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"Drilling through Conservation Policy: Oil Exploration in Murchison Falls Protected Area, Uganda"

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Approximately 2.5 billion barrels of commercially-viable oil, worth $2 billion in annual revenue for 20 years, were discovered under the Ugandan portion of the Albertine Rift in 2006. The region also contains seven of Uganda's protected areas and a growing ecotourism industry. We conducted interviews and focus groups in and around Murchison Falls Protected Area, Uganda's largest, oldest, and most visited protected area, to assess the interaction of oil exploration with the three primary conservation policies employed by Uganda Wildlife Authority: protectionism, neoliberal capital accumulation, and community-based conservation. We find that oil extraction is legally permitted inside protected areas in Uganda, like many other African countries, and that the wildlife authority and oil companies are adapting to co-exist inside a protected area. Our primary argument is that neoliberal capital accumulation as a conservation policy actually makes protected areas more vulnerable to industrial exploitation because nature is commodified, allowing economic value and profitability of land uses to determine how nature is exploited. Our secondary argument is that the conditional nature of protected area access inherent within the protectionist policy permits oil extraction within Murchison Falls Protected Area. Finally, we argue that community-based conservation, as operationalized in Uganda, has no role in defending protected areas against oil industrialisation. (Text from authors' abstract)

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