

Heroes of the Forest

In 2011, USFWS provided its first grant to support the widows of Virunga's fallen rangers, investing more than \$132,000 which was leveraged with more than \$130,000 in additional funds. USFWS has signed a 5-year cooperative agreement with the Virunga Fund Inc., investing more than \$290,000 which is matched by \$3.35 million, a portion of which will support the widows and children of Virunga's rangers who have been killed in the line of duty.



Funeral procession for a ranger killed in the line of duty at Virunga National Park, DRC. Credit: Virunga National Park

A well trained and equipped corps of park rangers is essential for the effective conservation and management of virtually every natural area around the world. Increased illegal wildlife trade and continuing instability in parts of Africa have led to a dramatic rise in park ranger killings, devastating rangers and their families.

In the last decade, 140 rangers have been killed protecting wildlife in Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Recently, rangers in Cameroon, Chad, Republic of Congo, and Kenya have also been killed while protecting their national parks.

The rise in assaults on rangers are indicative of the increasing pressure on wildlife and natural areas in Africa. While confronting these growing threats, park rangers, who are often underpaid and poorly equipped, face frequent deadly confrontations with

well-armed and organized poachers. The growing international demand for wildlife products, including ivory and rhino horn, increase the risks faced by these rangers by the day.

In 2011, the Wildlife Without Borders program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) launched an initiative to recognize the heroism of park rangers in developing countries around the world who are killed while protecting wildlife of global importance.

This initiative is named Heroes of the Forest and it is being piloted in Virunga. The goal is to provide financial assistance to the dead ranger's family and to raise public awareness of the dangers the rangers face and recognize them for making the ultimate sacrifice to protect their natural areas and wildlife.

USFWS plans to expand the program to other African parks and their

rangers and families, and later to other continents as well.

Due to the historical and biological importance of Virunga and the intense pressures faced by its wildlife and rangers, initiating the program here was an easy choice. Africa's most diverse and oldest national park (established in 1925), Virunga National Park was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 and a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 1996. Virunga is under direct threat by political unrest and rebel activity, contested oil exploration within park boundaries, illegal charcoal production, disease, and rampant poaching.

Formerly known as Albert National Park, Virunga lies in eastern DRC and covers 7,800 square kilometers. It is home to 200 of the world's remaining critically endangered mountain gorillas and a small population of endangered eastern lowland gorillas. It is endowed with more species of birds, reptiles and mammals than any other protected area in Africa. The park is managed by the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the *Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN).



Above: The mountain gorilla silverback, Bageni, resting with his family in Virunga National Park. Credit: Dr. Martin Kabuyaya

The Heroes of the Forest Initiative illustrates the U.S. government's recognition of the courage, commitment and sacrifice by park rangers around the world.



A ranger on patrol in Virunga National Park, DRC. Credit: Virunga National Park

Sacrifice of Rangers

Despite decades of civil war and conflict throughout the DRC and the most recent occupation of insurgent rebels in and around the park, Virunga's gorilla population is believed to remain relatively stable. This conservation success is due to the dedication of park rangers who have continued to patrol the park during the long civil war and subsequent periods of unrest and instability, often for little or no pay in life-threatening conditions. The killing of approximately 140 rangers in Virunga National Park in the last ten years has left many of their widows destitute, without medical help, or housing. This ever-present threat has had a profound impact on ranger morale, and it exacts a terrible burden on their families and local communities.

How USFWS is Helping

The pilot project of USFWS's *Heroes of the Forest* initiative in Virunga National Park provides a small (\$30 per month for each family) but critical financial safety net for the widows and children of deceased rangers. It demonstrates international recognition of the rangers' dedication and sacrifice and boosts the morale of the ranger

force to continue their critical work to protect Virunga National Park and its globally important wildlife.

Funding has also been provided to develop alternative fuel sources as an alternative to charcoal production; to purchase a plane for surveillance; to support an anti-poaching bloodhound unit; and to fund a chimpanzee habituation and tourism project.

USFWS Wildlife Without Borders Commitment

USFWS serves as a member of the Virunga National Park's Fallen Rangers Steering committee, a group of organizations dedicated to addressing the needs of the widows of Virunga's rangers. Working closely with park personnel on a wide range of conservation issues, in 2011 USFWS committed \$132,764 to the *Heroes of the Forest Initiative*, which was leveraged with \$130,040 in matching contributions. This served as the seed funding for the establishment of the fund, which has now grown to \$200,000.

In 2013, a five-year cooperative agreement was signed between the USFWS and the Virunga Fund to improve the ranger force of Virunga

and support continuation of the *Heroes of the Forest Initiative*. A total of \$290,000 was awarded for this agreement and leveraged by \$3.35 million.

The *Heroes of the Forest Initiative* demonstrates the U.S. government's recognition of the courage, commitment and ultimate sacrifice by park rangers. While many Americans know and admire Africa's spectacular wildlife, few realize that scores of rangers are killed while protecting Africa's parks and wildlife. This initiative is a step in addressing that gap.

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