

As the World Heritage Committee meets this month, China and France should encourage Uganda to nominate African Great Lakes for World Heritage, not drill it

[Murchison Falls](#) is famous for its rugged beauty and powerful waterfall, where the Nile River flows through a small gorge before plunging 43 meters into Lake Albert. The area is home to threatened species like chimpanzees, giraffes, lions, and the rare shoe billed stork. Lake Albert is part of the African Great Lakes system, a rich constellation of riparian ecosystems crucial for in-situ conservation, migratory birds, community livelihoods, and tourism development across ten East African countries.

Of the African Great Lakes, three lie within Uganda – Lake Albert, Lake Edward, and Lake Victoria. Collectively, the Great Lakes system constitute 25% of the world's unfrozen freshwater and support thousands of East African communities.

Instead of protecting the African Great Lakes system, however, the Ugandan government is allowing French and Chinese companies to drill it via the East African Crude Oil Pipeline. In order to help save this crucial ecosystem, China and France should be supporting Uganda to protect the threatened ecosystem. As the [World Heritage Committee](#) meets this month, an immediate way to do so is to call for the nomination of Lake Albert, Victoria, and Edward as a World Heritage site.

Seven of Africa's biogeographic regions converge in Uganda, making it one of the [top ten biodiverse](#) countries in the world. Uganda hosts 50% of the world's remaining mountain gorillas, and 50% of Africa's bird species. Despite its rich biodiversity and natural heritage though, Uganda has just three World Heritage sites, an embarrassingly low number. In contrast, China boasts 57 World Heritage sites. France enjoys 52.

The nomination and recognition of World Heritage sites are often a source of bragging rights, but they are also a space for international soft power. If there is a swell of support to nominate Uganda's African Great Lakes as a World Heritage site, particularly from China and France, it would send a clear signal to EACOP's project developers, Total and China National Offshore Oil Corporation, to re-think the viability of the project. EACOP's Chinese financiers would hesitate to support a project favored to become a World Heritage site. It would also allow the Ugandan government a gracious exit from the controversial project.

As in many developing countries, oil and resource extraction are regularly portrayed as the most viable path towards development in Uganda. But that is a false choice which ignores how regenerative economies, not extractive ones, are the only development path that does not worsen the biodiversity and climate crisis. The East African Crude Oil Pipeline currently threatening the African Great Lakes is a prime example of how extractive economies will always remain extractive with destructive impacts, and why protecting highly biodiversity ecosystems through mechanisms like World Heritage are crucial for their preservation.

The pipeline's 1400 km route will devastate the African Great Lakes area, and negatively impact at least [8 other biodiverse areas](#), such as Uganda's Bugoma Forest, Lutembe Bay Wetland Ramsar site, and even an existing a World Heritage site in Tanzania - [Ngorongoro National](#)

[Park. Research](#) shows that EACOP will trigger a wave of even more oil development in the region, including Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where one third of the world's remaining mountain gorillas reside.

Importantly, unrealized tourism value will be sacrificed for oil development. In 2019, Uganda's tourism industry reached \$1.6 billion USD, in which MFNP was one of the most visited parks in the country. In contrast, oil development will seriously damage, if not preclude any further [tourism development](#). A World Heritage designation would only magnify and expand its tourism potential.

EACOP has already profoundly damaged and destroyed the African Great Lakes and its biodiversity, all while dispossessing local communities of their lands and livelihoods and worsening climate change. Project developers Total and China National Offshore Oil Corporation claim that the pipeline's negative impacts will be mitigated by the use of high standards like the IFC Performance Standards, as if the standards can magically neutralize all the negative environmental, biodiversity, social, and climate impacts. But sustainability standards are a means to mitigate, not erase negative impacts.

The hard truth is that even the highest standards cannot fix a fundamentally flawed project which should have never moved forward to begin with. They can put lipstick on an oil project, but it's still an oil project.

Perhaps even worse than the biodiversity impacts are the social impacts. Total and CNOOC's subsidiaries are already [blacklisted](#) by 19 and 36 investors, respectively, for various environmental, human rights, biodiversity, and other violations. Unfortunately, this pattern continues as the project displaces, dispossesses, and impoverishes thousands of communities, with allegations that the companies unfairly compensated, intimidated, and harassed communities. Just last month, one activist who protested the project outside the Chinese Embassy went [missing](#) for 6 days before being found bloody and beaten.

Instead of extracting resources from Uganda, China and France should be encouraging the Ugandan government to protect its natural heritage, landscapes, and the people who depend on them. As the climate and biodiversity crises worsen, so has the magical thinking that fossil fuels, a historic driver of today's crises, is somehow part of the solution.

China and France, with its hefty string of World Heritage sites, can and should support the Ugandan government to nominate its African Great Lakes. If they do, their companies and banks investing in EACOP will be forced to think twice. And so will the Ugandan government.

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