

# Protecting those who protect: rangers and labour rights

Rangers play an indispensable role in the protection of natural resources, ecosystem services, biodiversity and cultural heritage (Singh, *et al.* 2021a). Often described as the ‘guardians of planetary health’, they safeguard natural capital and help maintain the delicate balance between nature and people (Stolton *et al.*, 2023; Singh, *et al.* 2021b). Their work is fundamental to achieving global conservation goal, including the Target 3 of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Stolton *et al.*, 2023). Traditionally focused on ecosystem management, biodiversity conservation, and the protection of cultural heritage, the scope of rangers’ responsibilities has significantly expanded. Today, they are also involved in biodiversity monitoring mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, delivering environmental education, serving as first responders during environmental emergencies, mitigating climate change, engaging with local communities and managing habitat and tourism (Singh *et al.*, 2021a; Singh *et al.*, 2021b; IRE, 2021; Werner, Singh, Galliers, 2024).

Despite the critical importance of their work, many rangers continue to face precarious and challenging working conditions. These include limited institutional capacity, inadequate training and support, unequal access to professional opportunities, and a general lack of representation and recognition – all while operating in hazardous and high-risk environments (IRE, 2024; Rerolle, *et al.* 2024; Lebon *et al.*, 2022; Wyatt, *et al.*, 2022; Belecky, *et al.* 2019). Although the fundamental principles of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) are intended to safeguard the rights and welfare of all workers, these protections are not adequately extended to rangers, as they are not recognised as distinct profession within the Environment Protection Professional. This lack of formal recognition not only undermines efforts to professionalise the ranger workforce but also exacerbates vulnerabilities, significantly compromising their safety, well-being, and long-term effectiveness (Anagnostou *et al.*, 2022).

The recognition and enforcement of labour rights for rangers-grounded in fundamental principles of decent work-are essential for the effective delivery of conservation and biodiversity protection outcomes. Rangers should be formally acknowledged by governments as essential workers, comparable to police or other first responders, given their critical

role in safeguarding ecosystem services and natural resources that we all depend on. A safe, equitable, and well-supported working environment contributes to improved morale, which, in turn, enhances workforce productivity and effectiveness (Ilesanmi, 2016). The provision of fair pay, the enforcement of work-life balance, and promotion of equality and non-discrimination are vital measures to reduce turnover and enhance performance across ranger forces (IRE, 2024a; IRE, 2024b).

Safety standards are also of paramount importance, as rangers often operate in remote, physically and mentally demanding environments and sometimes in conflict-prone areas (Galliers, *et al.* 2022). Inadequate safety provisions have led to disproportionately high rates of injury and mortality, undermining not only the individual rangers’ welfare but also the broader conservation capacities of the institutions they serve (IRE, 2024a; Galliers, *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, the institutionalisation of labour rights can play a transformative role in making the profession more inclusive, particularly by encouraging greater participation of women in the ranger workforce-an important step shown to improve conservation outcomes and team effectiveness (Elligson *et al.*, 2023; James *et al.*, 2021; Seager, 2021). As the global conservation community aims to meet ambitious biodiversity targets such as Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the ranger workforce will need to grow by a factor of five within the next five years to meet minimum capacity requirements (Appleton, *et al.* 2022). Ensuring fair labour conditions will be a prerequisite to achieving this scale and sustaining a capable, motivated, and resilient workforce.

## At Risk While Protecting Nature: The State of Ranger Working Conditions

Rangers often operate in unsafe and high-risk environments, often for low wages, poor employment terms and with excessive working hours (IRE, 2024a; Belecky, *et al.* 2019). They are exposed to life-threatening encounters with poachers, wildlife, and natural disasters, yet they are rarely provided with adequate support systems (Galliers, *et al.* 2022). The ILO has identified the ranger sector as one requiring special protection due to the prevalence of workplace violence (ILO, 2022). Additionally, the ranger workforce remains hugely inequitable, with women, indigenous people, and local communities significantly underrepresented. Female rangers, in particular, face systemic barriers

Rangers should be formally acknowledged as essential workers with a critical role in safeguarding ecosystem services and natural resources that we all depend on

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including sexism, exclusion from decision-making, and inadequate gender appropriate facilities (Belecky *et al.*, 2019; Seager, 2021).

A significant barrier to improving ranger welfare is the lack of recognition of the wider role rangers play as planetary health workers. In 27 percent of countries, rangers are not officially acknowledged as an essential workers, despite their critical role (IRF, 2024a). As a result, rangers often lack essential labour protection including the right to collective bargaining. In many contexts (51.9 percent), rangers do not have access to associations or unions for various reasons, including legal restrictions in their countries and a lack of awareness about the value of ranger associations (Belecky *et al.*, 2019).

Recognition of rangers as essential workers at the national level and formally acknowledging their vital role in nature conservation and climate mitigation is key to building a professional, well-supported workforce capable of delivering on ambitious global conservation and sustainability targets (Stolton *et al.*, 2023; IRF, 2024b), and will require coordinated support from the labour institutions such as ILO and national labour ministries.

Integrating Rangers into the Global Labour Rights Frameworks

There are already numerous labour standards and conventions that can serve to safeguard the labour rights of rangers.

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ILO Standard	Purpose	Relevance to Rangers
Convention No. 1 (1919) on Hours of Work	Limits excessive working hours, ensuring adequate rest periods.	Rangers often work unreasonable hours, sometimes up to 72 hours per week (Wyatt <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
Convention No. 87 (1948) on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise	Enables rangers to form unions and collectively bargain for better working conditions.	51.9 percent rangers do not have access to unions / associations that can collectively bargain on their behalf (Belecky <i>et al.</i> , 2019).
Convention No. 95 (1949) on Protection of Wages	Ensures sufficient wages, addressing concerns of underpayment.	Many rangers are underpaid, making wage protection crucial. The average monthly salary of a ranger is less than half of a police officer (Stolton <i>et al.</i> , 2023). Still 27.7 percent rangers across Asia, Africa and South America are working under temporary or no contracts (Belecky <i>et al.</i> , 2019).
Convention No. 131 (1970) on Minimum Wage Fixing	Creates fair wage policies to prevent worker exploitation.	37 percent of rangers earn below a life-sustaining wage (IRF, 2024a).
Convention No. 155 (1981) on Occupational Safety and Health	Mandates workplace safety measures to protect workers from hazards.	Rangers operate in high-risk environments with limited resources, making workplace safety a critical concern. Basic human necessities are often lacking – 60 percent of rangers do not have access to clean water while on duty (IRF, 2024). Many are also without first aid kits and have not received any first aid training. Furthermore, only 62 percent of rangers report having received adequate training to perform their duties safely and effectively (Galliers <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
Convention No. 190 (2019) on Violence and Harassment	Protects workers from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence.	Women make up only 3–11 percent of the global ranger workforce, with some countries reporting no female representation at all (Seager <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Belecky <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2020).
Recommendation No. 202 (2012) on Social Protection Floors	Ensures basic social protection, including health care and income security.	This is particularly critical given the high number of injuries and fatalities among rangers. Between 2006 and 2021, at least 2,351 on-duty ranger deaths were recorded (Galliers <i>et al.</i> , 2022). Additionally, 51.8 percent of rangers reported lacking access to medical treatment when needed, and 45 percent do not have access to insurance or compensation in the event of injury or death (IRF, 2024).
Recommendation No. 204 (2015) on the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy	Supports informal workers, such as indigenous people and local communities, transitioning to formal employment.	Rangers are not solely state employees; the profession encompasses a diverse workforce that includes volunteers, Indigenous peoples, and members of local communities. Relevant labour conventions could play a crucial role in supporting the transition of these groups toward formal employment or, at the very least, official recognition.

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A ranger drinks water from a stream using a leaf. © Daniel Nelson/WWF

## The Way Forward: Strengthening Rangers' Labour Rights

Rangers are the backbone of global conservation efforts, yet their labour rights remain overlooked in many parts of the world. Formal recognition through secure employment contracts, fair wages, legal protection, and institutional support is critical to ensuring their safety, well-being, and sustained engagement in conservation. It is imperative that governments and intergovernmental bodies acknowledge rangers as essential planetary health workers and meaningfully involve them and their representative organisations – in the development, implementation and evaluation of relevant policies. Collaborative efforts by national agencies, and conservation organisations are needed to establish, and enforce legal frameworks that guarantee the rights and protections of rangers. Such actions are not only a matter of justice but are also fundamental to strengthening global biodiversity conservation efforts (Stolton *et al.*, 2023).

The *Hyères Ranger Declaration* (IRF, 2024b), a triennial framework, developed and endorsed by rangers themselves, outlines critical priorities for strengthening the profession and underscores the urgent need for its recognition and support as an essential pillar of global biodiversity conservation and climate action. The declaration calls for:

- Fair and safe working conditions aligned with international labour standards.
- Legal protection and recognition of rangers in line with the human rights framework.
- Acknowledgment of rangers as first responders in natural disasters.
- Inclusion of rangers in global biodiversity and climate policy dialogue and decision-making process.

Governments have to officially recognise rangers as an essential workforce within their environment and labour policies (Stolton *et al.*, 2023). Establishing regulated labour standards will help ensure fair wages and provide rangers with the rights to advocate for improved working conditions. Further, integrating ranger specific provisions into national biodiversity strategies will strengthen institutional support and promote long-term sustainability.

Ensuring the occupational safety, health, and well-being of rangers is paramount and requires the implementation of IRF's Global Employment and Welfare Standards, provision of health and safety measures, and access to insurance, along with capacity-building and training aligned with global ranger competences (IRF, 2023). An inclusive and diverse ranger workforce must also be prioritised, with governments and employers committing to increased representation of women, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, supported by gender-sensitive policies such as safe accommodation and targeted welfare measures



(Elligson *et al.*, 2023; James *et al.*, 2021; Seager, 2021). Strengthening institutional and legal protections, including the adoption of the IRF Code of Conduct, mechanisms for reporting in-service deaths and workplace incidents, and the enforcement of laws to prevent exploitation and violence, is also critical (IRF, 2021).

In addition, the right to collective bargaining must be secured. The establishment of ranger unions or associations is essential to enabling rangers to negotiate employment conditions, advocate for occupational safety, and participate in decision-making processes. The international, regional and national labour institutions should support governments in institutionalising ranger labour rights and creating long-term, enforceable protections.

By adopting these policy recommendations, ensuring rights of representation, and aligning national policies with the *Hyères Ranger Declaration*, governments and employers can build a professional, well-supported ranger workforce – capable of effectively safeguarding the planet's natural and cultural heritage while operating under fair, safe, and dignified conditions.

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Establishing regulated labour standards will help ensure fair wages and provide rangers with the rights to advocate for improved working conditions

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Phnong ranger in the kitchen (the home is one big room on stilts – Bedroom, kitchen and family room). Toilets are outside © Ranjan Ramchandani/WWF



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