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# Role of ranger associations in strengthening ranger workforce

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## Abstract

The International Ranger Federation (IRF) is a network of regional, national, and sub-national ranger membership-based professional-worker associations. In this paper, we discuss the significant support that ranger associations receive from rangers across the world. A global ranger association model is presented that builds on the existing structure of IRF, and the relationship between three tiers of association is detailed. For the first time, the roles and responsibilities of the three levels of ranger associations are articulated and the benefits to members presented. Ranger associations can be vehicles for the provision of legitimacy and credibility to the ranger profession, the creation and promotion of a shared global vision of the ranger profession, advocating for members' interests and those of rangers who are not yet members, supply of thought leadership on professional development, and networking, sharing knowledge, and promoting good practices among the world's rangers. In other words, ranger associations are ideally positioned to facilitate the implementation of the white papers presented in this issue if they can build the required capacity, partnerships, and resources to do so.

## Introduction to ranger associations

The growing understanding of the indispensable role that rangers play in protecting the cultural heritage, natural resources, and ecosystem services of the countries in which they work has led to an increased understanding of the need for greater support for rangers. The Promise of Sydney at the 2014 World Park Congress calls on the world to “promote and support recognition of protected area [PA] managers, stewards and custodians from all types of PA as ‘professionals’ through systems and tools for professionalization that strengthen

performance in PA management through competent individuals and effective organizations.”

The first ranger association, formed in 1966, was the Association of National Park Wardens in Peak District national park in the United Kingdom (UK); it included Gordon Miller, who then went on to be a founder and president of IRF. The International Ranger Federation was founded on 31 July 1992 in the UK. The first formal collaboration agreement was signed between the Countryside

Management Association, representing rangers in England and Wales, the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, and the US Association of National Park Rangers. Since then, sub-national, national, and regional ranger associations have been created across the globe, with the number of associations having increased every decade (IRF 2020a). As of September 2020 there are 103 national or sub-national ranger associations from 62 countries registered as either regular, associate, or provisional members of IRF (IRF 2020b). Additionally, regional associations, such as the Game Rangers' Association of Africa (GRAA), Council of Oceania Ranger Associations (CORA), and the Ranger Federation of Asia (RFA), operate across multiple countries.

### **Defining a ranger association**

As per the 2019 IRF constitution, a ranger association can be defined as any “national, state, provincial, territorial, community or area ranger association, which is properly constituted and registered in terms of local legislative requirements, which is made up of a majority of professional rangers and is established for the purpose of furthering the cause of the rangers and the profession.”

One question frequently asked is: are ranger associations unions? According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics department definition, “Unions are independent workers’ organizations constituted for the purpose of furthering and defending the interests of workers” (ILO 2020a). However, this definition allows the organization that defines the association to class it as a labor union or not. As ranger associations do not bargain with employers, we propose that they are not to be viewed as unions.

Although not all rangers are necessarily public employees, ranger associations are better classified as “worker organizations” under ILO Fundamental Convention no. 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948; ILO 2020b) and as “public employee organizations” under Technical Convention no. 151 Labour Relations (Public Relations) Convention,

1978 (ILO 2020a). The purpose of these conventions is to provide guarantees to any public employee organization created to advocate for its members’ interests. These guarantees are:

1. Freedom to organize the association without interference or threats to members;
2. Facilities necessary to operate efficiently, as long as they don’t impair the service;
3. Opportunities to participate in the determination of working conditions (the organization itself determines which ones they would like to influence);
4. Recourse to procedures to resolve disputes related to the determination of working conditions; and
5. The respect for public employees’ civil and political rights.

Many rangers have reported that they have not been able to establish ranger associations for political reasons, including that they are perceived to be a union. However, ILO Convention 87 states that workers “have the right to draw up their constitutions and rules, to elect their representatives in full freedom, to organise their administration and activities and to formulate their programmes”; and that “public authorities shall refrain from any interference which would restrict this right or impede the lawful exercise thereof” (ILO 2020b). Furthermore, Convention 151 states that organizations such as those discussed here should “enjoy complete independence from public authorities” and “enjoy adequate protection against any acts of interference by a public authority in their establishment, functioning or administration” (ILO 2020a). One role that IRF plays is to promote the implementation of these conventions by signatory countries.

A ranger association could potentially be defined as a union under the ILO definition. While one advantage of this is the ability to formally negotiate with authorities, this is not the primary role and focus of a ranger association, which should be much broader. Therefore, ranger associations need to consider the implications of being seen as a union and rather look to adopt a hybrid



Delegates at the 8th World Ranger Congress, Estes Park, Colorado, USA, May 2016 | CHRIS GALLIERS / IRF

model, which can lobby but which also conducts other activities and provides other benefits to its members. In some countries rangers are represented by general public sector unions, separately from their ranger association.

As well as being workers' organizations, ranger associations are also "membership organizations," as they offer value to members through collective interests and the acquisition of selective benefits (Dicke and Saitgalina 2014). Membership organizations allow people to subscribe (free, or for a fee) to the organization. "Professional associations" are generally established around a profession, industry, activity or interest in a geographical area to facilitate networking. Ranger associations can therefore be defined as membership-based professional-worker associations.

### **Ranger association membership**

Ranger associations can be established to represent a specific ranger group (e.g., state-employed rangers) or they can offer broad representation by including community, Indigenous, and/or privately employed rangers. The requirements for joining a ranger association may vary among associations and often include different levels of membership (see Table 1 for examples).

### **Global structure of ranger associations**

Three levels of ranger associations have been developed over time, namely:

1. A single global association: IRF.
2. Regional ranger associations that operate across more than one country but not beyond a continent or the regional boundaries designated by IRF.
3. National and sub-national ranger associations that operate across a country, province, state, or other defined area within a country.

The number of national or sub-national ranger association under each IRF regional association is shown in Table 2.

### **Re-defining the role of ranger associations**

The value of ranger associations was identified in 1966 when the first one was formed (Miller 2020, per. comm.), the purposes being to share knowledge amongst like-minded people, to share experiences. and to create a platform where rangers could support rangers.

Some 26 years later, IRF was founded to provide a global forum for rangers from around the world to share their successes and failures in protecting the world's natural heritage, and to promote the



Ranger association	Membership type	Details
International Ranger Federation	Full members	Any national, state, provincial, territorial, community, or area ranger association, which is properly constituted and registered in terms of local requirements, as recognized by the federation, and endorsed by a full member.
	Associate members	Any individual or group who may further the cause of the federation or of protected areas.
	Provisional members	An individual ranger or group of rangers from a nation, state, province, territory, community, or area where there is no established ranger association.
	Honorary members	Any individual or group that has made a significant contribution to the federation, to any full member of the federation, or in the field of conservation, as recognized by the board.
Game Rangers' Association of Africa	Chapter with professional members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A chapter will register with the relevant country-specific government department in adherence with local legislation.</li> <li>• A chapter will comprise a minimum of five professional members from a specific country.</li> <li>• A chapter will elect a chapter committee in terms of the voting procedures that consists of at least four professional members, which persons may not be connected to each other. This chapter committee should comprise a chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary, and treasurer.</li> </ul>
Ranger Federation of Asia	Regular member	Registered ranger associations or individual rangers or ranger forums.
	Associate members	Individuals who are not themselves rangers but who are directly working with or supporting rangers.
	Corporate members	Corporate-sector partners that are interested in supporting rangers.
Oceania	Member	Ranger associations from the region.

**Table 1.** Examples of international and regional ranger association membership requirements.

Region	Regional associations of IRF	Number of national or sub-national associations
Africa	Game Rangers' Association of Africa	12
Asia	Ranger Federation of Asia	16
Europe	European Ranger Federation	28
North America	Association of National Park Rangers	10
Central America	None	3
South America	Latin America Ranger Federation (proposed)	21
Oceania	Council of Oceania Ranger Associations (CORA)	13

**Table 2.** The number and regional distribution of ranger associations under IRF.

exchange of information from countries in which protected area management enjoys broad public and government support to countries in which it is less supported (IRF 2020a).

There is a dearth of research around ranger associations and the value they bring for the workforce. The very fact that rangers across the world have created 103 associations over the past 60 years demonstrates their usefulness. This is further emphasized through the recognition ranger associations have been afforded in each World Ranger Congress declaration since 2012 (Table 3). Based on these declarations, it can be surmised that the desired role of ranger associations identified to date are:

1. Creation of a shared global vision of the ranger profession.
2. Amplification of a united global voice advocating for appropriate recognition and advocacy for their members' interests.
3. Networking, sharing knowledge, and promoting good practices between the world's rangers.

The accompanying papers presented in this volume, along with stakeholder consultation at the 2019 World Ranger Congress and the development of the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA) action plan, provide further insights into the desired roles of ranger associations. In addition to those roles already identified through World Ranger Congress declarations, ranger associations need to adopt two further ones: providing legitimacy and credibility to ranger work as a profession, and providing thought leadership on professional development across the sector. We therefore re-define the role of ranger associations as:

1. Provision of legitimacy and credibility for the ranger profession.
2. Creation and promotion of a shared global vision of the ranger profession.
3. Advocating for members' interests and those of all rangers not yet included in their membership.
4. Supply of thought leadership on professional development.

**Table 3.** World Ranger Congress declarations referencing the role of ranger associations.

Declaration	Year	Statement referring to ranger associations
Chitwan Declaration, Nepal	2019	Ranger associations need to be recognised for their importance of working towards a shared vision, and where rangers are encouraged to establish functional ranger associations and/or strengthen existing ranger associations, or their equivalent, in order to; i) create avenues for a united voice for rangers, ii) connect the global ranger community for knowledge sharing and promoting good practice, iii) provide effective communication and advisory channels to advocate for policy amendments with relevant decision makers.
Estes Park Declaration, USA	2016	That ranger associations and individual rangers, both collectively through IRF and individually, are developing the capacity to be recognized by all as an essential profession for society to embrace, being equal to other unassailable professions in the human community.
Arusha Declaration, Tanzania	2012	It is essential that we step beyond our field-based comfort zone towards more effective high-level representation, gaining long-term support to advocate for rangers and protected areas from a higher strategic perspective.  Encourage as a priority the formation of ranger associations, in particular in regions that are facing the greatest level of threats, currently have the lowest level of representation, and could benefit from the exchange that emerges from inter-association partnership and the like.

5. Networking, sharing knowledge, and promoting best practices among the world's rangers.

Each of these roles provides clear benefits to the members of any ranger association (Table 4). A key component of any membership association is to develop social capital within its members. To do this it needs to undertake actions that underscore the organization's relevance to its members and other stakeholders at large. The ranger profession is global and diverse, so challenges and opportunities vary greatly among countries. The three levels of ranger association are therefore important avenues to facilitate delivery of these benefits in locally applicable ways to support all rangers across the world.

National or sub-national associations are closest to the individual ranger and therefore provide critical network value. It is important to ensure all rangers are represented by a ranger association, and so local associations provide critical functions. However, it is preferable to have fewer, more effective associations providing this representation

than to have multiple, fragmented, and overlapping organizations. Structures and systems are needed to enable national or sub-national associations to receive the support they require, either directly or via strengthened regional and global associations, which can address some of the constraints experienced by smaller associations in a cost-efficient manner. An example of this is the GRAA model, which has centralized administration to support chapter associations. In a resource- and capacity-constrained environment, it is suggested that sub-national associations would be better consolidated under a national ranger association to create efficiencies of scale.

Global and regional associations must provide best-practice governance principles to national ranger associations and support building institutional capacity to strengthen governance and effectiveness. National associations must be empowered to best support their member rangers through the regional and international associations.

**Table 4.** The benefits of ranger association membership by association role.

Role of ranger associations	Member benefits
Provision of legitimacy and credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition as a professional</li> <li>• Understanding of global standards of performance</li> <li>• Clear guidance on code of conduct, ethics, diversity, etc.</li> <li>• Improved credibility in the community</li> <li>• Access to an institution that can accept support on behalf of members</li> </ul>
Creation and promotion of a shared global vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of being part of something bigger</li> <li>• Pride in World Ranger Day on 31 July</li> <li>• Access to ranger awards</li> </ul>
Advocating for members' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to advocates for members' rights and interests</li> <li>• Ability to convey members' needs and voices to sub-national, national, regional, and international levels</li> </ul>
Supply of thought leadership on professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to link members' needs to global professional development standards and practices</li> <li>• Access to advocates for and specialists in ranger professional development</li> <li>• Understanding of global best practices for ranger professional development</li> </ul>
Networking, knowledge sharing, and promoting good practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared identity with rangers globally, thereby enhancing a sense of community and belonging</li> <li>• Joining communities of practice where rangers share knowledge and expertise as part of a group of like-minded professionals</li> <li>• Access to intergenerational knowledge and skills transfer</li> <li>• Access to ranger-to-ranger support mechanisms</li> </ul>



IRF, as the global ranger federation, should only work with ranger associations and not individual rangers, but in order to remain connected to grassroots-level issues, it must work closely with the regional and national associations. The responsibilities of the three levels of ranger association are mutually supportive, yet separate (Table 5).

### **The value of ranger associations**

As demonstrated by the benefits of ranger associations (Table 4) and the responsibilities of the different levels of ranger associations (Table 5), their value to the sector could be significant. Ranger associations have built up some significant strengths over the decades, not least their global reach, representativeness, and the strong support they receive from rangers. However, ranger associations face multiple challenges that currently prevent them fulfilling the roles and responsibilities outlined in this paper. Table 6

outlines some key strengths and weaknesses of ranger associations at all levels.

Ranger associations have an important role to play in supporting, connecting, and strengthening the ranger workforce. They can also be a vehicle for change through connecting ranger needs to the interests of civil society groups, corporate entities, and other stakeholders. Each level of ranger association can play its role in bringing new partners to the movement to better support the profession (Table 7). However, IRF currently lacks capacity to meet many of its objectives. Of specific note here is the newly formed Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA; [www.ursa4rangers.org](http://www.ursa4rangers.org)), a collaborative initiative of seven conservation organizations that have come together to support IRF in delivering the vision of a network of well-supported, professionally competent, mandated, motivated, and representative rangers working effectively as custodians of biodiversity and the life-support systems upon which all life depends.



Delegates at the 9th World Ranger Congress, Sauraha, Nepal, November 2019. | [RANJAN RAMCHANDANI / WWF](#)



Responsibility	Global	Regional	National / sub-national
<b>Provision of legitimacy and credibility</b>			
Define the global role of a ranger	•		
Hold professional standards for the ranger sector	•		
Build the global network of associations	•	•	
Monitor the state of the ranger profession	•		
Guide and support regional associations	•		
Guide and support national and sub-national associations		•	
<b>Creation and promotion of a shared global vision</b>			
Set the vision for an improved ranger profession	•		
Host the World Ranger Congress every three years	•		
Promote vision for an improved ranger profession	•	•	•
World Ranger Day celebrations	•	•	•
Build new partnerships to support ranger needs	•	•	•
<b>Advocating for members' interests</b>			
Set global standards for ranger working conditions	•		
Integrate ranger needs into international policy	•		
Insert ranger needs into global conservation forums	•		
Integrate ranger needs into regional policy		•	
Insert ranger needs into regional conservation forums		•	
Integrate ranger needs into national policy			•
Insert ranger needs into national conservation forums			•
Support individual ranger needs where required			•
<b>Supply of thought leadership on professional development</b>			
Define generic ranger job descriptions	•		
Define ranger competencies	•		
Set training curriculums		•	•
Build partnerships to develop training		•	•
Advocate for systemic service professional development	•	•	•
<b>Networking, knowledge sharing, and promoting good practices</b>			
Establish ranger association twinning opportunities	•		
Establish global ranger discussion portal	•		
Establish communities of practice	•	•	•
Support rangers' access to ranger-to-ranger support			•
Support rangers' access to knowledge-sharing opportunities			•

**Table 5.** The responsibilities of ranger association levels.

Role of ranger associations	Strengths	Weaknesses
Provision of legitimacy and credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing proportion of rangers represented in an association</li> <li>• Association track record in providing member support</li> <li>• Good management of some associations</li> <li>• Only one network of ranger associations in the world</li> <li>• Proven impact through Fallen Ranger Fund (in partnership with The Thin Green Line Foundation), supplemental health insurance, training bursaries, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of strategic frameworks to guide ranger associations at all levels</li> <li>• No global definition of “ranger,” or core ranger job positions</li> <li>• “Ranger” not a recognized profession in most countries</li> <li>• Missing global standards on core issues such as capacity, diversity, working conditions, code of conduct, ethics, etc.</li> <li>• Lack of capacity in many associations to deliver their objectives</li> <li>• Lack of clarity in roles between association levels</li> <li>• Lack of professional, paid staff</li> <li>• Lack of resources</li> <li>• Insufficient centralized systems and data management</li> <li>• Political interference, especially when an association is viewed as a union</li> <li>• Legal barriers to association establishment in some countries</li> <li>• Cost of membership</li> <li>• Inability to monitor and report on impact</li> </ul>
Creation and promotion of a shared global vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing attention to the needs of rangers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of skills within volunteer workforce</li> <li>• Shared global vision not yet articulated</li> <li>• Missing strategy and plan</li> </ul>
A united global voice advocating for appropriate recognition and advocacy for members’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing voice for the ranger</li> <li>• Strong brand: World Ranger Day, Ranger Roll of Honour</li> <li>• Growing evidence base on ranger needs</li> <li>• URSA support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rangers not perceived as important by governments</li> <li>• Rangers not properly recognized within the conservation community</li> <li>• Political interference, especially when an association is viewed as a union</li> <li>• Inability to develop strategic partnerships</li> <li>• Lack of resources, partnerships, and staff to advocate adequately for rangers</li> </ul>
Supply of thought leadership on professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representing user needs</li> <li>• Some track record (Lotter et al. 2016)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No time or resources</li> <li>• Multiple training providers, but few focusing on the entire sector pre- and in-service training</li> <li>• Outdated formal training that does not address the evolving role of rangers</li> <li>• Focus on training as a project output rather than a professional process for an entire sector</li> <li>• Few working examples of what is required</li> </ul>
Networking, knowledge sharing, and promoting good practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rangers want to share and be networked</li> <li>• Experience of ranger members</li> <li>• Association twinning experiences</li> <li>• World Ranger Congresses</li> <li>• Force for Nature app</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication infrastructure</li> <li>• Distance and remoteness of rangers</li> <li>• Constraints of capturing the wealth of knowledge and expertise within an association</li> </ul>

**Table 6.** Strengths and weaknesses of ranger associations.

Ranger association level	Possible membership and partner organizations
Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global bodies, e.g., IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), UNEP (United Nations Environment Program), ILO</li> <li>• Global non-governmental organizations (NGOs), e.g., The Thin Green Line Foundation, URSA</li> <li>• Global foundations</li> <li>• Global companies</li> </ul>
Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant regional bodies, e.g., EU (European Union), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Pacific Island Forum</li> <li>• Sub-regional bodies, e.g., in Africa: ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States), EAC (East African Community), AMU (Arab Maghreb Union), SADC (Southern African Development Community)</li> <li>• Regional foundations</li> <li>• Regional companies</li> </ul>
National / sub-national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State entities</li> <li>• Local NGOs</li> <li>• National foundations</li> <li>• National companies</li> </ul>

**Table 7.** Possible membership and partner organizations for the different levels of ranger associations.

## Ways forward

Ranger associations should be the vehicle for implementing the Chitwan Declaration, which was signed by over 550 participants from 70 countries, most of whom represent a ranger association or conservation organization, gathered at Sauraha, Nepal, at the 9th World Ranger Congress, 12–16 November 2019.

However, membership organizations are only as good as the sum of their members. Strengthening IRF, its regional chapters, and national associations is critical to delivering the Chitwan Declaration. Among the many challenges to be overcome, four are critical to enable IRF to effectively deliver its mandate:

1. **Increased capacity.** Ranger associations are voluntary organizations with limited human capacity. People are needed in funded positions to competently execute the duties of ranger associations on a day-to-day basis. Initially, this

needs to focus on properly enabling IRF with a number of full-time personnel to deliver on the requirements outlined in Table 5. Only with full-time, paid staff can ranger associations attend to all administrative, governance, learning, and partnership functions, as well delivering on organizational objectives.

2. **Increased partnerships.** Developing partnerships is vital for the growth and strengthening of ranger associations. There are many organizations that carry ranger interests that could develop mutually beneficial relationships with ranger associations (Table 7). Each ranger association must identify and initiate its own partnerships, but there is also a responsibility to facilitate partnerships downwards from global to regional, national, and sub-national levels.
3. **Increased resources.** Resources are needed to be able to carry out a ranger association's duties. The scale of resources needs to increase by multiple orders of magnitude from what is



currently available. To achieve this, all ranger associations will need to develop applicable revenue-generating and fundraising strategies. Resources could be acquired through donations or grants, membership fees where possible, and in-kind support from partners. Developing sources of sustainable support for ranger associations is important to prevent troughs in a ranger association's functionality. At a global level the idea of establishing a ranger endowment fund should be investigated.

4. **Information flows.** Clear and effective mechanisms are needed to ensure that knowledge, experience, information, and ideas are communicated in both directions between central and local organizations and with individual rangers.

There is a lack of informed understanding of the role, scope, and impact of ranger associations. A "state of ranger associations" assessment is urgently needed to inform global, regional, and national strategies and provide recommendations on strengthening existing ranger associations and how they can better serve their members. Based on these analyses and the resulting recommendations along with the perspectives outlined here, we recommend a strategic framework be developed that creates clear, two-way support structures between all levels of ranger associations.

## Conclusion

Ranger associations should be viewed as membership-based professional-worker associations. They demonstrate significant support from the ranger community, with 103 national or sub-national associations under four regional associations (and another in development), all under the auspices of IRF. Ranger associations are sometimes viewed as unions, leading to opposition to their establishment in some countries. However, here we define their roles as different from those of unions: primarily through providing legitimacy and credibility to the ranger profession, creating and promoting a shared global vision of the ranger profession, advocating for members' interests and those of rangers who are not yet members, supplying thought leadership on professional

development, and networking, sharing knowledge, and promoting good practices between the world's rangers.

The structure of IRF, the global ranger association, is fit for purpose, but is highly constrained in reaching its potential due to a lack of capacity, partnerships, and resources. Further analysis is required to make clear recommendations on how to best strengthen ranger associations in general; once completed, a clear strategic plan for the global network of ranger associations would help encourage the global conservation community to support this institutional structure and capacity.

The world is at a tipping point. By 2030, the global community will be asking rangers to protect, manage, and restore some 30% of Earth's surface in order to help mitigate climate change, preserve ecosystem services, stem the biodiversity loss crisis, maintain wilderness for cultural and recreation purposes, and prevent further zoonotic disease spillover events. Without significant investment in professionalizing the ranger force and building the institutional capacity of its ranger associations, rangers will be ill-prepared for these critical roles we are asking them to fulfill.

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Family exploring tidepools at Cabrillo National Monument, California. | [GEDAPIX](#)

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