

Protecting our protectors: The need for improved ranger welfare

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Zoonotic diseases such as Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and now COVID-19 have claimed millions of human lives (Jones *et al.*, 2008). Some of the biggest contributing factors to the emergence of zoonotic diseases are land-use change (especially that resulting from intensified agriculture together with habitat destruction), the trade in wildlife and wild meat consumption (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021). The emergence of zoonotic diseases is just one of the consequences of these human activities. The loss of habitat and unregulated direct exploitation of wildlife are also major contributing factors to the widespread loss of biodiversity around the world; bird, amphibian, mammal, reptile and fish populations have plummeted 68% in just 50 years (WWF, 2020).

The primary mechanism to protect wildlife from exploitation in most countries is protected and conserved areas such as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and community reserves. These play a measurable and significant role in preventing land-use change and thus reduce the risk of emerging zoonotic diseases (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021) and biodiversity loss (Gray *et al.*, 2016). The effectiveness of these protected and conserved areas vary (Leverington *et al.*, 2010) but sufficient and well trained frontline staff is a key requirement for

effective protection from threats such as poaching (Moore *et al.*, 2018). As the frontline staff, rangers are the primary deterrence to illegal activities within these areas. Rangers also fulfil many other roles – including land management, working with local communities, monitoring wildlife and human activities, providing environmental education and enforcing relevant laws.

Despite this vital and difficult role, the ranger profession is one fraught with risk, and often little reward. Working condition surveys completed by rangers across three continents (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) and 26 countries have provided further weight to this assertion (Figure 1; Belecky *et al.*, 2019). The official death toll of rangers is also telling in this regard, with at least 1,312 rangers losing their lives while on duty between 2009 and 2021 around the world (International Ranger Federation, 2021). Thirty-nine per cent of these cases were homicide followed by other causes such as attacks from wildlife, accidents and occupational-related illnesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has further devastated the workforce, with nearly 500 rangers losing their lives to the disease between July 2020 and May 2021 (International Ranger Federation, 2021). Despite the dangers and importance of their work, approximately half of surveyed rangers reported not having access to adequate shelter, uniforms or boots.¹ The health, hygiene and other welfare conditions of rangers is also substandard. Of those surveyed, 57% never or rarely had access to clean drinking water on patrol, 49% did not have access to clean drinking water at ranger stations and 44% lacked access to a toilet. These dangers and poor hygiene conditions are further compounded by an apparent lack of medical

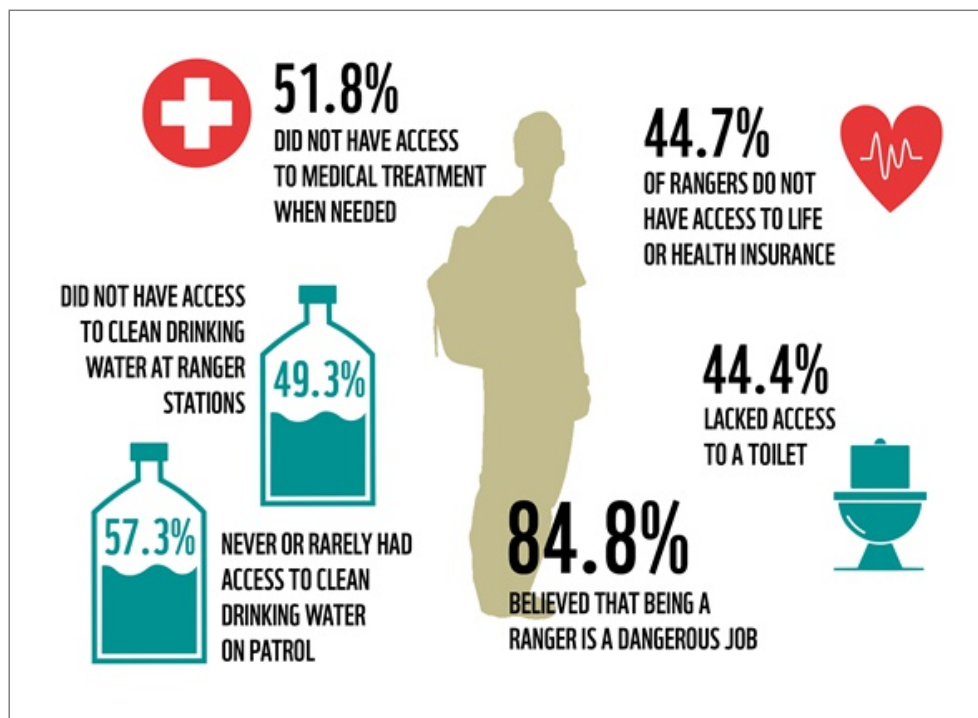


Figure 1. Key results from the world’s most comprehensive survey of rangers spanning three continents and 26 countries, highlighting the working conditions rangers face on a regular basis. Data from Belecky *et al.* (2019).

treatment and medical and life insurance. Only 48% of rangers reported a belief that the medical treatment available to them, when needed, would be adequate; only 42% stated that their employee insurance scheme provided compensation in case of serious injury on the job; and a mere 38% stated that this scheme included life insurance. Rangers are often the only income-generating member of their immediate families, meaning this final grim statistic has significant consequences for ranger families.

Considered essential workers in many countries, a great number of rangers have continued their work during the pandemic – in some cases, at an increased level of intensity. Because many rangers are government employees, in some countries they are being assigned to support roles in addressing the health crisis. Rangers are being diverted from their normal jobs to distribute food, transport personal protective equipment, conduct international border patrolling to control virus spread, enforce pandemic regulations among local communities, and other pandemic response activities (Singh *et al.*, 2021). These additional activities are potentially adding to what are already excessive working hours, with surveyed rangers working an average of 72 hours per week, a fact undoubtedly harming their physical health (Pega *et al.*, 2021). Many have been cut off from their families for longer than usual due to lockdown measures. A third of surveyed rangers ‘strongly agreed’ that protected area budgets have been adversely affected by the pandemic, negatively impacting their daily activities. More than half of surveyed rangers reported personal impacts such as salary delays and reductions in living conditions, resulting in two-thirds of rangers reporting concerns regarding their financial well-being as a result of the pandemic. 25% of rangers also reported not having access to adequate insurance to cover the treatment of COVID-19 despite having to continue their work, often in close contact with local communities (Singh *et al.*, 2021). It has been assumed by many that rangers will be somewhat protected from virus transmission because the nature of their work often keeps them away from urban social gatherings. This may be the case; however, more than 70% of surveyed rangers expressed concern about contracting the virus at the time of the survey. This reported fear may be due to a perceived difficulty in receiving adequate treatment should they contract the virus.

Rangers are clearly vitally important for the protection and preservation of biodiversity around the world. While their crucial role in addressing our current biodiversity crisis is recognized (although insufficiently so, as evidenced by their poor working conditions) it is becoming ever more clear that rangers are also essential planetary health workers. For humanity to avoid wildlife-borne zoonoses in the future, we need effective protection of wild places and wildlife, in addition to improved regulations, laws and government action on the illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade. Rangers will continue to be vital to the delivery of the ‘One Health’ approach, which stipulates that we must work across multiple sectors to achieve better public health outcomes.² The ‘One Health’ approach is critical to addressing health threats in the animal, human and environment interface, and rangers work directly at this interface.

Given this crucial role, it is both necessary – and, we would argue, a moral obligation – to enhance the working conditions of the world’s rangers, including rangers employed in the public sector as well as community and indigenous rangers. In order to achieve the goals of the ‘One Health’ approach and battle the extinction crisis, we need a professional and well-supported ranger workforce. For the sake of wildlife, the wider human population and rangers themselves, we must work to ensure their welfare. Steps are currently being taken. The recent formation of the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA) – a collaboration between some of the world’s largest conservation organizations – is a step in the right direction (see <https://www.ursa4rangers.org/>). Through their action plan, URSA aims to enable and advocate for better training, support, safety and equality for rangers, which in turn enhances recognition of their work and supports their capacity to build trusted relationships with communities and other stakeholders. Close cooperation between environmental non-governmental organizations, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and World Health Organization (WHO), should also pave the way to a better future for rangers. The ongoing development of occupational safety and health guidelines and ranger welfare guidelines are examples of positive steps towards a better protected ranger workforce. While momentum is generating, we must ensure that we continue and expand the effort to support rangers, to protect the world’s wildlife and ourselves.

Notes

- 1 All survey data in this and the following paragraph are from Belecky *et al.* (2019).
- 2 Two useful accounts of the ‘One Health’ concept and its history are Gibbs (2014) and Destoumieux-Garzón *et al.* (2018).

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