

## SHORT COMMUNICATION: SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING OF RANGERS

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### ABSTRACT

Rangers are on the frontline of conservation, providing a crucial service to nature – and humanity. Many of them face difficult and dangerous situations on a regular basis. They may encounter poachers and other criminal and potentially armed groups while on patrol, support rescue missions, fight fires or prevent wildlife from damaging crops, thus risking and sometimes even losing their lives. Despite these dangers and hardships, the provisions in place to safeguard their interests and safety often fall short of providing meaningful response and protection and they lack the same acknowledgement other frontline workers receive. The ‘Principles for Safeguarding the Rights and Well-being of Rangers’ were developed in an effort to contribute towards the improvement of the situation rangers face around the world and to provide clear standards for practitioners and decision-makers to guide policy and action. Guidance and tools for the implementation of the principles were also developed to help close the gap between theory and practice.

**Key words:** safeguards, protected and conserved areas, human rights

### INTRODUCTION

Rangers play a crucial role as nature’s first responders. They are known by different titles and are defined by the International Ranger Federation (IRF) as individuals or groups of individuals working in protected and conserved areas and wider land- and seascapes that are responsible for safeguarding nature and cultural and historical heritage as well as for protecting the rights and well-being of present and future generations (IRF, 2021).

The ranger profession demands a multitude of skills and an extensive understanding of the environmental and socio-cultural landscape in which they operate. At the same time, ranger jobs can be dangerous, and death in the line of duty is not rare within the ranger workforce: between 2006 and 2021, an estimated 1,535 rangers have lost their lives (Galliers et al., 2022). All too often rangers lack adequate equipment, support and recognition, and do not have the means to ensure their rights and well-being are respected (e.g. Anagnostou et al., 2022; Belecky et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2020; WWF, 2022).

Misconduct by rangers towards communities or individuals has been an issue of considerable concern that has damaged the reputation of the workforce and undermined the overall approaches adopted by conservation projects and protected area authorities (e.g. Duffy et al., 2019; Tauli-Corpuz et al., 2020). However, while a lot of attention is paid to such cases and there has been a strong international response, including the creation of a ‘Code of Conduct’ (CoC) by the IRF, the perilous situation of rangers themselves often gets overlooked and they find themselves lacking the appropriate working conditions and respect that other essential frontline workers, such as police officers and firefighters, receive (Galliers et al., 2022; Stolton et al., 2023; WWF, 2016, 2019).

In light of this, there is a need to ensure that the rights of rangers are also safeguarded. Social safeguards are a set of standards, policies, mechanisms and compliance systems that aim to prevent and mitigate harm to people and their environment and to offer compensation to those affected by conservation activities and other development interventions. The ‘Principles

for Safeguarding the Rights and Well-being of Rangers' and accompanying guidance were designed to be part of this broader social safeguards umbrella, providing a framework for and connecting existing efforts to improve the lives of rangers and ensure that they are, and feel, safe and supported.

To understand the gaps that needed to be filled by the principles and accompanying guidance, an initial literature review was conducted. Based on this review, two scoping workshops were held in March and May 2022 by Asesoramiento Ambiental Estratégico (AAE) and the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA) to shed further light on the needs in safeguarding provisions for rangers. The workshops included practitioners working with and supporting rangers, such as experts in environmental and social (E&S) safeguards and human rights and employees from the ranger workforce itself. The insights gained during this process informed the development of the principles and guidance (Barrueco et al., 2023; Iraola et al., 2023).

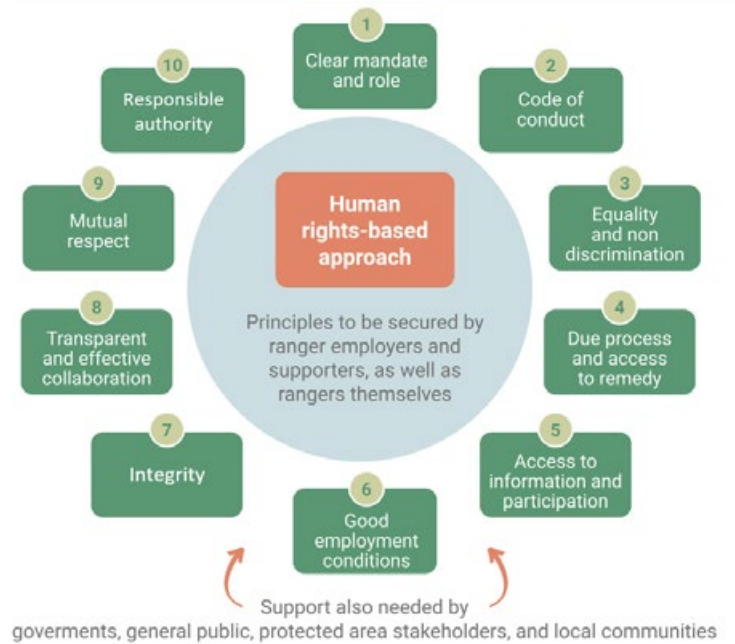
## THE PRINCIPLES FOR SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING OF RANGERS

The following ten principles (see Figure 1) seek to achieve the aim of creating a motivated ranger workforce that places human rights at the heart of their operations and fosters trust with vulnerable individuals and groups they come into contact with. The human rights approach on which the principles are based involves: 1) proactively preventing or, if not possible, minimising situations where the safety of rangers or those they interact with could be compromised, and 2) reactively addressing instances in which rangers or people they interact with did not feel safeguarded.

It is important to recognise that no one principle alone will achieve this aim. Instead, these principles are interconnected, with each one offering contributions that collectively support their realisation. While rangers, whether officially employed or working as volunteers, are the focus of the principles, this aim can only be achieved with the support of all stakeholders, including governments, organisations employing or supporting rangers, local communities and the general public.

### Ensuring rangers have a clear mandate and role

Rangers can find themselves in situations where lives are potentially at stake and therefore need clarity on how to identify their responsibilities and respond during emergencies. Lack of clarity on mandate (authority to act in a particular way) and role (position or purpose of an employee) as well as lack of adequate training can have



**Figure 1.** The Principles for Safeguarding the Rights and Well-being of Rangers, with a human rights-based approach at the centre (Source: Iraola et al., 2023).

severe consequences (i.e. result in injuries or even death if they suffer accidents or attacks, or in civil and criminal proceedings and/or penalties if they act wrongfully or negligently).

Organisations employing or supporting rangers can ensure a clear mandate and role through a combination of measures, including conducting a conflict sensitivity analysis, determining the necessary competencies for the job (see, for example, IRF and URSA, 2023), and developing training and education plans according to the specific circumstances of each area. Many rangers face difficult challenges when they are threatened, for example, with violence by poachers or other armed groups, and therefore, adequate training, as well as having clarity on their mandate and role, become essential to ensure they are well prepared to face such challenges. Where rangers are expected to carry firearms (e.g. in areas where poachers might be present), psychological and technical assessment checks for job suitability and comprehensive training in the use of weapons ought to be implemented.

### Acting within and respecting the Code of Conduct

A well-developed Code of Conduct (CoC) encourages a disciplined and empowered workforce that maintains high standards of practice and ethics. It also provides valuable guidance to rangers, ranger employers and conservation organisations supporting rangers to make better work decisions and promotes the implementation of globally accepted best practices.



Salome Idoitze, the first female ranger in Georgia (Tusheti Protected Areas). © Paata Vardanashvili

Employers and organisations should first analyse the need for a CoC, and if one has already been developed, assess and benchmark it against IRF's CoC to ensure that the highest standards are met. Effective communication and awareness-raising of the need for a CoC is also very important to ensure buy-in, as is making the necessary adjustments to meet specific practical and institutional needs and requirements.

### **Securing equality and non-discrimination**

Discrimination and unequal treatment are unfortunately not uncommon within the ranger workforce. Apart from suffering from sexual and labour harassment, women also face disparity in employment and promotion opportunities, fuelled mainly by gender stereotypes. To date, it is estimated that women constitute only 3–11 per cent of the ranger workforce (Seager, 2021).

Actions to promote equality and respect in the ranger workforce include carrying out systematic training for rangers on all aspects of discrimination; developing and/or improving protocols against all forms of discrimination, abuse and violence (including sexual harassment and gender-based violence) and ensuring the proper implementation of such protocols; and having policies in place that ensure that equality is guaranteed for hiring, promotion and remuneration.

### **Ensuring due process and access to effective remedy (judicial and non-judicial)**

Rangers, just like everyone else, should have access to due process in the event that they are accused of misbehaviour, and to effective remedy in case they are wronged or are involved in accidents during work operations. Grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) play a crucial role in the process of obtaining due

process and eventually remedy, and should operate as open and transparent procedures for all parties while handling confidential information in a satisfactory manner. Adequate legal assistance (e.g. in the form of a legal regulatory body) and systems that safeguard rangers against unfair accusation and treatment are also needed to ensure rangers are cleared of unsubstantiated allegations with no further negative consequences for them. In cases where accusations are proven true, it is vital to have a fair process that leads to fines and/or penalties proportionate to the wrongdoing.

### **Enabling access to information and participation**

Establishing trust within the sector, as well as between rangers and the people they come into contact with, can be facilitated by ensuring that everyone feels well-informed and listened to. Therefore, it is crucial to provide accessible, comprehensive and timely information to rangers, including regarding their rights, avenues for legal support, availability of medical support in case of emergencies and access to the GRM in the event of witnessing misconduct or experiencing unfair treatment. It is also important to go beyond the mere sharing of information and increase ranger participation in decision-making processes affecting their working conditions, role and mandate.

### **Supporting ranger welfare through good employment conditions**

A good working environment, including good employment conditions, is essential to ensure a professionalised and efficient workforce. Unfortunately, these conditions are frequently not met in the ranger workforce. According to Belecky et al. (2019 and 2021), out of 6,241 rangers that participated in a survey from 28 countries, less than half (46.6 per cent) reported



Polisin'ala, community patrollers near Antenina in Ambaro Bay, Ambilobe, Madagascar. © Nick Riley / WWF-Madagascar

having access to paid sick leave, roughly one-third (33.7 per cent) said they had life insurance and only 48.3 per cent answered affirmatively when asked if the medical treatment provided was adequate when needed.

It should be ensured that rangers have a minimum acceptable remuneration, are paid on time, receive payment while on holiday, family or sick leave, and are provided with life and health insurance. It should also be guaranteed that all rangers have basic equipment and that well-defined procedures are established so that the workforce feel adequately equipped and supported while on duty. Supporting the mental health of the workforce is also a must and can be done by providing a proper work/life balance and psychological support, if needed.

### **Promoting integrity in the ranger workforce**

Integrity is a desirable characteristic of any employee, and while part of it may come with personality, it can also be actively promoted. Superiors and organisations employing rangers can play a key role by leading by example, demonstrating strong moral principles and showing respect, appreciation and support for all members of the workforce. Having a robust recruitment and selection process in place can also help guarantee that rangers enter the profession with the right values and level of integrity. Additional measures can include establishing an oversight body and a reporting mechanism for rangers, implementing background checks and well-being plans, actively and openly including ranger unions and associations in any

anti-corruption measures, and providing access to an independent, fair and safe whistleblowing mechanism.

### **Fostering transparent and effective collaboration**

Encouraging transparency and collaboration is key, as is finding solutions to ranger–community problems with an understanding of the community's needs and efforts and its capacity to partner in conservation. This can be actively promoted by ensuring rangers have an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural context of the community they will be operating in and understand the factors that may limit effective collaboration, in particular grievances over territory, rights and previous abuse. Establishing channels of communication and response systems (including associated training) in order to anticipate and mitigate any possible conflict and crisis is also important.

### **Building and consolidating mutual respect**

Rangers are expected to demonstrate respect in many ways, including towards the law, the CoC, and the views and interests of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) and other vulnerable groups. However, a case can be made for how they themselves are not always treated with respect, as they can sometimes be subject to verbal and even physical abuse from both colleagues, local community members and visitors.

An internal policy or guidelines setting the terms for adequate behaviour at work that emphasise collaborative

and respectful relationships is a must-have in any organisation. It is also important to encourage the adoption of practices and attitudes that build trust and respect between rangers and communities (see Stolton et al., 2022), and having operating procedures and training in tolerance, patience and conflict avoidance.

## Conferring and exercising responsible authority

Those in charge must also be able to exercise responsible authority and sound judgement while also delegating authority appropriately to others. Given the nature of the ranger profession, this is particularly important as those in charge need to know how to act and lead those under their responsibility in what can sometimes be very dangerous situations (e.g. encounters with poachers and other armed groups, wildlife attacks or serious accidents). The political realities of protected and conserved areas and lack of proper financing also mean that these areas sometimes face limitations in terms of adequate management, and those responsible should ensure that these constraints do not exacerbate the problems already faced by rangers (see the Convention on Biological Diversity's Programme of Work, Goals 1.4 (especially 1.4.6) and 3.2 (CBD, 2004).

Performing leadership tests and employee evaluations, instituting capacity building programmes for superiors and setting up procedures to monitor whether authority is exercised appropriately are actions that organisations employing rangers can implement to work towards guaranteeing that authority is exercised in a responsible manner. Efforts also need to be made to ensure that superiors are being more proactive in supporting rangers, as rangers are often seen not only as leaders within their communities but also as breadwinners, which can lead to significant pressure to perform.

## CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The principles presented here serve as a guide to protect the rights and interests of rangers and other actors with whom they interact and, as such, are part of a broader social safeguards framework of policies, codes and standards that aim to uphold human rights and achieve transparency, non-discrimination, public participation and accountability, among other goals.

The value and potential beneficial impact of the principles, however, depend on their proper implementation by the relevant authorities. The developed documentation, which includes an accompanying spreadsheet designed as a planning tool, offers more detailed guidance, tools and resources to support an appropriate application of the principles

at different institutional levels. These can be found at <https://www.ursa4rangers.org/ursa4rangers-resources/>

The principles and guidance documents are recent and socialisation of them has only just started. They were presented in a recent IRF Ranger Roundtable Webinar and further outreach opportunities are explored. The medium-term objective is to pilot their implementation in practice, which would allow their further refinement and adjustment over time and thus optimise their impactful implementation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Sara Barrueco** is a Safeguards and Policy Analyst at AAE, where her work has focused mainly on environmental and social standards, risk and impact assessments/due diligence and the development of policy guidance, in particular for the Latin America, Caribbean and Africa regions. Her background is primarily in environmental politics and ethics and climate change.

**María Jesús Iraola** is a geographer who has worked as an environmental consultant for the past eight years specialising in E&S safeguards. She has worked in Latin American and African countries, producing Strategic E&S Impact Assessments, including organising consultations with multiple stakeholders and producing E&S Management Frameworks.

**Monika Bertzky** has almost 20 years' experience in international conservation, with a focus on E&S safeguards/standards, Strategic E&S Assessments, E&S Impact Assessments, E&S Management Frameworks/Plans and other tools for human-rights based conservation. She is a member of the WCPA and of the Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy.

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**Chris Galliers** is the President of the International Ranger Federation, having been on the IRF Committee since 2012.

## SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

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## RESUMEN

Los guardas forestales están en primera línea de la conservación y prestan un servicio crucial a la naturaleza y a la humanidad. Muchos de ellos se enfrentan periódicamente a situaciones difíciles y peligrosas. Pueden encontrarse con cazadores furtivos y otros grupos delictivos y potencialmente armados mientras patrullan, apoyan misiones de rescate, luchan contra incendios o evitan que la fauna salvaje dañe los cultivos, arriesgando así, y a veces incluso costándoles, la vida. A pesar de estos peligros y adversidades, las disposiciones vigentes para salvaguardar sus intereses y su seguridad a menudo se quedan cortas a la hora de ofrecer una respuesta y una protección significativas, y carecen del mismo reconocimiento que reciben otros trabajadores de primera línea. Los “Principios para Salvaguardar los Derechos y el Bienestar de los Guardaparques” se desarrollaron en un esfuerzo por contribuir a la mejora de la situación a la que se enfrentan los guardaparques en todo el mundo y proporcionar normas claras para los profesionales y los responsables de la toma de decisiones para orientar la política y la acción. También se elaboraron orientaciones y herramientas para la aplicación de los principios con el fin de ayudar a cerrar la brecha entre la teoría y la práctica.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les gardes forestiers sont en première ligne de la conservation, fournissant un service crucial à la nature - et à l'humanité. Nombre d'entre eux sont régulièrement confrontés à des situations difficiles et dangereuses. Ils peuvent rencontrer des braconniers et d'autres groupes criminels et potentiellement armés au cours de leurs patrouilles, participer à des missions de sauvetage, lutter contre les incendies ou empêcher les animaux sauvages d'endommager les cultures, ce qui risque de leur coûter la vie et parfois même la leur. Malgré ces dangers et ces difficultés, les dispositions en place pour protéger leurs intérêts et leur sécurité sont souvent loin d'apporter une réponse et une protection significatives, et ils ne bénéficient pas de la même reconnaissance que les autres travailleurs de première ligne. Les “Principes pour la sauvegarde des droits et du bien-être des rangers” ont été élaborés dans le but de contribuer à l'amélioration de la situation des rangers dans le monde et de fournir des normes claires aux praticiens et aux décideurs afin de guider les politiques et les actions. Des conseils et des outils pour la mise en œuvre des principes ont également été développés pour aider à combler le fossé entre la théorie et la pratique.