

# Militarised Conservation: “Paramilitary Rangers” and the World Wild Life Fund (WWF)

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*Think charity, think vulnerability and its endless well of opportunistic exploitation. Over the years, international charity organisations have been found with employees keen to take advantage of their station. That advantage has been sexual, financial and, in the case of allegations being made about the World Wild Life Fund for Nature, in the nature of inflicting torture on those accused of poaching.*

BuzzFeed, via reporters Tom Warren and Katie J.M. Baker, began the fuss with an [investigative report](#) claiming instances of torture and gross violence on the part of rangers assisted by the charity to combat poaching. It starts with a description of a dying man’s last days, one Shikharam Chaudhary, a farmer who was brutally beaten and tortured by forest rangers patrolling Chitwan National Park in Nepal. Shikharam, it seems, had been singled out for burying a rhinoceros horn in his backyard. The horn proved elusive, but not the unfortunate farmer, who was detained in prison. After nine days, he was dead.

Three park officials including the chief warden were subsequently charged with murder. WWF found itself in a spot, given its long standing role in sponsoring operations by the Chitwan forest rangers. As the BuzzFeed report goes on to [note](#),

“WWF’s staff on the ground in Nepal leaped into action – not to demand justice, but to lobby for the charges to disappear. When the Nepalese government dropped the case months later, the charity declared its victory in the fight against poaching. Then WWF Nepal continued to work closely with the rangers and fund the park as if nothing had happened.”

The report does not hold back, insisting that the alleged murder of the unfortunate Shikharam in 2006 was no aberration.

“It was part of a pattern that persists to this day. In national parks across Asia and Africa, the beloved non-profit with the cuddly panda logo funds, equips, and works directly with paramilitary forces that have been accused of beating, torturing, sexually assaulting, and murdering scores of people.”

The poach wars are a savage business, throwing up confected images of heroes and villains. They do not merely involve the actions of protecting animals, but military-styled engagements where fatalities are not uncommon. Anti-poaching has become a mission heralded by the romantically inclined as indispensable, its agents to be celebrated. Desperate local conditions are conveniently scrubbed out in any descriptions: there are only the noble rangers battling animal murderers.

The Akashinga, for instance, are an anti-poaching enterprise of 39 women operating in Zimbabwe who featured with high praise in a [report](#) from the ABC in October last year. Who are the victims, apart from the animals they protect? There is little doubt in the minds of the reporters: the women themselves, victims of assault, many single mothers from Nyamakate. Laud them, respect their mission.

It is clear is that these women are feted warriors, armed and given appropriate training. They “undergo military-style training in unarmed combat, camouflage and concealment, search and arrest, as well as leadership and conservation ethics.” Their source of encouragement and support is Damien Mander, formerly a military sniper and founder of the International Anti-Poaching Foundation.

Mander’s own laundry list for being a “good anti-poaching ranger”, as featured in an [interview](#) to the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre in 2015, is unvarnished: “A passion for nature, strong paramilitary base, and ability and willingness to work in hostile environments for extended periods of time as part of a team.”

The line between the mission of charity and its mutation into one of abuse is tooth fine. In February 2018, *The Times*, assisted by information supplied by whistleblowers, sprung the lid off Oxfam GB workers in Haiti, suggesting that charity workers had received sexual favours for payment in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake. (Nothing like a crisis that breeds opportunity.) It was duly revealed that the organisation had done its level best to conceal the fact. The UK International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt’s [statement](#) to Parliament in February took most issue with the latter. “In such circumstances we must be able to trust organisations not only to do all they can to prevent harm, but to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing when they do occur.”

In the course of its conduct, Oxfam did not, according to Mordaunt, furnish the Charity Commission with a report on the incidents. Nor did the donors receive one. The prosecuting authorities were also left in the dark on the subject.

Defences have been mounted by those working in the aid sector. Mike Aaronson, [writing](#) in August last year, pleaded the case that aid organisations were being unduly singled out, the scape goats of moral outrage and privileged ethics.

“Aid organisations carry a lot of risk, operating in chaotic and stressful environments where in trying to do good they can end up doing harm.”

In condemning them, it was easy to ignore the fact that they had “done most to address the issue”.

The WWF situation, which has moved the matter into the dimension of animal protection and conservation, has hallmarks that are similarly problematic with the humanitarian sector in general. And the reaction of the organisation has also been fairly typical, laden with weasel-worded aspirations.

“At the heart of WWF’s work are places and people who live with them,” an organisation spokesman for WWF UK asserted in [response](#) to the allegations. “Respect for human rights is at the core of our mission.” There were “stringent policies” in place to safeguard “the rights and wellbeing of indigenous people

and local communities in the places we work.”

Students of the broad field of humanitarian ventures [suggest](#) four instances where militarisation takes place. Charities and relief organisations have become proxy extensions in armed conflict (consider Nicaragua and Afghanistan during the 1980s); creatures of embedment (the Red Cross in the World Wars); agents of “self-defence” – consider the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in the twelfth century; and engaged in direct conflict (the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War).

The WWF case suggests a direct connection between the mission of a charitable organisation and its captivation by a dangerous militancy. It has become a sponsor, and concealer, of vigilante action, obviously unabashed in cracking a few skulls in the name of shielding protected species. Along came the networks of informants, surveillance and exploiting local issues. No longer can this be regarded a matter of altruistic engagement in the name of animal conservation; it is a full-fledged sponsorship of a paramilitary operation with all the incidental nastiness such an effort entails.

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