

For Rangers on the Front Lines of Anti-Poaching Wars, Daily Trauma

Unsung heroes face daunting challenges.



An anti-poaching team patrols in Zakouma National Park, Chad, in February 2014.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCO LONGARI, AFP/GETTY

Laurel Neme

for [National Geographic](#) In Focus

PUBLISHED JUNE 27, 2014

In May 2008 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), 80 Mai Mai militia ambushed a unit of 12 wildlife rangers on patrol near Rwindi in Virunga National Park, wounding Habimana Buzara in the leg as he covered their retreat.

The rangers watched helplessly as the rebel group—aiming to terrorize the unit—tortured their injured comrade and kicked him in the head until he died. They buried their friend later that day, and the next morning they were back at work.

Wildlife rangers endure similar ordeals to soldiers in combat. They routinely face death, injury, or torture from poachers, and the wild animals they protect can kill them too. In the DRC, which has been riven by almost two decades of civil war and political instability, about 150 rangers have been killed in Virunga alone since 2004.

Rangers are exposed to deeply disturbing scenes, with each poached carcass a frustrating and grisly reminder of failure, and they operate in the bush under harsh physical conditions, often with inadequate equipment, pay, and support.

"Worldwide, about two rangers are killed every week," says Sean Willmore, president of the [International Ranger Federation](#) and founder of the [Thin Green Line Foundation](#), a charity that trains rangers and supports the widows of those killed in the line of duty. "But that's only partial data," he adds. "It could be double that amount."



Emmanuel de Merode, chief warden of Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, leads other rangers down a path in the mountain gorilla area of the park.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT STIRTON, GETTY

Relentless Onslaught

In March 2013, poachers killed nearly 90 elephants in southwestern Chad, including 30 pregnant females, many of which aborted their calves when they were shot.

Since mid-April, poachers have slaughtered 68 elephants in [Garamba National Park](#), in the DRC, hacking off tusks and removing the animals' brains and genitals. Nine elephants had bullet wounds to the top of their heads and backs, indicating they'd been shot with precision from helicopters.

In May in [Mount Kenya National Park](#), Mountain Bull, a great tusker who was under constant monitoring and had had a portion of his tusks removed to deter poachers, was killed. And this month, [beloved Satao](#), thought to be the largest of Kenya's elephants, with massive tusks that almost touched the ground, was found in Tsavo East National Park with his face mutilated and his tusks gone.

During the previous 18 months, Kenya Wildlife Service rangers and staff with the NGO [Tsavo Trust](#) had jointly monitored Satao's movements. But with "mounting poaching pressures and anti-poaching resources stretched to the limit, it proved impossible to prevent the poachers getting through the net," according to the trust's published statement. On June 21, the [Star newspaper](#) reported that KWS rangers arrested three suspects in the killing.

Rangers on rhino battlegrounds face similar tragedies. In South Africa through June 5 of this year, poachers had killed 442 rhinos, 293 in [Kruger National Park](#) alone.

On February 28, 2014, tourists in the park came across a mutilated rhino wandering dazed, but alive, on the side of the road. Half its face had been hacked off with a panga, or machete, and its eyes had been gouged out.

Rangers then launched a search, but dense bush and heavy rain made tracking difficult. It took them three days to locate the rhino, and when they did, they found that it had a bullet in its brain. They had no option but to put the animal out of its misery.

"It's a relentless onslaught," says Johan Jooste, special projects commander with [South African National Parks \(SANParks\)](#). "This place gives new meaning to 24/7."



A ranger sits with an orphaned mountain gorilla in Virunga National Park's gorilla sanctuary in July 2012.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL MOORE, AFP/GETTY

Rangers Are Targets Too

Haltebaye Ndotoingar, assistant conservator at Chad's [Zakouma National Park](#), says his worst day on the job was April 2, 2002, when he watched a man in his unit die during a battle with heavily armed poachers. At dawn one day in September 2012, some 50 miles (80 kilometers) north of Zakouma, poachers killed five guards (one other escaped but is presumed dead) in the wet season elephant range outside the park. The murders were likely payback for a raid on their camp a month earlier.

In April 2014, Virunga's head warden, [Emmanuel de Merode, survived after being shot](#) in a roadside ambush in what may have been an assassination attempt. [He'd made many enemies](#) as a result of his efforts to curb poaching in the park and to enforce a ban on charcoal production and stop oil exploration there.

Even successful operations can end traumatically for rangers. After receiving a tip, rangers in Kruger pursued a poaching gang led by an ex-soldier. "Shortly after getting into the area, we heard two muffled shots fired in quick succession," says Don English, the regional ranger for Marula South. The unit hiked toward the shots and froze when the undergrowth rustled. Just then four poachers burst out of the thicket, and the rangers dived for cover behind an anthill. After several intense exchanges of gunfire, they gave chase and apprehended two of the poachers. Two others escaped.

During questioning, the poachers admitted that they'd shot two rhinos. The rangers immediately mounted a helicopter search for the wounded animals, following tracks in the tall grass until they located an adult female in severe distress. Her calf and another young rhino were nearby. As they hovered above her checking for bullet wounds, the rhino stumbled away and collapsed. "With blood gushing out of her nostrils and mouth, in saddened silence we watched her die in front of us," English later wrote in his journal. "It doesn't come naturally to any human being to put bodies into a body bag," SANParks Jooste says. "Just to see the barbaric slaughter of those animals, it's not good for any of us. It's not good to see blood on the soil of good earth. It's not supposed to be."



A South African soldier participates in a night patrol exercise against rhino poachers in Kruger National Park in July 2011.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN, AFP/GETTY

Rules of Engagement

Unlike soldiers in combat, rangers pursue criminals, not enemy combatants. Rangers enforce national laws and work under specified rules, and in South Africa and elsewhere, they're permitted to fire only in self-defense. That need for restraint can be stressful, Jooste says. "Here's this [ranger], tracking poachers in 45 degrees [Celsius, or 113 degrees Fahrenheit] for many days. He gets a sighting, but he cannot shoot at the person. He must now stalk the person." Yet the thick bush hinders tracking. When the ranger finally finds his quarry, "then he must challenge the poacher. Only when that person picks up his rifle may he defend himself. And that is taxing."

According to Jooste, in 2013 SANParks rangers engaged in 65 wildfires, but they recorded 108 sightings of poachers. "Because we're law abiding, they get away. Because they run away into the bush, [the poachers] have the advantage." In addition, when a ranger in South Africa kills a poacher, the ensuing police investigation puts pressure on the ranger and his or her family—even if the case is dismissed. "You're on the defensive all along," Jooste says. "You know that when you sight them, in a split second you'll have to make a decision whether to defend yourself, and there will be consequences."



This rhino and her calf were killed by poachers at the Finfoot Lake Reserve in South Africa in 2012.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL BORN, THE TIMES/GALLO IMAGES VIA GETTY

Steadfast Commitment

"Many who become game rangers go into it knowing that the position goes with many dangers of wild animals, dehydration, irritating insects, never mind the poachers—and most are the type of tough personality that can handle the rigors of the job," says Kevin Bewick, head of the [Anti-Poaching Intelligence Group of Southern Africa](#).

A recent ranger recruitment drive for Virunga yielded 1,800 applicants for 112 spots, despite the high death toll in the park during the past decade. For many, the attraction is the promise of a job, but that's not the only, or even the main, factor.

"Being a ranger was not a choice but a calling," says Stephen Midzi, whose base is Shangoni Post in Kruger. "I was born for this, so had to fulfill what has already been written in my book of life." Zakouma's Ndotoingar says simply, "I'm proud of my work." "Not a single guy has quit," SANParks' Jooste notes, adding that without the rangers like Midzi, poaching statistics would be a lot worse. "Look what would happen if we weren't here."



Rangers gather before going on patrol in Zakouma National Park in 2014.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCO LONGARI, AFP/GETTY

Psychological Challenges

Rangers deal with the stress of their work in many ways. Some use sport—running or soccer. Others simply accept it. "I try to challenge myself," says Zakouma radio operator Hadj Tadio. "I chose the business, and I knew that the worst awaits me."

"I've seen exactly 409 dead elephants to date," says [Richard Ruggiero](#), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Branch Chief for Asia and Africa, who regularly works on the front lines with rangers. "My only recourse now is to try hard to stop thinking about how I feel. It's an indulgence that only leads to more heartbreak, anger, and frustration. So I just plunge forward."

Others obtain solace from the place they love. Kruger's Midzi puts it this way: "To sit among a pride of lions and hear them roar in synchrony, that's a moment that always renews my energy."

Although no studies exist on how rangers in anti-poaching units are affected by repeated exposure to disturbing situations, the trauma suffered by soldiers in war zones may offer the closest proxy.

A 2010 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs guide warned families of "combat stress" among returning service members and listed their experiences, which are similar to those faced by rangers: Most U.S. troops serving in Iraq (in 2006) were attacked or ambushed (60 percent); received incoming fire (86 percent); were shot at (50 percent); discharged a weapon (36 percent); saw dead bodies or remains (63 percent); and knew someone seriously injured or killed (79 percent). It was noted that these types of ordeals can provoke a range of reactions, such as sleeplessness, agitation, anger, anxiety, and depression.

SANParks requires that whenever rangers engage directly with poachers, they see a psychologist. "This is a guerilla warfare situation being fought by men and women trained to protect animals and not trained to kill," says Rethea Fincham, a clinical psychologist who treats rangers at Kruger.

She worries that when pushed too far, rangers could become a risk to themselves or others. Post-traumatic stress can provoke symptoms such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, or avoidance, which in turn could cause an elevated fright response. The danger: A ranger shoots unnecessarily, or hesitates to shoot when necessary, endangering himself or his colleagues.

Self-medication, too, with alcohol or cannabis can lead to potentially dangerous reactions on the job.



After having to leave Virunga National Park because of fighting in the region, 120 courageous rangers joyfully returned in November 2008.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT STIRTION, GETTY

Community Support

On May 11 conservancy ranger Ltadamwa Lardagos of the [Northern Rangelands Trust](#) was killed on the slopes of Mount Kenya in a battle with a band of cattle raiders who had evaded law enforcement for days. Although the men escaped, villagers reported their movements to Lardagos's unit, and his team apprehended his killer later that day.

The trust's anti-poaching teams, with members nominated by their communities and representing each of the three ethnic groups in the area, patrol conservancies in northern Kenya to prevent livestock theft, which exacerbates ethnic tensions and is increasingly linked to ivory poaching. As a result of the patrols, the number of poached elephants in community conservancies decreased from 108 in 2012 to 45 in 2013.

On May 23, Zambia's [Liuwa Plain National Park](#) head ranger [Dexter Chilunda was killed by poachers](#). People in the local community quickly stepped forward with crucial information that led to the arrest of two suspects and the recovery of both Chilundu's rifle and the shotgun used to murder him.

Community backing has even helped turn some poachers into conservationists. "When I was a poacher, I was seen as somebody who was just a drunk," says Kenyan Sammy Manthi of Kidong'u Village, who now works as a community ranger with [Tsavo Pride](#), an organization of former poachers that aims to create alternative livelihoods in villages around Tsavo West National Park. "Now that I am a ranger, I am a respected member of my community."



An orphaned lowland gorilla settles down for the night with her caregiver, a specially trained ranger, in April 2008 in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT STIRTION, GETTY

More Help Needed

"These men are really taking the strain," says psychologist Fincham. "In order to keep them in this fight, more of the finances given for rhino poaching needs to go into the maintenance of the men at grassroots level."

Many rangers lack proper training and equipment, even the most basic gear such as boots or first aid kits. And when something goes wrong—someone is injured, or worse—there's little support for the families.

Ranger work is so hard, the International Ranger Foundation's Willmore says, "you'd think they might pull back, but they don't. It's unbelievable that they go out. Imagine the difference when we do the positive side. Imagine how much more effective they could be with support and equipment."

Lardagos, 36, left behind a wife and two young children. Virunga's Buzara, 29, was the father of three, and Chilunda, the father of four.

Wives and husbands have to cope not only with losing a spouse or parent but also with losing their income and housing (which goes to replacements), and they often can't afford to send their children to school.

For the rangers themselves, knowing that if they get hurt, their families will suffer, lowers morale. "When you start supporting widows and orphans, those still alive think people do care," says Willmore. "It has a huge impact on the rangers and goes a long way to motivating them."

So far, Willmore's Thin Green Line Foundation has given financial support to a hundred families, with a thousand more lined up for help. [African Parks Network](#)—an NGO that, in partnership with governments, runs seven national parks in six countries (Zambia, Malawi, DRC, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Chad)—provides a life insurance policy that pays widows the equivalent of three years' salary. In some cases, as with Lardagos's family, private donations are providing critical support.

Strong laws and meaningful prosecutions with harsh penalties (more than just a slap on the wrist) also send a message to rangers that their work counts.

In November 2011, two rangers spotted a Mozambican poaching gang in South Africa's Ndumo Game Reserve tracking a white rhino and ordered the men to lower their weapons. Instead, the men pointed their bolt-action rifles at the rangers, who fired, killing one poacher, Erasmo Mazivele. The rangers apprehended another, Wawito Mawala.

When the case came to court in June 2013, the outcome was stunning: Mawala was convicted of murdering his accomplice—even though it was the rangers who shot him. The magistrate stated that Mawala knowingly put his accomplice in that dangerous situation.

Make Targeting Kingpins a Priority

It's vital to root out corruption and arrest ringleaders at the top of the supply chain—otherwise, when poachers are caught, new ones simply replace them.

On its Facebook page in May, the [Game Rangers Association of Africa](#) noted that of the 96 rhino poaching arrests made in the first four months of 2014 in South Africa, all were low-level poachers, not kingpins or even mid-level operators.

In March, renowned conservationist and former Kenya Wildlife Service director [Richard Leakey](#) said that those behind the poaching in Kenya are protected by influential government officials, and he called on President Uhuru Kenyatta to take action.

Paula Kahumbu, CEO of [WildlifeDirect](#), and Philip Murgor, former director of public prosecutions in Kenya, [echoed those statements](#), noting the alleged involvement of an MP from Central Province, a governor from the Rift Valley, and two Mombasa businessmen.

Meanwhile, Kenya Television Network's [Dennis Onsarigo](#) reported that "the country has only 11 kingpins behind the country's largest onslaught on rhinos and elephants" and that they "are known to authorities."

"Put yourself in the shoes of an honest ranger," says Andrea Crosta, the founder of [Elephant Action League](#) and [WildLeaks](#). "Think about the increased motivation if law enforcement could bust those high up in the ivory supply chain."

Until that happens, how many more animals—and people—will die?