

Coltan Mining in World Heritage Sites in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Updated Summary - 23 April 2001

IUCN - The World Conservation Union appeals to the international community to stop buying coltan, which is being mined in contravention of restrictions in protected areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). IUCN is particularly concerned about the damaging impacts of this mining on the natural values of two universally important World Heritage sites: Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Okapi Wildlife Reserve, located in the eastern part of the DRC.



Coltan mining in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve.
Photo: Terese and John Hart, Wildlife Conservation Society

Coltan mining in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. Photo: Terese and John Hart, Wildlife Conservation Society The mineral coltan, short for columbite-tantalite, is the principal source of tantalum, a rare and valuable metal in huge demand in today's high technology industries. 40% of the world's official reserves of tantalum ore is found in Australia, although significant sources are also located in Africa, South America, Canada and China. The eastern part of the DRC is said to hold some 15% of the world's supply of the ore. Tantalum is an extremely hard, dense element that is

highly resistant to corrosion. It has a very high melting point and is a good conductor of heat and electricity. Demand for tantalum has been growing since 1992 mainly due to the increase in applications for tantalum capacitors used in personal computers and mobile phones. The electronics industry is by far the biggest consumer of tantalum but severe shortages of the ore have been experienced in 2000 and early 2001 as a result of the market demand for capacitors.

These market shortages have put pressure on the mining of coltan in the DRC and illegal exploitation has become a serious problem during the second war, which broke out in 1998. The coltan mining is having devastating impacts on the natural values of two World Heritage sites, notably Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Okapi Wildlife Reserve. These vast sites are of universal importance mainly due to their impressive diversity in flora and fauna, including threatened species of primates and birds. Both sites were added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1997 as Park facilities had been looted and destroyed, large militia groups and illegal settlers had occupied parts of the sites, and most of the park staff had fled. Today, for instance, park staff only have control of 5% of Kahuzi-Biega National Park.

Adding to the extreme pressure on these sites from war and poaching, in the past year it is estimated that over 10,000 people moved into Kahuzi-Biega National Park and 4000 into Okapi Wildlife Reserve in order to mine for coltan. Park officials for both sites report a heavy toll on the flora and fauna. Streams and forests are being severely degraded by the mining operations. The miners have also been relying on bushmeat for food, including elephants and the endangered eastern lowland gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*). Park Officials at both sites, as well as Mbuti Tribe Leaders in Okapi Wildlife Reserve, report that native fauna has been wiped out in areas near the mines. As people move further into the Parks in search of coltan and food, it is feared that the entire

populations of these animals will be wiped out or will be reduced to dangerously low levels. Considering that the Kahuzi-Biega National Park is one of the most important sites in the world for the eastern lowland gorilla, there is a great danger that the species could be pushed to the brink of extinction.

In June 2000 the United Nations Security Council established an expert panel on the illegal exploitation of natural resources of the DRC. On 12 April 2001, following numerous interviews with governments, rebel groups, UN agencies, representatives of States and international organisations, the Panel presented its report to the Security Council (The full report can be viewed at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/docs/s2001357.pdf>). It stated that "in Kahuzi-Biega Park, a zone controlled by the Rwandans and the RCD-Goma and rich in coltan, only 2 out of 350 elephant families remained in 2000. There is serious concern....that the rest fled of their own accord or were killed, as two tons of elephant tusks were traced in the Bukavu area in late 2000." The poaching of elephants for ivory seems to be a highly organised operation. The Panel was not able to look into concerns relating to the gorillas due to time limits.

The UN Panel noted that "illegal exploitation of the mineral and forest resources of the DRC is taking place at an alarming rate". It stated that direct extraction of coltan and other minerals (gold, diamonds and cassiterites) is being carried out in the DRC in three ways: "(a) by individual soldiers for their own benefit; (b) by locals organised by Rwandan and Ugandan commanders; and (c) by foreign nationals for the army and commander's benefit." The working conditions of the miners are very poor. The UN report, and other reports to IUCN, have noted that, in some cases, Congolese people and Rwandan prisoners work in the mines under heavy guard of Rwandan soldiers. A number of mines have also collapsed in recent months, killing the miners.

IUCN has been informed that the situation in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve may begin to improve as the President of the Congolese Liberation Front (FLC), who has control of the Park, has ordered the miners to start leaving.

On 19 March 2001 IUCN sent out a [Press Release](#) on the serious damage being caused to the World Heritage sites as a result of the coltan mining and made three appeals (listed below). The Director General has also written to the Heads of State in the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda, as well as various ministries, rebel leaders, ambassadors, mining and conservation organisations. Numerous newspapers, magazines and journals have been covering the issue around the world. The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund (<http://www.dianfossey.org/releases/release9.html>), and the Tantalum-Niobium International Study Center (<http://www.tanb.org/>) have also made statements and press releases expressing concern. Local conservation organisations and park staff continue to work in the region, often risking their lives, in order to protect these sites and their wildlife.

The UN Panel, following its study, concluded that tough measures must be taken to bring an end the cycle of exploitation. The report names a sample the foreign companies importing coltan and cassiterites (also a source of tantalum) from the DRC via Rwanda. The majority of these companies are European-based. The Panel has recommended that "the Security Council should immediately declare a temporary embargo on the import or export of coltan (and other resources).....from or to Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda until those countries' involvement in the exploitation of the natural resources of the [DRC] is made clear.....All countries should abstain from facilitating the import or export of these resources." The Panel also recommended that "UNESCO, in collaboration with UNEP, the secretariat of CITES and non-governmental organisations

Kahuzi-Biega Park, the Okapi Reserve and Virunga Park, and propose sanctions to be taken against those Governments whose soldiers were involved in the mass killing of endangered species."

IUCN is extremely concerned about this ongoing devastation of both World Heritage sites caused by the illegal exploitation of coltan, and is making three appeals:

1. It calls on buyers of coltan to ensure that the product they purchase does not come from these World Heritage sites in the DRC.
2. While supporting the current efforts to remove miners from the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, it calls on the DRC authorities, and the neighbouring States of Rwanda and Uganda, to help enforce an immediate removal of miners from within the boundaries of both the affected World Heritage sites.
3. In addition, IUCN calls on the buyers of coltan and the governmental authorities in DRC, Rwanda and Uganda to do everything in their power to find acceptable alternative livelihoods for all miners removed from the two World Heritage sites.

IUCN supports the UN Expert Panel's recommendation for a temporary embargo on the import and export of coltan, as well as sanctions to be taken against Governments whose soldiers were involved in killing endangered species. IUCN supports the efforts of the Park staff and conservation groups, such as the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, which are working in extremely difficult conditions, and encourages others to do the same. IUCN calls on the international community, mining organisations, industries and conservation organisations, to support IUCN in an effort to protect these important World Heritage sites.

Under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, IUCN is the official advisor on the Natural Heritage to the World Heritage Committee. Each year, IUCN reports to the World Heritage Bureau and Committee on the State of Conservation of natural and mixed World Heritage sites. IUCN also makes recommendations to the Committee on how to mitigate or minimise threats to the natural values of World Heritage sites.

IUCN - The World Conservation Union was founded in 1948 and brings together 79 states, 112 government agencies, 760 NGOs, 37 affiliates, and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership. Its mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. Within the framework of global conventions IUCN has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. IUCN has approximately 1000 staff, most of whom are located in its 42 regional and country offices while 100 work at its Headquarters in Gland, Switzerland.

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