Central Africa and South Asia: Worldlife Fund (WWF) Knew About Rights Abuses by Park Rangers, but Didn't Respond Effectively

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In March 2019, Buzzfeed News published the first of a series of articles tying international conservation giant WWF to violent and severe human rights abuses allegedly committed by park rangers working in Central Africa and South Asia. Based largely on field investigations by the advocacy groups Survival International and the Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK), the reports sent shock waves through the conservation industry, depicting out-of-control eco-guards enforcing the boundaries of protected wildlife reserves through the torture, rape and murder of people living in nearby communities.

In response to the broad outcry that followed, WWF commissioned an independent investigation by a panel of human rights experts that included a former UN high commissioner for human rights as well as luminaries in the fields of conservation and protected area management. On Nov. 24, after more than a year of interviews and review of internal WWF documents, the panel released a 160-page final report.

The report found that staff members working in WWF country offices, particularly those in Central Africa, knew for years that there were allegations of violence and misconduct by park rangers who were receiving support from WWF that included salary bonuses. After human rights organizations began to publicize the allegations, WWF International hired consultants to investigate their veracity, but in some cases their reports were either kept from the public or their language was softened before being presented to senior figures in the organization.

"In some cases, however, it is clear that to avoid fueling criticism WWF decided not to publish commissioned reports, to downplay information received, or to overstate the effectiveness of its proposed responses," the panel wrote.

It also found that WWF often chose to prioritize relationships with local government agencies in charge of protected area management over the safety of nearby Indigenous communities.

While the panel emphasized that it found no evidence that WWF had specifically directed rangers to violate the human rights of local hunters and villagers, it found that WWF country managers failed to follow up on credible allegations of "multiple human rights abuses" in order to avoid offending host government agencies directly in charge of ranger operations.

> “WWF’s implementation of its social policies and human rights commitments has been inconsistent in the countries of concern to this report, and especially weak in the Congo Basin countries,” the panel wrote.

To accompany the report, WWF published an unsigned management response, pointing to steps the organization has taken since the Buzzfeed series, including a call for proposals to set up grievance processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), plans to hire an ombudsperson, and the establishment of a new “international safeguards” office.

> “Human rights abuses are never acceptable, and we feel great sorrow and sympathy for the people who have suffered,” a WWF spokesperson said in a statement emailed to Mongabay.

Wally, drawing to educate and raise awareness about environmental conservation among his community neighboring the Salonga National Park, Monkoto, Tshuapa, Democratic republic of the Congo, October 2016. Photo by Leonora Baumann for Mongabay

Years of troubling allegations with little follow-up

The panel’s investigation focused on six countries: the DRC, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Nepal and India. In each country, WWF provided support to local government agencies in charge of managing protected areas, including by training park rangers and giving them salary bonuses if they met patrol benchmarks. In some cases, WWF country offices have signed agreements to serve as co-managers of the national parks where those rangers worked.

According to the panel’s findings, as far back as 2008 WWF staff members heard credible reports of serious human rights abuses being carried out by park rangers, yet continued to

provide them with support. In Cameroon, for example, 15 representatives of the Indigenous Baka group attended a meeting at WWF's local office on July 1, 2008, where they complained of "extra-judicial beatings" carried out by rangers against Baka people who had traditionally hunted and fished inside national parks.

Many of the most serious allegations, however, were brought to the attention of WWF senior managers between 2014 and 2018. Reports shared by Survival International and RFUK, and then later supported by investigations carried out by consultants hired by WWF, detailed numerous and widespread allegations of rape and murder.

The report was particularly harsh in its findings on Salonga National Park, a sprawling 3.6-million-hectare (8.9-million-acre) tract of protected rainforest in the DRC that was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1984. WWF has worked in Salonga since 2005, and since 2015 has operated under a memorandum of understanding with the DRC agency in charge of protected wildlife reserves, L'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN), that authorizes it to act as co-manager of the park.

After a staff member at WWF DRC reported allegations of violence being committed by rangers working in Salonga in late 2016, the country office's senior management team decided that a consultant should be hired to investigate in greater detail. But no follow-up action was taken, and when a staff member raised concerns over the failure with WWF's regional head office for Africa, they were chastised by WWF DRC's country director. (No names were provided in the report.)

The panel said the country director and another senior staff member in charge of WWF's operations in Salonga believed the abuses were "not the responsibility of WWF and that ICCN would react negatively to an effort to investigate past human rights abuses."

Subsequently, RFUK carried out a field investigation in 2018 along with APEM, a Congolese civil society group, where they visited 11 villages bordering Salonga. Of the 231 people surveyed during the mission, nearly one in four said they'd personally experienced physical violence at the hands of park rangers.

The testimony they collected included details of a gang rape committed against four women, two of whom were pregnant, by Salonga park rangers in 2015.

In response to RFUK's findings, WWF International hired two local civil society groups to investigate the allegations. But according to the panel, they prevented those groups from determining whether there were abuses that had not yet been reported, instead limiting their investigation solely to incidents that had already surfaced.

One of those investigations, conducted in late 2019, was kept out of the public eye after researchers found evidence of "multiple instances of murder, rape, and torture committed by ecoguards." In February 2020, WWF published a statement saying it had decided not to release the report "out of concern for the health and safety of the alleged victims."

The panel said the suppression of the investigation was part of a broader pattern of WWF obscuring or downplaying the severity of allegations against rangers to the public — and, in some cases, even to its own board of directors.

When WWF hired a consultant to investigate abuses in Cameroon, for example, the final report described "widespread allegations" against park rangers and growing numbers of

complaints. But by the time a briefing paper summarizing his findings was presented to WWF's international board, it had been edited to leave out information about new allegations, instead portraying the abuses as having only occurred in years past.

In another case, a field report prepared by a consultant hired in 2017 to work on a proposed national park in the Republic of Congo was edited by WWF to remove a reference to Baka community members hiding in fear when they saw vehicles with WWF's panda logo enter their village.

> "Internally, WWF's focus on promoting 'good news' seems to have led to a culture in which Programme Offices have been unwilling to share or escalate the full extent of their knowledge about allegations of human rights abuses because of concern about scaring off donors or offending state partners," the panel wrote in its final report.

Indigenous Baka "Pygmies" in southeast Cameroon. Photo courtesy of Greenpeace / Markus Mauthe.

Steps toward reform?

While the panel's report detailed years of haphazard and inadequate responses to allegations of abuses by park rangers, it also praised WWF for taking more recent steps toward incorporating human rights protections into its operations. In particular, it highlighted a nascent program in the Central African Republic where WWF provides support to a local human rights organization charged with receiving complaints of abuses by rangers. The panel said it was a model for how WWF could address abuses in other countries. WWF has said it is in the process of looking for a partner to implement a similar program in the DRC.

The report described local judicial processes in Central Africa that often failed to hold rangers accountable for abuses. Of six rangers who were tried for a gang rape in the DRC, for example, five were acquitted.

The panel urged WWF to use its leverage with host governments to proactively prevent abuses from happening in the first place, including by pushing for binding codes of conduct to be signed by rangers as well as stronger human rights provisions in future agreements with government agencies.

> "WWF support to rangers should be tied to compliance with the Code of Conduct, which should be public and disseminated to indigenous peoples and local communities in their own languages," it wrote.

In its management response, WWF says it will hire an ombudsperson who will report directly to its international board and will have the authority to investigate some allegations of abuse.

However, the panel expressed concerns about the limited authority that WWF envisions for the role, saying that as currently proposed it "will not make a judgment about the merits of a complaint and will not impose solutions or find fault."

The panel said that so far none of WWF's agreements with host countries have been amended to include stronger human rights protections, nor have codes of conduct been adopted for park rangers in the Congo Basin. And WWF has not yet established a promised new system to respond to allegations of mistreatment and abuse by rangers in Salonga, despite the severity of the abuses.

Late last year, WWF temporarily suspended its support for rangers in Salonga after a fisherman was found dead in the park. But funding was resumed after the case was referred to the DRC's military tribunal, the legal body that holds jurisdiction over rangers.

In an email to Mongabay, a WWF spokesperson said it is "prepared to suspend our work" in Salonga if human rights benchmarks are not met by ICCN and rangers working there.

Aside from the 2018 RFUK field investigation, there has been no effort to comprehensively catalog the full extent of abuses suffered by communities living near Salonga. WWF has no plans to compensate local people who say they suffered abuses at the hands of rangers.

A wake-up call for the conservation world

While public furor over the scandal has been directed toward WWF, advocates say it is not the only conservation organization that has provided support to rangers accused of human rights abuses.

> "This is something that's going on throughout Africa, and it can't continue," said Stephen Corry, CEO of Survival International. "People are wising up to it now that it's getting exposure."

In the wake of Buzzfeed's articles, legislators in the U.S. called for an investigation into whether aid money provided by the U.S. government had been used to support rangers that were implicated in abuse. More than $12 million in financing for conservation organizations working in the Congo Basin was suspended.

In October, the U.S. General Accountability Office, found that three grantees — WWF, the

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and African Parks — had each been confronted by accusations of abuse by rangers in recent years. In response to the GAO's investigation, the U.S. Department of the Interior announced in a September 2020 memo that it would cease funding conservation activities in the Congo Basin until "additional controls" were established, and that aid dollars could no longer be spent on supporting park rangers in the region.

The decision is a significant blow to WWF and WCS. According to the memo, the U.S. has given more than $150 million to WWF for "anti-poaching and park management" activities since 2004, with an additional $19 million provided to WCS for similar purposes since 2010.

In its response to the independent panel's findings, WWF said it does not exercise operational control over park rangers, who are under the command and supervision of host governments.

In countries like the DRC, ensuring rangers follow human rights norms is "more challenging when there is conflict, weak governance, and weak rule of law," a WWF spokesperson told Mongabay.

But advocates say that while they acknowledge the challenges that organizations like WWF face in working with local government agencies, they could still be doing far more to pressure those agencies to prioritize human rights standards, particularly through their control over funding.

> "I know ICCN and how they operate, and I can only imagine the difficulties in that relationship," Joe Eisen, executive director of RFUK, said in an interview. "But when it gets to a point where you're not willing to speak truth to this stuff there's something seriously, seriously wrong."

While WWF and other large conservation organizations may not have direct operational control over rangers, staff members are often involved in strategic planning and furnish substantial portions of their salaries and equipment.

> "The reason the rangers are there is because of the conservation project," Corry said. "And the government wants those projects, because they bring in money."

Organizations like WWF say they are in a difficult position. The remote, forested protected areas where they work are often home to dwindling populations of endangered species like chimpanzees and elephants. If they withdraw their support for those areas and the agencies that police them, they say those species and their habitats could be at higher risk of being exploited by logging and mining companies.

In addition, WWF says that pulling out of places like Salonga would have ripple effects for some of the communities they work in.

> "WWF's work includes community-based natural resource management, livelihood generation, governance, access rights, biodiversity monitoring, and wildlife management, all of which bring benefits to local communities. If that support is suspended, it can impact local communities," a WWF spokesperson

told Mongabay.

Critics say the issue is larger than a few bad apples in ranger outposts. In Central Africa, some protected areas may have been set up during the colonial era through forced evictions and land dispossession. Baka communities living in Cameroon and the Republic of Congo, for example, say that being closed off from the forest has made it harder for them to feed themselves and carry out their traditional spiritual practices.

The approach of barring local Indigenous communities from protected areas and policing them with armed rangers has been referred to in the past as "fortress conservation" — a model that WWF itself has publicly rejected for decades.

> "It took a long time to get conservation groups to realize that fortress conservation couldn't be the ultimate answer to this, and a lot of people still haven't quite gotten there," said Michael Wright, who served as WWF's senior vice president for international programs between 1979 and 1994.

For outside audiences and donors, the term "poachers" often conjures up images of heavily armed gangs tracking and killing elephants. But trespassers in national parks are often impoverished local people looking to shoot game either to eat or sell in markets.

As a campaign to protect 30% of the planet's wild spaces gains steam with conservation groups and national governments, Eisen says the issues that led to WWF's scandal are becoming more urgent.

> "It shows how risky that 30 percent is if we just do a little tinkering around the edges of the current model, which doesn't work in Africa and parts of Asia," he said.

Michael Sutton, executive director of the Goldman Environmental Foundation, says he hopes the scandal won't lead to permanent funding shortfalls for WWF and other organizations. To reduce the likelihood of human rights abuses in the future, international organizations are going to have to be tougher on local government partners and Indigenous communities must be allowed a much more active role in protected area management, he said.

> "When Indigenous people are given greater control of their own environment, they tend to take better care of it and accomplish more effective protection results," he said. "It's something we've learned over the years, and that we're continuing to learn."

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Featured image: ICCN park rangers on patrol in Garamba National Park in DRC in 2017. Photo by Thomas Nicolon for Mongabay.

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