as exemplified by recent efforts to expel armed groups shielding clandestine fishing in the area south of Lake Edward. In June 2015, a Mai-Mai group operating in Binza (north Bwisha) tried to retake control of this area with the objective of reinstalling fishing activities and allowing the population to return. Assailing an FARDC-ICCN patrol post, it killed one park guard and between 11 and 15 soldiers.

Such continuing clashes have fostered the perception that nature conservation has become entirely militarised and that the boundaries between the ICCN and the FARDC are increasingly blurred. As an inhabitant testified:

> These [FARDC and ICCN] are two specific institutions, based on a different philosophy; I do not understand why they collaborate […] I am worried about this construction. Normally the army should provide security and then leave it to the guards. But now the guards are with the soldiers, so I wonder what are they searching for the guards? (Interview, Vitshumbi, 2014)

Hence, it appears that the joint operations with the FARDC have reinforced distrust towards the park guards, and that armed groups benefit from this as it makes the population reluctant to collaborate with the ICCN and the army. This generates a dynamics similar to that described by Lombard (2016), where both those promoting and those resisting armed conservation, whether armed or non-armed actors, strategically mobilise threats and coercion, and the use of force may have unanticipated and counterproductive effects.

In sum, there are many indications that the strict approach adopted by the park and its collaboration with the FARDC have fuelled the very dynamics that are at the root of armed mobilisation and unauthorised resources exploitation. This finding is confirmed by other sources. A 2010 report by international nature conservation organisations identified the new management's 'much stronger confrontational stance to the protection of the park' (Kujirakwinja *et al.* 2010, v), as having generated serious tensions, concluding that 'conservation strategies focusing on strict resource protection and excluding communities from management decisions—i.e., non-participatory fines and fences approaches—are unlikely to succeed in securing the natural resource base in densely populated areas' (Kujirakwinja *et al.* 2010, 10).

The counterproductive effects of the 'hard' approach to counterinsurgency/ conservation also undermine the 'soft' counterinsurgency/conservation efforts. Not only do they hamper the goal of 'winning hearts and minds', they also render it difficult to implement the rather ambitious 'development' schemes. Additionally, the economic plans of the Virunga Alliance have been developed in a similar top-down manner to how the park is managed, which is an important source of park-population tensions. Moreover, it remains unclear to what extent mere job creation through private investment schemes and tourism can take away other sources of armed mobilisation and unauthorised resource exploitation. Contrary to dominant discourses, we found that neither of these two processes is purely a result of economic factors. Rather, they are also importantly fed by elements like changing access to and the meanings attached to land and livelihoods, feelings of (historical) injustice, the contested legitimacy of the park's claims to territory and resources, and distrust towards the Congolese state, including the army and park rangers. Many of these factors relate directly or indirectly to antagonism towards the existence and policies of the park. Armed groups capitalise on this anti-park sentiment, which allows them to earn income by granting people access to the park and its resources, and to reinforce

their ranks whenever these livelihood activities are disturbed. These dynamics are well captured in the message that was passed during a meeting with local leaders in one of the forbidden settlements in the park: 'If they are forcing us out of our houses, you will see a lot of Mai-Mai [local militias] around here. This is our land' (Interview, 2013).

Concluding remarks: Scrutinising green militarisation

This contribution has analysed the effects of green militarisation on the dynamics of conflict and violence in the Virunga National Park, and how these dynamics shape and are shaped by the livelihood and resistance practices of the people living in and around the park. As such, it contributes to the study of a dimension of green militarisation–its effects on armed mobilisation and violent conflict–that has received limited attention in the existing literature. We believe that this is not only an analytical lacuna, but also a missed opportunity to work towards the 'desecuritisation' of conservation. One of the primary justifications of the current wave of green militarisation is that 'wildlife crime' is increasingly driven by insurgent or 'terrorist' groups (Duffy 2016; White 2014). As a corollary, 'combatting' such crime through militarised means is presented as an effective way to quell insurgencies, hence to pursue both conservation and 'stabilisation'. Analysing in an in-depth manner how green militarisation affects insurgent mobilisation allows for assessing the veracity of these claims, and may therefore contribute to undercutting its legitimisation.

At the same time, more nuanced analyses of the links between (counter)insurgency and conservation may help to stem the recycling of a number of contested theories of violent conflict that were influential in the 1990s and early 2000s and that seem to have gained renewed currency with the emergence of 'tusks fund terror' discourses. These include 'resource wars' narratives (e.g. Klare 2001), which in some circles became entwined with 'greed' explanations of violent conflict (Collier 2000; for a critique see Cramer 2002) and determinist interpretations of 'environmental security' thinking that focus on an ill-defined notion of 'scarcity' (Homer-Dixon 1999; for a critique see Peluso and Watts 2001). Only detailed empirical case studies of violent conservation spaces can counter these reductionist explanations (cf. Benjaminsen 2008).

Based on our study of the Virunga National Park, we suggest that this research agenda on the violent aspects of green militarisation should follow two precepts. First, it should take up Cramer and Richards's (2011) call to bring the analysis of agrarian relations and change back into the study of violent conflict. In particular, it should focus on the interaction between physical and economic insecurity, and how this shapes and is shaped by access to livelihoods and civil-rebel relations. Second, it should focus on the factors driving armed group mobilisation and the complex causal mechanisms underlying organised (physical) violence. While moving away from insurgencies and more narrowly defined interpretations of violence has been crucial for opening up analytical space to innovatively study and conceptualise 'the ways in which specific environments, environmental processes and webs of social relations are central parts of the ways violence is expressed and made expressive' (Peluso and

Watts 2001, 25), this broader focus should not lead to obliterating the study of the micro-dynamics of violent conflict, notably the tracing of insurgent trajectories and the chains of events leading up to specific acts of violence. Such detailed analysis is crucial for understanding how conservation overlaps with counterinsurgency, and how insurgency relates to resistance against conservation. A better understanding of these dynamics and relationships seems all the more urgent in the light of the growing convergence of counterinsurgency and conservation, as only robust analysis will allow for the production of counter-narratives that are sufficiently powerful to work towards 'green demilitarisation'.

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