

Plea to support Africa's game rangers as conflict spreads to more parks

The Game Rangers Association of Africa is calling on governments, funders and conservation groups to lend more support to wildlife rangers across the continent following an increasing number of attacks involving armed militia groups.



Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife anti-poaching rangers patrol a remote section of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve. (Photo: Project Rhino)

Game rangers in many parts of Africa say they are facing some of the most challenging times in decades, partly due to the increasing presence of armed militias, along with illegal miners, loggers and bushmeat hunters.

The [Game Rangers Association of Africa](#) says more than 30 protected wildlife areas across the continent are now “severely affected” as armed extremists, separatists and organised crime groups expand in scale and sophistication.

The call to provide more support to rangers follows a series of attacks on rangers in northern Mozambique, South Sudan, northern Nigeria, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and the W-Arly-Pendjari park in Benin.

“In the wake of these attacks, many areas are experiencing sharp increases in illegal mining, logging and bushmeat poaching, as insecurity takes hold. Africa’s protected areas harbour valuable natural resources that are increasingly targeted to fund, feed and shelter extremist, militia and criminal networks, driving widespread ecological degradation and deepening insecurity for both nature and the communities who depend on it,” the association said on 23 January.

These recent attacks include the killing of [five forest rangers](#) in the Oyo National Park in western Nigeria; at least two game scouts shot dead in the [Niassa Special Reserve](#) in northern Mozambique and the disappearance of [four rangers ambushed in Lantoto National Park](#) in South Sudan.



Kruger National Park rangers pay tribute to fallen colleagues during a World Ranger Day event near Skukuza camp in July 2022. (Photo: SANParks)

Elaborating on its recent statement of concern, Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) chief executive Louise de Bruin told Daily Maverick that there had been a steady increase in incidents that went beyond the “everyday” dangers rangers faced, such as attacks by armed poachers.

“At the association’s third African Ranger Congress in Kenya in September last year, we dedicated a lot of focus on protected areas that are becoming conflict zones and what that means for rangers, bringing rangers from across Africa together to get their insights and experiences.

“From that, we held a workshop in November to discuss this further, and our recent statement aims to highlight this serious issue because support is needed now more than ever before,” she said.

Apart from the immediate threat to lives, rangers and wildlife managers also faced a combination of pressures, including chronic trauma, persistent uncertainty and repeated exposure to violence that was placing immense strain on their mental health and wellbeing.

“Rangers are not soldiers. They are guardians of peace, protectors of ecosystems and vital partners to communities living alongside wildlife... The GRAA stands with them and urges the global conservation community to do the same – to ensure that those who risk everything to protect Africa’s wild places receive the protection, respect and support they deserve.”

The association also acknowledged the risks of “the creeping militarisation of ranger roles without the necessary training or safeguards”.

“Training gaps remain significant, with many rangers unprepared for the demands of high-risk conflict contexts that require specific skills in conflict awareness, negotiation, trauma care and human rights.

“These realities are poorly understood at the global level, leading to policy and financial responses that fall short of the scale and urgency of the challenge. Donor hesitancy – or full support withdrawal – from high-risk conflict landscapes leaves frontline teams dangerously undersupported at the moment they need help most.”

While funders may fear funding areas where human rights abuses could occur, withdrawing support exposed rangers and the communities and landscapes they protect to far greater human rights violations at the hands of extremists and armed groups, the association asserted.

In addition to increasing security threats, many ranger teams lacked basic resources – vehicles, communications systems, protective equipment, adequate staffing and reliable funding, while also grappling with rising costs for fuel, logistics and security.

A [study by the International Ranger Federation](#) in 2022 found that more than 40% of all on-duty ranger deaths since 2006 were due to “felonious deaths such as homicide”, with the remaining deaths due to accident, illness, wildlife attack or drowning. Africa and Asia had the highest number of ranger deaths in the world, accounting for 80.3% of overall total deaths between 2006 and 2021.

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