



July 12, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Kampala, Uganda

Wildlife struggles as Total exploits oil in Murchison Falls National Park, new study shows

Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) is urgently calling for action to address the severe impacts of oil activities, climate change and poaching on biodiversity in Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP), one of Uganda's oldest, largest and most visited parks.

The call is based on a [study](#) published by the organisation today following research to document the impacts of the Tilenga oil project infrastructural development activities on the almost century-old park. The Tilenga oil project, which is operated by TotalEnergies E&P (U) B.V., involves drilling of hundreds of oil wells in the park.

To support oil exploitation in the park, the company and other stakeholders have or are developing infrastructure including oil rigs, wellpads, pipelines and roads among others in the park.

The study which was published today by AFIEGO assessed the impact or risks presented by development of the following infrastructure to biodiversity conservation in the park: oil rigs, wellpads, oil roads and the Victoria Nile Pipeline Crossing. The latter pipeline is supposed to be constructed under the Victoria Nile, and it will affect the Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Ramsar site, an Important Biodiversity and Bird Area which has also been [proposed](#) for UNESCO World Heritage status.

The study, whose objective is to raise stakeholder awareness about the status and impacts of oil infrastructural developments in MFNP to promote biodiversity conservation, employed the following methodology: satellite images from February and May 2024 were analysed to identify wellpad construction, road clearing, and access points for the Victoria Nile pipeline crossing among others.

Maps, which can be found in the study report were developed based on the satellite images. The maps show the status of development of the infrastructure that was studied. The maps show that wellpads, roads and Victoria Nile Pipeline Crossing were in various stages of development by May 2024.

The maps also show that two of the ten wellpads that are being developed to enable oil extraction in MFNP are too close to the Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Ramsar site, a wetland of international importance that is important for conservation of vulnerable bird species such as the Shoebill.

The wetland is also an important spawning ground for the Lake Albert fisheries. It will be recalled that in 2017 and 2018, Lake Albert was Uganda's biggest fishery, accounting for over 171 million tonnes and 43% respectively of Uganda's fish catch.



This map, which was developed by Earth Insight, shows wellpads Jobiri 10 and Ngiri 1 that are approximately 950 and 750 metres respectively from the Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Ramsar Site.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were also conducted with oil host communities, four operators and biodiversity experts with knowledge of MFNP between April and June 2024. The interviews were used to gather qualitative data on the impacts of the Tilenga oil project on MFNP's biodiversity. Relevant documents were also reviewed to understand the risks posed by oil infrastructural developments on wildlife. Below are the key findings from the KIIs and document review:

- **The Tilenga oil project activities in MFNP are concentrated in the Northern sector** which hosts more populations of wildlife than the park's Southern sector. The Northern sector largely consists of savanna grasslands, whose conservation status has increasingly

captured [global attention](#) due to the degradation faced by the grasslands. The concentration of oil project infrastructure in the sector endangers the conservation of wildlife and savanna grasslands.

- **Further, an oil rig is already operating in the park and this rig has had impacts.** The study participants indicated that the vibrations from the oil rig had affected elephants, which are sensitive to vibrations.
- **The study participants noted that elephants were increasingly moving away from the park and into community areas, where they had caused fatalities.** As many as five people in Buliisa district, which neighbours the park, were reported to have been killed by elephants between 2023 and April 2024.
- **Indeed, [research](#) conducted between 2013 and 2015 documented the fact that elephants** were negatively impacted by oil exploitation activities and they, for the most part, moved away from areas where the activities were ongoing.
- **The oil host communities that participated in the study threatened that if Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) does not address the invasions by elephants, they could engage in retaliatory killings, which endangers the conservation of the gentle giants (elephants),** which are listed as [endangered](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
- **The study also showed that there were fears amongst conservationists that the bright light from the drilling rig, which is visible from as far as 13.9 km away, could cause significant disruption to nocturnal wildlife.** Species, some of which are listed as [vulnerable](#), by the IUCN such as leopards, hyenas, lions, and certain bird species, which rely on darkness for hunting and other activities could be particularly affected.
- **Development of roads in the park has raised the conservation risks for** wildlife such as various antelopes, elephants, hippopotami, giraffes and others as the roads ease access to the park by poachers. Worth noting is that the population of [hippopotami](#) in the park is on the decline due to poaching and climate-change induced floods that destroyed hippo habitats and [breeding grounds](#) for crocodiles especially in 2020 and 2021.
- **The roads have also increased motorisation in the park, with trucks carrying** materials for the Tilenga oil project infrastructural activities, being implicated in contributing to the increase. The trucks and other motor traffic heighten the road accident risks faced by biodiversity, and cause disturbances for nocturnal wildlife such as lions that sleep during the day. The wildlife could migrate, the study participants observed.
- **The study participants further noted that the construction activities in the park had increased human activity in the park, which presents conservation risks to shy and nervous wildlife** such as waterbucks, bushbucks (*Engabi*), reedbucks and others. The Uganda Kob are however starting to acclimate to the human presence.



Some of the wildlife that has been impacted by or whose conservation risk has been increased by the Tilenga oil project

To strengthen biodiversity conservation, the research recommends that TotalEnergies and the Ugandan government stop all oil exploitation activities in MFNP. The research also calls on the United Nations (UN) Ramsar Secretariat and UNESCO World Heritage Committee to engage the Ugandan government to stop the oil activities in MFNP.

Further, the research calls on the Ugandan government and development partners to support UWA to address risks such as climate change, poaching and human-wildlife conflicts that are endangering the conservation of vital wildlife which supports the multi-billion tourism and other industries in Uganda.

Read the full report by clicking [here](#).

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