

Will this help to wake up the conservation establishment concerning the realities on the ground in Central Africa?



I have photographed and filmed in the Lac Lobeke area on several occasions. The area has always been a hell hole as far as commercial poaching activities, without any kind of effective enforcement measures (except for those conducted by some of the trophy hunting companies operating in the area).

See pictures and my earlier comments on [Elephant Conservation in the Central African Region](#).

Reading between the lines of the report below, I respectfully submit the question if the employers of these rangers which get killed in this fashion are taking their responsibilities seriously enough.

These forests are home to well-armed commercial poaching gangs, who will kill pretty much anything they can get their hands on. That does not stop with wildlife.

This is an area where the law of the jungle, indeed, governs. The guys with the best weapons and training will in the end win. At this stage these are probably not going to be MINEF or WWF rangers.

Sending unarmed and, apparently, badly trained forest guards into this kind of war zone might be classified as negligent. For these rangers not to have communication equipment, which would enable them to call in reinforcement when encountering the kind of hunting camp they seem to have come across, adds to this perception. For these unarmed guys then to wait and try to arrest well-armed poachers – and then getting ‘detected’ by the poachers instead also illustrates an amateurish approach. Plus this scenariosuggests that no basic policies and procedures, governing such engagements, appear to be in place.

Poaching gangs are not poor villagers hunting for the pot but criminals who have to be treated as such. As has been documented in parts of the neighboring Central African Republic, these poachers will not become carpenters or gardeners in Bangui or Yaoundé when the wildlife is gone. They will make a living by looting and turning their guns on people.



A few years ago, Cameroon had a shoot and kill policy for this kind of element in the major urban centers. The forests are becoming the breeding grounds for new brigades of this sort, which will only result in more security problems coming out of the forests.

Animal Planet produced a film on elephant poaching in Cameroon. It shows a well-respected conservation activist crawling around a container with a tooth brush trying to find some slivers of ivory to prove that this container had in the past been used to smuggle ivory. In the same film there are elephant poachers from SE Cameroon, bragging about their illegal activities and giving details about how it all works. No blurring of faces or shooting the interview in dark shadows, which means these guys were not worried about any kind of enforcement ever catching up with them.

The message? The conservation establishment has to rethink its approach to conservation in the Central African region. The other side is well equipped, willing to shoot and kill with no concerns about law enforcement. Meanwhile, it is typical enough for the national enforcement authorities to feel they have better things to do than risk their life for 'stupid animals in the forest'. It is certainly not a priority on the national agenda.

So the message is do not count on the national law enforcement. Instead, the political will must be created to be allowed to equip and train independent ranger forces, providing the relevant motivation in form of remuneration with risk allowances that will take care of families if indeed rangers should lose their lives. Then send them out with 'shoot to kill' orders when encountering armed poachers (as some of the anti-pirate fleets in the Indian Ocean have started doing). If it cannot be done outside the existing government hierarchy, try to do it within. Set up special parastatels as has been done in other African Nations with poaching problems or bring in qualified and registered private local security companies.

I am aware that WWF and many others feel that this goes way beyond their remit; they cannot afford to be involved in seeing humans killed in the name of wildlife protection. The problem with that approach is that innocent forest guards end up losing their lives, the wildlife gets killed anyway, and the criminals have a good laugh.

Forest ranger murdered by poaching gang

A forest ranger has been killed and another seriously injured in a violent clash with gorilla poachers outside a national park in Cameroon, WWF has learned. The attack occurred on September 27 about 10 kilometers from Cameroon's border with Central African Republic.

The two rangers were on patrol near Lob eke National Park, where WWF provides critical support to forest rangers, when they discovered the carcasses of two critically endangered Western lowland gorillas in a forest camp, authorities say. Intending to take the perpetrators into custody, the rangers concealed themselves nearby while waiting for the poachers to return to the camp.

Detecting the rangers, a group of six or more men opened fire on the unarmed forest guards who both sustained multiple gunshot wounds. Ranger Jean FilsMamendji, who was hit in the arm and shoulder, was able to escape.

Mamendji's partner Zomedel Pierre Achille, a 12-year veteran of the patrol, was hit in the chest and back. "I staggered with Achille some 300 metres but had to let go because the poachers were closing in on us and shooting simultaneously," Mamendji tearfully told WWF from his hospital bed.

A rescue mission was dispatched and searched through the night for Achille. His body, stripped naked, was located the following day having been tied to a tree by the assailants. Evidence suggests that the victim was also severely beaten about his head and body, possibly with a rifle, before his death. He may also have sustained stab wounds.

"This brutal attack was a deliberate attempt to intimidate the government," said David Greer, WWF's African Great Ape Coordinator. "Poaching gangs are waging a war for Cameroon's forests and sending a message that they do not respect the law."

Retaliatory attacks by poachers against rangers have increased in recent months in response to increased law enforcement efforts by the government. Illegal activity has been particularly prevalent in Southeast Cameroon, where dedicated WWF teams are working harder than ever to support the government efforts. Victims of the violence have not been restricted to forest rangers. Earlier this year a group of six Baka pygmies were shot and wounded by poachers.

"Rangers are putting on a uniform every day to protect their wildlife, their forests and ultimately, the wellbeing of their communities from individuals who seek only to commit criminal acts such as trafficking protected species," Greer says.

"These brave men are going into battle underequipped and often without proper training. Law enforcement efforts at all levels need to be dramatically scaled up, especially in the typically weak judicial systems," Greer says. "That is where a criminal deterrent can be established that will not only save Africa's dwindling wildlife, but will also protect its people from lawless violence such as this."

Achille, who leaves behind five children, is the first ranger to lose his life in the line of duty in this area in recent years. His killers are being pursued by authorities from both Cameroon and Central African Republic.

"This is the saddest day in the history of conservation in Southeast Cameroon," said BasileYapo, WWF's Cameroon Country Director. "It is a clear testimony of the danger we face in this landscape. This incident calls for firm action against poachers."

"As this case goes well beyond wildlife crime, we expect that our government partners will take the necessary steps to locate and bring these assailants to justice, while making a firm statement that criminal behavior will receive swift and severe punishment," Greer says. "Anything less would dishonor to the memory of our brave, fallen colleague."

Rampant poaching, often occurring within protected areas, is driving gorillas closer to extinction. Poaching and the illegal wildlife trade are also decimating forest elephants, which are being killed in large numbers for their ivory.