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Pluralizing Political Forests: Unpacking 'the State' by Tracing Virunga's Charcoal Chain

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Abstract

Peering through the lens of illegal charcoal production in the forested areas of Virunga National Park in eastern DR Congo, this paper makes a case for disaggregating the notion of "the state" to better capture "the political" in contemporary political forests. It argues that to identify the fluctuating importance of different dimensions of "stateness", it is crucial to acknowledge the polymorphous socio-spatial relations that produce political forests. Thus, we draw on the notions of territory, place, scale and network (TPSN) to examine how "stateness" in Virunga has transformed under the particularization, transnationalization, and regionalization of authority. This approach allows us to show how these processes do not only stem from neoliberalization, but are also driven by, inter alia, regional warfare and non-state militarization. The resulting complexity of the regulatory landscape turns Virunga into a space marked by a plurality of partly overlapping and partly conflicting political forests.

Key words: political forests; natural resources; TPSN framework; the state; neoliberalization; Democratic Republic of the Congo

Introduction

Political forests – a concept that relates to the socio-political dimension of the (re)production of land-use zones and species as "forests" (Vandergeest and Peluso 2015) – are increasingly decoupled from the processes of the territorialization of state

authority that informed their genesis in many contexts globally (idem; Peluso and Vandergeest 2001). For Vandergeest and Peluso (2015), the growing salience of non-state actors and processes constitutes the most recent, "fourth" moment in the historical evolution of political forests, entailing shifts in the modes and goals of forest management. This development away from predominantly state-controlled political forests parallels and converges with similar transformations in the domain of protected areas (PAs). A growing body of literature on neoliberal conservation describes how conservation practice is increasingly informed by the twin logics of deregulation and re-regulation (Castree 2008). These logics induce overlapping processes of de-territorialization, re-territorialization and re-scaling, through developments like marketization, decentralization, and outsourcing (Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe et al. 2010). The result is the rising influence of supra-national actors and institutions, like international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and bi- or multilateral aid donors, transforming PAs into transnationalized spaces (Igoe and Brockington 2007).

Looking through the lens of charcoal production in the forested areas of Virunga National Park, located in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this paper demonstrates how these areas consist of multiple overlapping, intersecting and conflicting political forests, rather than a single political forest. Moreover, we show how the waning influence of central state authority within this plurality of political forests cannot uniquely be ascribed to neoliberalization. Rather, it is also a result of regional warfare, militarization involving non-state armed actors, and the rising regulatory influence of patronage networks and customary chiefs. These developments have transformed regulatory authority, contributing to its transnationalization, regionalization (indicating the scale of the Great Lakes Region herein), and particularization (or the growing imprint of particularistic rather than public logics). These processes can only be adequately captured by analytically disaggregating the notion of "the state", which implies examining the variable role of different components of "stateness". Such disaggregation, we argue, is facilitated by recognizing the "polymorphy" of Virunga's political forests, or the organization of their "sociospatial relations in multiple forms and dimensions" (Jessop et al. 2008: 390). This means studying at once territories, places, scales and networks (TPSN), an approach formulated by Jessop et al. (2008).

Using the TPSN framework within the analysis of political forests helps examine what dimensions of stateness (e.g. regulatory, extractive and signifying capacities) are articulated in what ways within the multiple socio-spatial relations that constitute political forests. Focusing on multiple articulations of stateness, in turn, allows for going beyond dichotomous conceptualizations of state vs. non-state spheres. Additionally, it enables a finer-grained understanding of how the inhabitants of political forests engage in the "contentious co-production" (see Introduction to this special issue) of dominant regulatory arrangements. As we show, another advantage of adopting a polymorphous approach is that it facilitates unearthing the variegated processes driving the pluralization of political forests, which in the case of Virunga go beyond neoliberalization. As such, this approach promotes a better understanding of how neoliberalization interacts with other processes in producing regulatory transformations. It therefore helps identify the differential articulations of neoliberalisms in particular time-space contexts, or what Brenner et al. (2010) call "variegated neoliberalization".

In respect of Virunga, the salience of neoliberalization in successive waves of regulatory restructuring has been uneven. While Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) played an important role in deregulation from the 1980s onwards–contributing to illegal charcoal production under the protection of park guards and other state actors–their effects were crucially mediated by the configuration of the Congolese state and its economic policies (Reno 1998). And while the resulting weakening of state regulatory capacities paved the way for warfare, in the end, regional geopolitics were instrumental to the outbreak of the First (1996–1997) and Second (1998–2003) Congo Wars (Lanotte 2003). These wars induced processes of re-regulation– in turn facilitated by forms of transnational deregulation enabling illicit financial and commodity flows– that rendered Congolese, Rwandan and other foreign state and non-state military figures crucial regulators of the charcoal trade (cf. Jackson 2006). This militarization, in turn, provided justifications for the privatization of Virunga's management in the 2000s, which led to the transnationalization of the regulatory regimes surrounding charcoal (Marijnen 2018). In this manner, through indirect and incremental effects, and in interaction with other processes, structural adjustment ultimately contributed to promoting the privatization of the park. The example of Virunga thus shows how the cumulative impacts of successive waves of neoliberalism-driven transformations create pluriform "layering" effects (Brenner et

al. 2010: 189), entailing reconfigurations of authority that play out differently across places, territories and scales, as shaped by pre-existing regulatory landscapes.

Our analysis draws on in total eight months of field research in the wider Virunga area focusing on authority patterns, conflict dynamics and the militarization of the political economy, including the charcoal sector (see Figure 1). To study the charcoal commodity chain, we interviewed producers, transporters, traders, taxing authorities, armed protectors, and charcoal consumers. Furthermore, we contacted park and other authorities, various types of security services, and local and international NGOs. We also analyzed discourses on charcoal diffused via news media and reports of NGOs and the United Nations (UN). To examine the evolution of regulatory arrangements, we also draw on earlier field research on the militarization of natural resources governance conducted in the eastern Congo between 2010 and 2016 (e.g. Marijnen 2017, 2018; Verweijen 2013, 2016).

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. We first discuss the analytical pertinence of approaching political forests, stateness and neoliberalization as polymorphous phenomena. Next, we analyze the charcoal commodity chain in the Virunga area to trace the particularization, regionalization and transnationalization of regulatory authority. Subsequently, we draw on the TPSN framework to examine the uneven relevance of both central state authority and neoliberalization in the (re)production of Virunga's plurality of political forests. We end by reflecting on the importance of disaggregating "the state" and studying the polymorphy of political forests for understanding forest dwellers' space for and modes of contention.
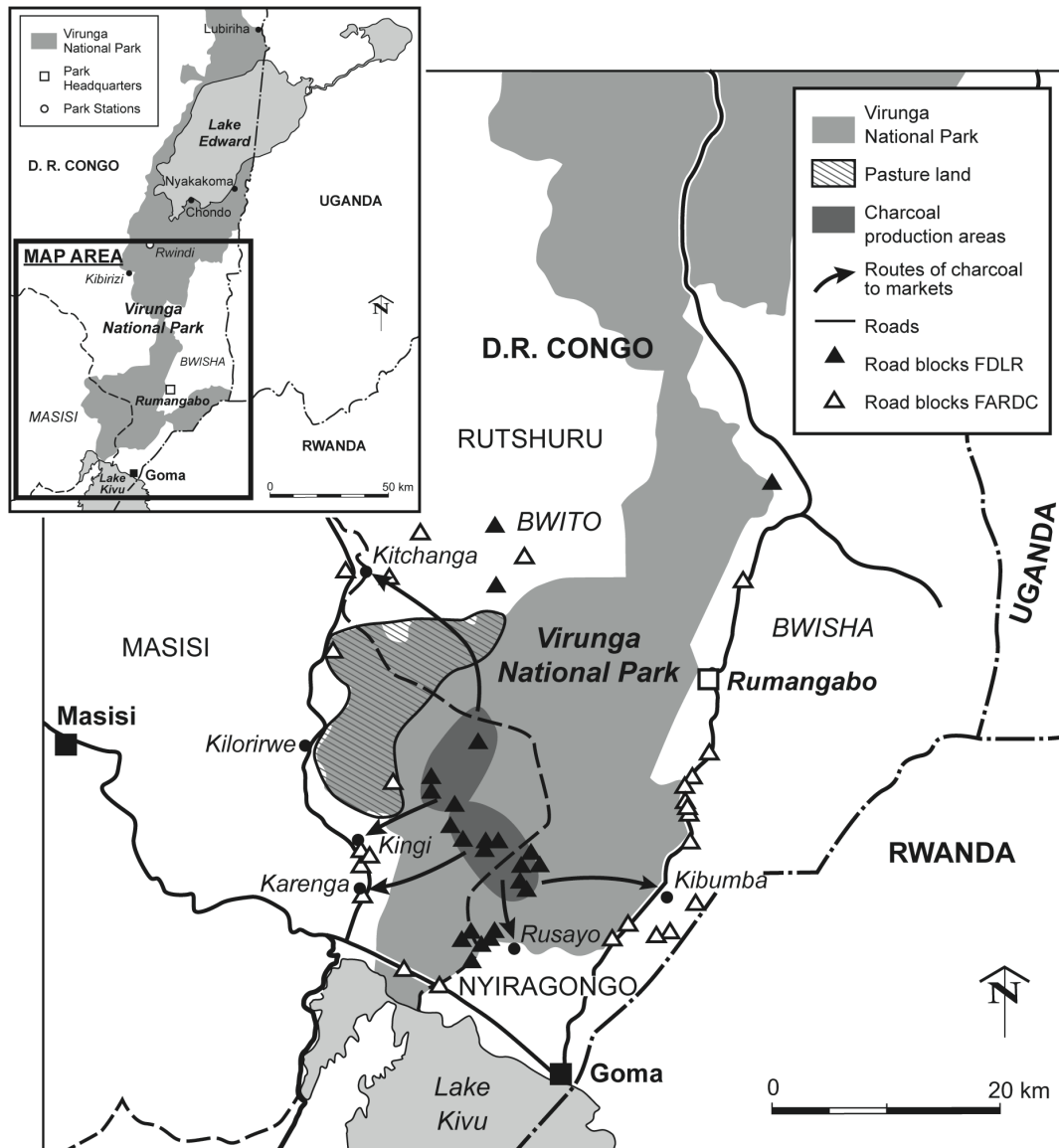
Figure 1 Rough sketch of charcoal commodity chain in southern sector of Virunga National Park (sources: Schouten et al. 2017, ICCN and field research 2014–2017; disclaimer: this map does not claim to be exhaustive, only representing the main activities and locations; it is a snapshot of a volatile environment, implying it may not accurately reflect the current situation)

The Polymorphousness of Political Forests, Stateness and Neoliberalization

Within the field of political ecology, the notions of sovereignty, territory and "the state" are conceptualized in increasingly sophisticated manners, transcending previous monolithic understandings. Amongst other factors, this trend is a result of growing theoretical and empirical engagement with the neoliberalization and

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transnationalization of nature conservation. For instance, both Corson (2011) and Büscher (2010) observe how a more pronounced role for foreign actors in PAs does not necessarily weaken, but may also strengthen certain registers of state power, and therefore intensify state territorialization. To explain this paradox, Lunstrum (2013) coins the term "articulated sovereignties". This concept conceives of sovereignty as a set of attributes, competencies and powers that are articulated via complex interactions between and among intra-state, extra-state and non-state actors. These different components of sovereignty are "multiple, contingent, have different targets and spatialities, can potentially threaten one another, and may be gained by compromising other powers" (2013:2).

Peluso's (2018) notion of "entangled territories" captures a similar convoluted constellation of multidimensional relations between and among state and non-state actors. Owing to these entanglements, even in spaces where state authority is not dominant, the protagonists of territorialization may still "mimick state actors and enroll state institutions" (2018: 401), or be state actors involved in illegal practices not directed by central state institutions (see also Sikor and Lund 2009). In such cases, territorialization should be conceptualized as driven by emerging forms of governmentality that are constituted by a range of elements, notably: access and property relations, taxation practices, situated knowledges, forms of labor organization, and resource materialities and spiritualities (Peluso 2018).

The concept of entangled territories shows how, in a departure from its past predominant association with "the state" (Agnew 1994), territorialization is increasingly approached as a process that plays out via multi-scalar networks involving varying combinations of intra-state-, extra-state and non-state actors, logics, and practices (Peluso 2005). Accordingly, while still primarily articulated in the language of territorialization (e.g. Kelly 2015; Nel 2015a), the literature on PAs and political forests increasingly engages with network perspectives and the concept of scale (e.g. Li 2007; Zulu 2009). This pluralization of analytical tools is important, as it helps avoid "methodological territorialism" (Jessop et al. 2008: 391)– which often leads to obscuring or misreading other socio-spatial processes, for instance, those less directly related to control. A singular focus on territorialization may for instance obliterate the affective dimensions of "stateness", which are more readily uncovered when studying place-making.

The term "stateness" was coined by Hansen and Stepputat (2001) to unpack

the notion of "the state", which they see as having heterogeneous constituent components that should be analytically distinguished. These include regulatory authority, the *idea* of the state, bureaucracies, symbols, and state practices such as taxation. This theoretical approach draws on Mitchell's (1991: 81) conceptualization of "the state" as a "structural effect" of entwined epistemological, discursive, and material processes that (re)produce state/society boundaries. This conceptualization suggests that, rather than approaching "the state" as a reified and monolithic whole with agency of its own, it should be seen as resulting from, and producing effects through, the interactions between entangled intra-state, extra-state and non-state actors and processes.

Analytically disaggregating the state is a precondition for accurately grasping the effects of neoliberalization. While it is clear that neoliberalization reconfigures state authority and its spatializiation (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), different elements of stateness might be affected differently across places, territories, and scales. To examine how this reconfiguration has unfolded in the Virunga area –where it has to a large extent been driven by other processes than neoliberalization– we will first trace the evolution of its regulatory landscape, focusing on charcoal. Subsequently, we draw on the TPSN framework to analyze the changing role of "central state authority", herein considered a shorthand for authority exercised by the presidential patronage network, the central government, and the upper echelons of state agencies.

Multi-layered Regulatory Landscapes Surrounding Charcoal

The southern sector of Virunga National Park –a UNESCO world heritage site– is home to major old-growth forests (sclerophyll, tropical mountain and bamboo forests on volcano slopes). It is therefore commonly referred to, both by the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) and the population, as "Virunga's forest", compared to the adjacent central sector with more open land habitat (e.g. savannahs). The southern sector is subject to increasing deforestation, which generates substantial negative environmental effects, such as land degradation and diminishing habitats for protected species like the mountain gorilla (Van de Giessen 2008). Deforestation is mostly the result of the clearing of land for pastoralism, especially in the area of the park adjacent to the territory of Masisi (see Figure 1) (Marijnen 2018). Yet it also stems from the production of charcoal, and the collection of firewood and wood for construction.

Most of the charcoal from the southern sector is sold to the more than one million inhabitants of the city of Goma, the capital of North Kivu province (UNSC 2010). It was estimated that in 2006 (when having a population of only 550,000), the city consumed over 47,425 tons of charcoal, representing 285,500 tons (or 476,000m³) of wood. Charcoal is the main source of energy both for people living in Goma and around the park, with households burning about 840 kg (made from 5,040kg of wood) per household per year. That charcoal production requires such large amounts of wood is in part related to the unsophisticated nature of the kilns (piles of wood and earth under which tree branches are burnt), which do not reach very high temperatures (Languy et al. 2008). Aside from fuel, charcoal is also a crucial source of livelihood for thousands of people living in the park area – in some villages, as many as two thirds of the inhabitants depend on it for their income. Most of the production process, like tree felling and organizing the burning process in the kilns is carried out by young men who lack access to land and capital. Women, for their part, play a crucial role in transporting the sacks of charcoal out of the park. A part of this manual labor force consists of people who are internally displaced due to ongoing violence in the area. Yet charcoal provides income to many more people, including those selling and reselling charcoal at markets in villages around the park and in Goma. In addition, it yields benefits to "tax collectors" of various kinds, including armed forces, environmental and intelligence agencies and market authorities.

The multilayered regulatory landscape surrounding charcoal is shaped by various factors, such as de jure and de facto property and access rights, the characteristics of the commodity and its chain, and the heavy militarization of the area. Access –whether to the park, the trees, the kilns, transport routes or markets– is to a large extent shaped by changing configurations of conflicting and colluding armed actors. These include park guards of the ICCN, which co-manages the park, members of the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and multiple Congolese and foreign armed groups. In exchange for granting access, these actors impose "taxes" on producers and transporters of charcoal, generally at roadblocks strategically located at charcoal traffic bottlenecks (Schouten et al. 2018). Some are also involved in organizing the production and transport of charcoal, often via civilian collaborators. Given that charcoal is bulky –it is usually sold per sack of 50kg, for between $7-30 depending on the quality and point of sale– larger-scale transport occurs per big truck. In some cases, these trucks are owned by the army, which is advantageous as military vehicles are exempted from taxation (UNSC 2010; Schouten et al. 2018).

Both the production of charcoal –due to the smoke emanating from the kilns–

and its transportation are difficult to hide and therefore easy to tax. The illegal status of the commodity chain renders the sector further vulnerable to taxation, since it provides state agents with the discretionary power to disallow the activity (Verweijen 2013). Yet while its production is illegal, the trade in charcoal from the park is generally not seen as illicit. Not only is the commodity itself considered a basic need, the lack of livelihood opportunities and the contested status of the park cause many to view charcoal production as justified (cf. Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). In addition, the widespread involvement of state agents and the relatively open nature of the trade help further normalize and legitimize it. However, as we show in the following overview of the regulatory landscape surrounding charcoal, the involvement of state agents should not be equated with state regulation.

The Regionalization of Authority

Several of the armed groups that are (or used to be) major players in the charcoal trade originate from, or are closely linked to, ruling elites in Rwanda. These regional influences are in part the outcome of a long history of territorial contestation. Before the colonial period, certain Rwandan kings exercised relatively strong, albeit fluctuating, influence over the Bwisha area now adjacent to the park (in the Congo). The population there is from the same groups (Hutu and Tutsi) and speaks the same language as in Rwanda (Kinyarwanda) (Fairhead 2005). Throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras, this history of influence has fed into territorial claims and interference, including two military invasions in the 1990s (Mathys 2017). Yet the first invasion in 1996 was mostly related to the threat posed by Rwandan refugee camps along the Congo-Rwanda border, which hosted hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees as well as combatants of the former Rwandan government forces and militias implicated in the genocide against Tutsi in 1994. Some of these refugee camps were located in Virunga National Park or its buffer zones, allowing their inhabitants to collect forest products both for their own use and as a commercial activity. The result was rapid deforestation, proceeding at a rate of 7,000-10,000m^3 a day (Biswas and Tortajada-Quiroz 1996).

The ex-Rwandan armed forces and militias in the camps –which later formed the rebel force Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)– soon reorganized themselves militarily, launching cross-border raids to dislodge the new Tutsi-dominated government in Rwanda. To stop this menace and overthrow the

president of the Congo (then named Zaire), accused of facilitating the Hutu forces' military reorganization, Kigali mobilized a mixed regional-Congolese insurgency in 1996, which took over the country in only seven months. This insurgency forcibly dismantled the camps and killed tens of thousands of Hutu refugees in Virunga's forests (Lanotte 2003). Until today, as one interviewee argued, the area is considered by some not primarily as a national park but as one large graveyard (interviews, May 2015).

Discontent with the new Congolese regime, Rwanda and its ally Uganda initiated a new rebellion in 1998, which unleashed the Second Congo War. During the war, the southern sector of Virunga was occupied by a rebel force commanded by the Rwandan army, which was closely linked to (mostly Tutsi) Rwandan political and economic elites. In 2003, after the adoption of a peace accord, the Virunga area formally passed from rebel to central state control. Yet, after the withdrawal of the Rwandan army, Rwandan influence over the eastern Congo continued via intermediaries, in particular the Tutsi-dominated Congolese rebel group National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP). This group claimed to protect the Congolese Tutsi population both against the distrusted Congolese army (FARDC) and the FDLR, which was strongly supported by Rwandan Hutu networks in the region and in Europe (UNSC 2011). These three military actors (FARDC, FDLR, and CNDP) were for a long period the main players in the charcoal business. They constantly clashed and colluded, not only with each other but also with the manifold smaller armed groups (often named "Mai-Mai") that continue to operate in the park. This complex pattern of more or less negotiated, differentiated territorial control between different armed forces–now also including ICCN rangers–persists until today. As a young man in Rusayo explained about the *makala* (charcoal) chain:

> The ICCN arrive here sometimes, they are not based here because of the presence of the FDLR in the park 10–20 kilometers from here (…). Between the production [site] of the *makala* and the final market there are three barriers, the people that produce *makala* pay a tax to the FDLR, the people that transport the *makala* first to the police, and later on again to [FARDC] soldiers at road blocks (interview, June 2015).

Given the FDLR and the CNDP's embedding in networks stretching into the Great Lakes Region, power plays between regional elites and their local allies strongly impact regimes of access to the charcoal trade. For instance, in the area of the

park bordering Masisi territory, along the Kingi-Kitchanga axis, there is a large Tutsi population who arrived in 2003 and later remained under the protection of the CNDP. In 2008, the rebel group sharply expanded its presence in the park with the backing of elements in the Rwandan government, prompting the ICCN to negotiate with them to guard access to the sector that hosts the mountain gorillas (see Figure 1). To maintain good relations, the ICCN –which now included "CNDP-friendly rangers" (Wikileaks 2008)– did not address the rebels' presence in the park in Masisi, where they engaged in charcoal production and cleared land for large-scale cattle-ranching and human settlement. Many of the ranches then built are owned by businesspeople and politicians with strong ties to Rwandan elites, evidencing the regionalization of the regulatory regime surrounding charcoal.

In 2009, the CNDP became part of the Congolese army (FARDC), which further circumscribed the possibilities for law enforcement in the Masisi part of the park. Negotiating from a position of military strength, the CNDP managed to constitute itself as a parallel power network within the FARDC, while remaining closely related to its former Rwandan backers. Moreover, the group used its position within the Congolese army to conduct military operations against the FDLR, at times with the support of Virunga's park guards, which allowed them to take over many charcoal protection rackets (UNSC 2011). Given the CNDP's de facto autonomous status in the army, these operations did not contribute to extending central state authority over the park. Rather, they reinforced a regime of access to the park and its resources where those with links to Rwandan elites were favored, creating competition and conflicts between the FARDC and the park authorities (UNSC 2010). Furthermore, its leadership being dominated by Tutsi, the ex-CNDP's military dominance reinvigorated long-running inter-group tensions throughout the eastern Congo, which equally impacted regimes of access (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013).

The Particularization of Authority

Within the Congo, both political and armed mobilization occur to an important extent along ethnic lines (Verweijen 2016). While the primary support base of the CNDP was the Tutsi community, (Congolese) Hutu populations have generally closer ties to the FDLR and Nyatura armed groups. The Nande, for their part, are the primary constituency of different Mai-Mai groups in the Virunga area. Due to the ethnicized

nature of armed mobilization, the territorialization of charcoal protection rackets intersects with the territorialization of ethnicity. This latter process originated in the colonial era, when the colonizers set out to create territorially fixed "ethnic homelands" ruled by customary chiefs (Muchukiwa 2006). The result was a "bifurcated state" (Mamdani 1996) where customary authorities were state-recognized local authorities, but operated under customary law. This system continues to be in place today, introducing a complex layeredness to state authority at the local level.

While the land on which Virunga National Park is located formally belongs to the Congolese state, chiefs consider themselves to be the customary owners of what they regard as their ancestral grounds, therefore rejecting state ownership. Chiefs have also been at the forefront of contestations of the park's limits, including by allowing people to live and exploit resources within the park (Vikanza 2018). Since the trees from which *makala* is made are located on "their" land, chiefs feel entitled to tax its production and trade. According to the population of Rusayo, these revenues push the chief of Bukomo "to close his eyes [to the charcoal trade]." The chief justifies his stance by arguing that the ICCN does not respect the original agreement between the colonial administration and his forefathers, forcing him to seek other means of income. This agreement stipulated that in exchange for ceding their lands, the eleven customary chiefs in the Virunga area would gain an equal share of the revenues of authorized fishing within the park (mostly on Lake Edward). In part owing to the forms of ethnic territorialization resulting from rebel occupation, this system does not work anymore. As the chief states:

> our Nande friends [including the Mai-Mai groups protecting illegal fishing] completely appropriated the fisheries around Lake Edward and do not share the fish equally (…) The convention we concluded does not work anymore, we cannot go there anymore, I would risk getting killed. The ICCN should reconsider the convention, because now people encroach on the park for *makala* (interview, June 2015).

The prominence of chiefs linked to particular ethnic constituencies contributes to the particularization of authority, or the growing imprint of particularistic rather than public logics on its exercise. A similar process takes place where state agents act more in the service of patronage networks than of their administrative hierarchies. Given that within patronage systems, loyalty is exchanged for access to resources, this

form of particularization generally reinforces state agents' involvement in revenue generation (Bayart 2006). While already pronounced, the imprint of patronage networks on the workings of the state increased from the 1970s onwards, when state resources dried up due to a combination of economic crisis, bad economic management and SAPs. As the real wages of state agents drastically dropped, President Mobutu Sese Seko encouraged them to "fend for themselves" by means of pilferage, extortion and other forms of power abuse and predation (Reno 1998). In relation to PAs, this encouragement led rangers to become involved in illegal natural resources exploitation, including of charcoal (Vikanza 2018).

After the Congo Wars, the workings of the state apparatus have continued to be shaped by rationalities of patronage and revenue generation (Verweijen 2013). This generates complex patterns of conflict and collusion between different state services and rebel forces all vying for resources. For instance, at an illegal charcoal market in the park called Karenga, where the ICCN does not go, the rebels of the FDLR, the Congolese army and police, and the official Congolese tax authority are present simultaneously to impose taxes. While the army demands 500 *francs congolais* (FC, equaling USD 0.3) per bag of *makala*, the tax authority levies 5,000FC per "official" market stall per week. While collected by Congolese state actors, this money does not necessarily flow into the state coffers, even though parts of it are transferred to higher levels of the hierarchy. Most Congolese state agencies are characterized by systems of *rapportage,* whereby money generated at lower levels is transmitted to higher levels, following the contours of patronage networks. To maximize revenues, such networks attempt to influence their members' zones of deployment, for instance, trying to ensure that loyal army commanders are stationed in charcoal production areas (UNSC 2010; Verweijen 2013). Consequently, even while involving state actors, access to charcoal production and its revenues becomes largely shaped by particularized forms of authority.

The Transnationalization of Authority

The imprint of non-state logics on Congolese state actors' practices can also be detected among the ICCN, which is strongly guided by its foreign sponsors. Over the past decade, the latter have gained growing influence over the park, mirroring the heavy transnational involvement in the colonial era (De Bont 2017). Transnational influence became particularly pronounced when the European Commission, the

park's largest donor, put pressure on the Congolese government to conclude a public private partnership (PPP) that incrementally transferred the responsibility for the park's management to a British NGO, the Virunga Foundation (Marijnen 2017). Hence, following textbook patterns of the neoliberalization of nature conservation, transnationalization went hand in hand with privatization (Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe et al. 2010).

The new park management and its transnational support network heavily invest in addressing what they label the "charcoal crisis". This course of action is justified by two predominant discourses, which are diffused by the park's publicity campaigns and international media and INGO reporting. The first portrays *makala* as a "conflict resource" that is a main cause for the mobilization of armed groups, as reflected in its dramatic description as "black gold" (e.g. Mbugua 2016). According to a recent report of the US-based lobby and advocacy NGO *The Enough Project*, entitled *The Mafia in the Park*, "illegal charcoal is a centerpiece of the criminal business network in eastern Congo", run "by one of the region's most established and enduring armed militias (the FDLR)" (Dranginis 2016: 5). The second discourse, reflecting Neomalthusian strands of environmental security thinking, depicts charcoal as "unsustainable" in the light of "population pressure" and "scarcity". As a 2008 report named *Charcoal in the Mist* states:

> The combination of a high and rising population density, the strong reliance on resources and the enormous need for energy in the form of firewood and charcoal, all lead to a very high pressure on the natural resources in this region (Van de Giessen 2008: 13).

These discourses attract and shape multiple internationally sponsored interventions to stop the charcoal trade. In addition, they inform the park management's efforts to push armed groups involved in the trade out of the park via military operations with mixed battalions of ICCN rangers and FARDC soldiers (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). While the rangers of the ICCN are technically Congolese state agents, their commander in chief is the (Belgian) director of the Virunga Foundation. Moreover, they are trained by private security contractors including former Belgian paratroopers, and receive allowances, transport and equipment financed by foreign donors (Marijnen 2017). This embedding in transnational networks influences their discourses and practices. For instance, it leads

them to frame and approach the population in places like Rusayo as "enemies of the park", because they are intermingled with the FDLR or other rebel groups (interviews, June 2014). Despite this, many inhabitants, especially those depending on charcoal for their livelihood, continue to collaborate with armed groups. As a man in Rusayo stated:

> We had a good collaboration with the FDLR (…) and because they cannot leave the forest, we carried the bags on our back from the park to our village, and then it gets transported to Goma (…) You need to work together with the enemy if it is your neighbor (interview, June 2015).

Civilian collaborators complicate efforts of the mixed ICCN-FARDC battalions to "reconquer" rebel-held areas, as they withhold information on rebel movements, and help rebel groups return to areas they were dislodged from (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). In this way, the population plays a crucial role in military struggles to regulate the charcoal trade, further illustrating how regimes of access to Virunga's forests are shaped by contentious co-production.

The inhabitants of the Virunga area are also crucial for the success of INGO efforts to curb the charcoal trade. To change charcoal consumption patterns, INGOs try to transform people's attitudes and promote the development of alternative sources of fuel, but with limited success. An alternative fuel project initiated by the Virunga Foundation in 2008 –the production of biomass briquettes– was, in the words of an INGO employee "a complete failure also because it did not take the cooking culture and traditions into account" (interview, July 2014). The briquettes produced a lot of smoke and had a relatively short burning period, rendering them unable to warm up cooking pots for a longer period of time. The World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) subsequently initiated another project, called EcoMakala, which promotes tree planting on small plots of land located close to the park, in cooperation with local associations. A part of the trees is destined for making *makala*, another part for the production of sticks and planks, while in the future another part should receive carbon credits in the framework of REDD+. Similar to the briquettes project, EcoMakala – currently covering over 9,000 hectares of planted trees–overlooks the complexities of the charcoal market. Crucially, the charcoal it yields– locally known as *makala biwerewere* ("idiots' charcoal") (UNSC 2017)– is of significantly lower quality than *ndobo*, the longer-burning charcoal from old-growth trees in the park. It is made from

eucalyptus trees, which are non-indigenous to the area, and negatively affect soil and water quality (Stanturf et al. 2013). Refusing to inhabit the ascribed environmental subject positions, people in Goma continue to buy *ndobo* at around USD 25–30 per bag, despite EcoMakala costing much less: approximately USD 15 per bag at the market and USD 7 at the plantation (field notes, May 2017).

To remedy this, WWF tried to convince the Congolese government to significantly raise the taxes imposed on *makala* from the park to push the price further up (interview, May 2014). This effort by a transnational actor to shape the regulatory practices of Congolese state agents led to a conflict with another part of the state apparatus that is equally under transnational influence, namely, the ICCN. According to the chief warden of the southern sector: "EcoMakala is not a good project (…). They work with people who do not collaborate with us [the ICCN] and who do not respect the park" (interview, June 2013). It follows that the transnationalization of authority is not a monolithic process, as it involves multiple players that are often in competition.

What further hampers the EcoMakala project is that illegal *makala* production in the park offers far more people an income than EcoMakala, which benefits mostly the landowner. Moreover, only farmers with a minimum of 0.5 hectare of officially registered land can participate, thus excluding many of the youngsters involved in *makala* production. Another problem is that WWF imposes very strict criteria, and if farmers do not comply, their contract is broken. Due to rampant insecurity in the area, planted trees are sometimes stolen or destroyed, causing farmers to miss out on their income. Many of the local associations involved therefore question the way the EcoMakala project is run. Yet they believe they cannot change it as they are not equal partners. An external evaluation of the project similarly concluded that WWF –aside from being allocated 54 percent of the project budget while local associations receive five percent – does not genuinely work together with or transfer responsibilities to these associations (Bouyer et al. 2013). Hence, where international conservation NGOs are involved, the contentious co-production of regulatory authority occurs on a decidedly un-level playing field.

Territory, Place, Scale and Network in (Re)making Political Forests

As this brief overview of the evolution of the regulatory landscape surrounding

charcoal shows, authority in Virunga's forests is shaped by interactions between a multitude of intra-, non-, and extra-state actors, who are embedded in multi-scalar networks. These conflicting and collaborating actors have divergent relations to and discourses on charcoal and Virunga's forests more generally, as shaped by, inter alia, worldviews, feelings of belonging, livelihood needs, and military dynamics. It follows that Virunga's forested area can better be conceptualized as constituted by a multitude of diverse political forests, rather than a single political forest. The polymorphous socio-spatial relations constituting this plurality of forests are unevenly shaped by different dimensions of "stateness". Below, we further examine this unevenness by drawing on Jessop et al.'s (2008) TPSN framework. For lack of space, we cannot go deeply into the conceptual discussions around this framework's components, which we consider not competing, but complementary and overlapping perspectives (cf. Paasi 2008; van Meeteren and Bassens 2016).

Territory

Articulating with Painter's (2010) approach to territory as an *effect* of sociotechnical practices, Elden (2010) identifies three inter-related dimensions of the processes that (re)produce this effect; political-economic, political-strategic, and political-technological. Complementing these dimensions, Paasi's (1991) discussion of regionalization highlights what may be termed a "political-symbolic" dimension of territorialization, relating to the forms of identification surrounding territory, and how these are anchored in and give meaning to everyday life. In respect of political forests, these four dimensions take on the following shape: The *political-economic* dimension centers on defining and controlling access to the ownership and use of land and forest resources, which often involves processes like enclosure and dispossession (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). The *political-strategic* perspective, in turn, relates to forests as a terrain where insurgencies and counterinsurgencies are staged, which deeply affect control over land, resources and populations (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). The *political-technological* dimension is constituted by techniques of scientific forest management, such as zoning, demarcation, and codifying access and user rights in legislation (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Neumann 1998). Finally, the *political-symbolic* perspective focuses on the ways forest spaces are identified and given meaning, for instance, as "national parks" (Jazeel 2005) or as "forests" rather than "jungles" (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011).

In the case of Virunga, we observe that in none of these four dimensions, the Congolese central state is hegemonic. Starting with the political-economic dimension, we observe that access to the means and profits of charcoal production and trade is contested by various armed forces and related civilian networks. Even where Congolese state actors are influential, they are not necessarily directed by their official hierarchy in Kinshasa nor do the revenues they make from charcoal –by breaking the law– necessarily flow to that hierarchy. Instead, authority and resources are largely channeled through patronage networks. Following this general pattern, the army too is riddled with multiple competing power networks (Verweijen 2018). Consequently, counterinsurgency operations –relating to territory as terrain– do not always contribute to the extension of central state authority. The same applies to law enforcement operations by the externally trained, funded and commanded ICCN rangers, which mostly reinforce the control of the Virunga Foundation.

The political-technological dimension of territorialization is equally marked by a high level of transnationalization: even while drawing on Congolese state legislation and state actors like the ICCN, it is INGOs such as the Virunga Foundation and WWF that have predominant influence on the scientific management of Virunga's forests and inhabitants, for instance by zoning tree production sites. Looking at the fourth, political-symbolic-dimension of territory, we see no clear-cut dominance of the central state either. The meanings of Virunga's forests projected by the central state, which portrays Virunga as "national park/patrimony", are continually contested. Rejecting state ownership of land, customary chiefs and their constituencies see Virunga's territory primarily as their ancestral grounds, leading them to speak of "our forests". Informally, Rwanda's ruling elites also contest the significations propagated by the Congolese state. They see Virunga not so much as a (Congolese) "national park", but as a (historical) sphere of their own influence and site of justified intervention (Mathys 2017), in part owing to the presence of the FDLR. Paradoxically, even actors linked to the Congolese state diffuse meanings that reflect limited state control. For instance, FARDC soldiers involved in counterinsurgency operations often speak of Virunga as "forest" in the sense of "bush" (*pori* or *forêt /brousse*), which indicates the presence of rebel forces (interviews, January 2012). Hence, broadly similar to the ways in which the territorialization of ethnicity is reinforced by ethnicized armed group control,

historical territorial imaginaries and current forms of military occupation interact in shaping the political-symbolic form of Virunga's forests as territory.

Place

Territory overlaps in several aspects with place, here seen as "an historically contingent process" (Pred 1984). Following Agnew, place is considered to have three main dimensions: The first is *locale,* or "the settings for everyday, routine social interaction provided in a place", constituting its "structured microsociological content" (1987: 5). Political forests as locale are constituted by the everyday micro-practices and interactions of forest dwellers, users and governors, and how these practices and relations shape and are shaped by macro-structures, like nation-state frameworks. The second dimension of place is *location,* referring to the embedding of locales within physical settings (Agnew 1987: 27). In relation to political forests, location, such as proximity to international borders, affects the ways they are framed and governed (cf. Lunstrum 2014). A good example is transfrontier conservation spaces labeled "peace parks", reflecting how transboundary management supposedly fosters regional stability (Büscher 2010). The third dimension of place is *sense of place*, or the subjective orientation toward place that is engendered through everyday practices (Agnew 1987: 27). In this respect, Massey (1994) stresses the importance of power/knowledge relations that render certain meanings of place visible while obscuring others. While some senses of place attached to political forests are therefore more conspicuous than others, they generally continue to be highly diverse: forests may, for instance, be seen as dangerous places, as places of production, as ancestral heritage or as spiritual environment (Neumann 1998).

One way to study Virunga's forests as locale is to look at micro-practices of charcoal production and taxation, and how these are guided by routines, norms, beliefs and people's sense of entitlement to forest resources (cf. Sikor and Lund 2009). These various elements are in turn shaped by people's sense of place, which varies among different groups. Among large parts of the population, Virunga's forests instill a sense of danger, stemming from memories of massacres and the presence of multiple armed actors. Yet a sense of Virunga may also bear ethnic and ancestral connotations that are (re)produced by everyday practices, like the taxation of charcoal by customary chiefs (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). Even for displaced populations, who do not live on their ancestral grounds, Virunga's forests are often ethnicized

spaces, as host populations and armed forces frame displaced people in terms of their ethnic origins (interviews, 2015–2017). Furthermore, for many of the poor who lack access to land, Virunga's forests and entitlements to their resources are primarily seen in terms of survival. As one man in Rusayo commented:

> We are like fishermen, who need to stay close to the water, we need to stay in the park. Even before the FDLR arrived we made charcoal, and if they are gone, we will continue with the trade and the FARDC will help us to do so (interview, June 2015).

As this quote indicates, while the idea of "the state" continues to occupy a central role in imaginaries of socio-political order in the eastern Congo (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014), for certain groups, it may be relatively irrelevant whether an area is controlled by state or non-state forces at the level of everyday practice. This relative indifference is reinforced by the location of Virunga far (over 1500 kilometers) from Kinshasa, and people's overall weak political and economic ties to the capital, which cannot be reached overland due to poor road infrastructure. These thin connections to the capital stem from and feed into a strong orientation towards the local region, including the other side of the border (Jackson 2006).

Scale

Following Swyngedouw (1997: 169), we see scale as "the embodiment of and the arena through which social relations of empowerment and disempowerment operate". The boundaries of these arenas are socially produced via contingent processes of structuration that are partly shaped by capitalist relations, therefore being both "fluid" and "fixed" (Smith 1992). The analytic of scale has been employed in analyses of political forests and PAs in a variety of ways, of which we will discuss here only a few. Focusing on forest governance in Uganda, and how it has been affected by neoliberalization, Nel (2015a) describes processes of "upscaling", reflecting the growing policy influence of supra-state entities like the World Bank; "outscaling", relating to the increasing salience of the private sector and market-based configurations; and "downscaling", or the decentralization of governance structures.

We see roughly similar processes at work in Virunga's political forests, as partly driven by neoliberalization. Processes of "upscaling" go hand in hand with "outscaling", as reflected for instance in the European Commission's pressure on the

Congolese government to devolve the park's management to a PPP. This partnership has opened the door to a profound influence of market rationalities and parties on the park's management and financing (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016). Market rationalities also imprint INGO initiatives to curb charcoal production, as reflected in WWF's plan to designate a part of the EcoMakala forests for REDD+. "Downscaling" has in part taken the form of the "particularization" of authority, whereby customary chiefs contest or ignore national authorities and legislation, like the boundaries of the park. Yet it has also occurred through transnational actors' harnessing of local NGOs to implement projects like EcoMakala. For their part, such local "intermediaries" often engage in "scale jumping" (Smith 1992), bypassing Congolese state actors to deal directly with INGOs in order to access their resources and reshape their projects.

Processes of up–, out–and down-scaling have not rendered the nation-state scale irrelevant. Through legislation, regulations, and the presence of state actors, the framework of the nation-state shapes the interactions that (re)produce other scales. Additionally, the nation-state figures as an important "scalar narrative", articulating agency and (de)legitimizing paths of action (cf. Taravella and De Sartre 2012: 645). For instance, even though their own influence undermines the Congolese state's regulatory authority, transnational actors frame Virunga's forest explicitly as a Congolese state space. Thus, for the park's Belgian chief warden, law enforcement operations that reinforce the authority of the (transnationally managed) Virunga Foundation lead to "the restoration of state institutions" and "the rule of law" (Dranginis 2016: 26). Congolese state agents, in turn, portray Virunga's forests explicitly as "state/national space" to legitimize their claims to authority or resources, emphasizing that they are national officials upholding the state dominated order (Marijnen 2018). However, due to the particularization of state authority, these scalar narratives do not necessarily contribute to reinforcing the regulatory power of central state institutions.

Network

Networks can be conceptualized in multiple ways: herein we approach them as socio-spatial abstractions that foreground interconnectivity, and thus primarily as epistemological, rather than ontological categories (cf. van Meeteren and Bassens 2016). In respect of political forests, network perspectives have for instance been employed in the form of analytics of assemblage (Li 2007; Nel 2015b). Yet here we

focus on another type of network approach, namely, the analysis of commodity chains of forest products. Commodity chain analysis entails examining the interconnections between actors at different scales by mapping access to means of production and revenues, as well as the claims to such access (Ribot 1998). In this way, it provides detailed insight into regulatory regimes. When applied to charcoal in Virunga's forests, commodity chain analysis foregrounds the links and blurred boundaries between state and non-state, civilian and military actors, who both fight over and agree upon particular divisions of labor, territory and revenues. Yet to fully grasp the complexity of commodity chains, and the practices of the different actors involved, one also needs to examine the wider social networks into which these actors are embedded, which channel flows of resources, information, authority and discourses.

As emerges from the previous, studying the social networks of actors in the Virunga area reveals the transnationalization, regionalization and particularization of regulatory authority. Looking at armed forces, we see that many of the rebel groups involved in the Second Congo War had strong regional links, for instance with Rwandan elites. Others, often through the trade in minerals and hardwood, also had important transnational connections (Lanotte 2003). The continued existence of these multi-scalar relations renders a conceptualization of the protracted violence in the eastern Congo in terms of Duffield's (2002) "war as a network enterprise" analytically accurate. For Duffield, the emergence of these war networks was enabled by global financial and economic deregulation in the post-Cold-War era. These regulatory transformations facilitate illicit money and commodity flows, which in turn allow rebel groups and state actors alike to obtain arms and resources.

Today, many armed actors, like the FDLR, continue to be embedded in multi-scalar networks, although in the case of the government forces, these are more heavily oriented towards the national scale. Like other state actors, FARDC personnel is part of patronage networks that crosscut and overlap with the official military hierarchy. These networks infuse different parts of the FARDC, which provokes conflicts and competition within the military (Verweijen 2018). For instance, when the ICCN started its collaboration with the FARDC in 2010, this provoked a backlash among other parts of the army involved in illegal resources exploitation, such as the navy, leading to armed confrontations (UNSC 2010). This example shows how mapping the networks of which state agents form part helps analyze "the state" in a disaggregated manner, which enables a more accurate analysis of the salience of its various

components across different political forests.

Concluding Remarks

Looking at the regulatory landscape surrounding charcoal produced in the forested areas of Virunga National Park, this paper highlights the need to analytically disaggregate "the state" in order to grasp the complexities of the fourth moment in the historical evolution of political forests, away from central state domination. Moreover, it demonstrates how such disaggregation is facilitated by recognizing the polymorphy of the socio-spatial relations that (re)produce political forests. A polymorphous and disaggregated approach, in turn, allows for better identifying the drivers of the variegated salience of stateness, and how this variation shapes and is shaped by processes of de-and re-regulation. In the case of Virunga, these drivers are only partly related to neoliberalization, although –in interaction with other processes– the latter did play an important role in setting in motion successive waves of regulatory transformations.

Neoliberalism, notably in the form of SAPs, was one of a complex mix of ingredients that intensified the particularization of authority from the end of the 1970s onwards. The resulting weakening of central state control over lower echelons of the state apparatus and peripheral regions laid the foundation for successive wars in the 1990s and early 2000s (Reno 1998). These wars were partly triggered by competing projects of Congolese and Rwandan state territorialization, and promoted the far-reaching regionalization of regulatory complexes (Verweijen and Van Meeteren 2015). The weakening of central state regulatory capacities and the devastations caused by warfare provided in turn a new impetus for neoliberalism-driven transformations. They justified the de-facto privatization of Virunga's management, which led to the profound transnationalization of regulatory authority (Marijnen 2018). Ironically, the policies of the new park management further weaken central state authority over the park and intensify instability. In particular the military operations promoted by the park to push out armed groups have aggravated conflicts and violence (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018), creating a seeming justification for yet more market-oriented interventions, such as the commodification of park rangers' law enforcement activities (Marijnen and Verweijen 2016). This situation illustrates how the "collateral damage" caused by neoliberalization can "provide a positive spur to

regulatory reinvention" (Peck and Tickell 2002: 392), causing its harmful effects to become the conditions for its own reproduction.

While transnational actors' salience circumscribes the room for maneuver of Virunga's inhabitants due to the asymmetry of the underlying power relations, it also furthers the pluralization of Virunga's political forests, which ultimately enhances people's space for contention. On the one hand, the presence of a plurality of political forests complicates charting paths of action, as it forces social agents to navigate between, cope with and adapt to multiple, often transitory regulatory regimes and actors. On the other hand, the pluralization of political forests enlarges forest dwellers' scope for contention, allowing them to make use of the interstices between different forests. The overlapping and conflicting nature of Virunga's diverse political forests, and their multi-scalar and networked character, allows their inhabitants to jump scales, play off competing factions, and resist meanings and regulations propelled by powerful actors, such as the central state and transnational agencies. The fragmented nature and uneven salience of stateness play a crucial role in producing these spaces of contention. Had we not systematically explored these differential articulations of stateness, by examining the socio-spatial relations productive of political forests in all their variety, these spaces would not have come fully into view. It follows that recognizing and exploring the polymorphy political forests is indispensable for understanding the ways in which both "stateness" and "neoliberalization" are contested and co-produced in locally specific ways, with unstable and uneven outcomes.

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