



Killings, torture, sexual and physical violence and intimidation have no place in conservation: Independent report on WWF-linked human rights abuses shows conservation sector needs root and branch change

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- A report commissioned due to [intense media pressure](#) reveals systemic problems resulting in violence and abuse in protected areas managed or supported by WWF and major problems in WWF's organisational approach to human rights
- Systematic denial of traditional and customary rights to lands underpins the emergence of violence, intimidation and other human rights abuses in protected areas
- Global inter-governmental negotiations seek a doubling of protected areas over the next 10 years, creating significant further risks of dispossession of customary rightsholders from their territories.

WWF has financed and provided technical support to conservation projects that have been rife with human rights violations including rape, murder and intimidation, and WWF failed to deal with these issues adequately, confirms a review (released yesterday) into WWF's global operations.

The [independent review](#) into human rights violations in WWF programmes includes serious findings about WWF's response to killings, torture, sexual and physical violence and intimidation against indigenous peoples and local communities connected with WWF operations in several areas of the world.

The report also points to serious failings in WWF's organisational culture, characterised by a lack of transparency, accountability and inconsistent commitment to human rights, saying "it is clear that to avoid fuelling criticism WWF decided not to publish commissioned reports, to downplay information received, or to overstate the effectiveness of its proposed responses". In the worst cases, WWF has not investigated human rights violations brought to its attention, apparently so as not to upset its relationships with government.

Despite these damning findings, in its [public response](#) issued yesterday, WWF International fails to take adequate responsibility for its role in enabling human rights violations to occur or to continue, or issue a sincere apology to the many individuals who suffered from these abuses.

The flawed practices highlighted in this report that permit and facilitate human rights violations must end and WWF must take further concerted steps to ensure that they do. We urge WWF to implement the report's recommendations in full, commission an investigation into the full extent of human rights abuses in its programmes, apologise unreservedly to survivors of abuse carried out in their name, and provide remedies to those affected where appropriate.

Some of the most serious findings were in relation to [Salonga National Park](#) in the DRC, where the report finds that, despite allegations of sexual and physical abuse by rangers being raised with senior management in 2016, a planned investigation was not implemented “apparently out of concern that doing so would meet with resistance from ICCN [the DRC state conservation agency]”. A subsequent investigation carried out in 2019 – only after significant media attention had been brought to the situation – “identified widespread allegations of extremely grave abuses by ecoguards and army personnel, including allegations of multiple murders, rapes, torture and beatings.” To this day, few of the remedial measures promised by WWF have been implemented and the organisation has provided little or inadequate support to victims in seeking redress.

On the basis of this and other findings, the panel points to the need for a substantial, practical integration of human rights expertise throughout WWF, as well as much greater transparency from the organisation. The independent panel’s report also makes a significant contribution to clarifying the obligations and responsibilities of conservation organisations in respect of human rights. Importantly, it recognises that multinational conservation organisations have the same responsibilities as businesses to respect human rights under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. This is a welcome confirmation in light of the huge – and increasingly business-like – scale of intervention of conservation organisations across the globe.

The human rights abuses suffered by indigenous peoples and local communities listed in the report highlight fundamental issues that arise across the conservation sector as a whole, not isolated to WWF. The underlying cause of these abuses, as recognised in this report, is the exclusion of indigenous peoples and other communities with collective customary rights from their ancestral territories. The frequency and severity of abuses has been exacerbated by the increasing militarisation – with little or no oversight – of protected areas, especially in contexts where human rights abuses by security forces are widespread. We urge other conservation organisations as well as conservation funders to read this report closely and evaluate and amend their own practices in line with the recommendations made.

The sector must transform to ensure the human rights of indigenous peoples and other local communities affected by conservation projects are upheld, including their right to their customary lands and to protection from violence, intimidation, and abuse. This transformation is urgently needed, both to end violations and to move towards a community-led approach to conservation that acknowledges that sustainable conservation of indigenous peoples’ lands is most effective and durable when it is based on secure tenure.

The report is also timely as governments are currently negotiating a global target for radically increasing the area of the globe under some form of protected status. The currently proposed target is 30% of the land area of the globe by 2030, a near doubling from today’s proportion of 15.4%. This report highlights the very real and significant dangers that are associated with such a target if it is applied in countries where indigenous peoples and local community rights are not recognised or respected and if it does not explicitly include commitments to increase the area of land under secure title for indigenous peoples and local communities.

Notes for editors

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Joe Eisen, RFUK Executive Director, said *“This long overdue report lays bare the failings of WWF in protecting the human rights of those affected by its programmes and of an outmoded model of conservation that should be consigned to history. Yet WWF’s response shows an utter lack of contrition or accountability for these failings. We now need a paradigm shift that places local communities and Indigenous Peoples, not international organisations, at the front and centre of conservation efforts. The future of our planet depends on it.”*

Helen Tugendhat, FPP programme coordinator said *“This report rightly points to the exclusion of indigenous peoples and local communities from their customary lands and territories as the ‘original sin’ that underpins the serious human rights violations it records. We must see securing such rights, and supporting local ownership and management, as a central element in reducing human rights violations and in securing the ecosystems that they protect.”*

Signe Leth, IWGIA senior advisor said *“Indigenous Peoples’ rights must be at the centre of conservation actions to avoid further rights abuses by the sector. An integral part of this is the recognition of the contribution of Indigenous Peoples to conservation. 80% of the remaining biodiversity is on Indigenous Peoples’ lands and still, many major conservatists act as if they know better. This report clearly shows the opposite.”*

For interview

Shankar Limbu, LAHURNIP, Nepal. Shankar is an indigenous lawyer from Nepal who has worked closely on the ground with community members in and around Chitwan National Park. Available for interview on Chitwan National Park and conservation policy generally.
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Peter Kitelo, CIPDP, Kenya. Peter is an Ogiek man from Mt Elgon, who has experienced directly his lands being incorporated into protected areas. He supports inter-community learning and exchange between the Ogiek in Mt Elgon and the Batwa impacted by Kahuzi Biega National Park in the DRC.
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Signe Leth, senior advisor in the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). Signe has worked closely with partners on the ground in documenting the human rights violations occurring in protected areas in Asia. sil@iwgia.org

Background information:

The independent investigation, commissioned by WWF after Buzzfeed published [a series of serious allegations](#) against the organisation in early 2019, was carried out by a high profile expert panel, comprising Judge Navi Pillay (former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights), Professor John Knox (former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment), and Dr Kathy McKinnon, Chair of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. The Panel received submissions and information from civil society and from directly affected communities and reviewed internal documents from WWF to investigate the allegations and the extent to which respect for human rights has been integrated into WWF's operations.

Additional resources:

Other reviews and investigations into conservation areas, notably in sub-saharan Africa, have reached similar conclusions regarding the long-term implications of the exclusion of indigenous peoples and local communities from traditionally owned territories due to the imposition of protected areas. See:

KfW's Human Rights Obligations in Conservation Work The example of La Salonga National Park November 2020 by the German Institute for Human Rights. Available at: [https://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/Stellungnahmen/Position Paper KfWs Human Rights Obligations in Conservation Work.pdf](https://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/Stellungnahmen/Position_Paper_KfWs_Human_Rights_Obligations_in_Conservation_Work.pdf)

United States Government, Department of the Interior memorandum regarding its investigation that led to the US Government suspension of funding to many large conservation organisations. Available at: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/online-docs.pdf>

Draft Investigation Report, Investigating allegations of non-compliance with UNDP social and environmental commitments relating to the following UNDP activities: Integrated and Transboundary Conservation of Biodiversity in the Basins of the Republic of Congo, TRIDOM II. (October 2017 – March 2023) Case No. SECU0009 Date: 10 March 2020. Available at: https://info.undp.org/sites/registry/secu/SECU_Documents/SECU0009_Draft%20Investigation%20Report_For%20Public%20Comment0ddf041323354a9ca3864d50de9970b7.pdf

FPP (2019) *Transforming Conservation*, <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/lands-forests-territories-rights-based-conservation/news-article/2019/transforming-conservation>

RFUK (2016) *Protected Areas in the Congo Basin: Failing both people and biodiversity* <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/protected-areas-in-the-congo-basin-failing-both-people-and-diversity-english.pdf>

LAHURNIP, NIWF (2020) Fact Finding Mission Report: Violation of Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights in Chitwan National Park of Nepal <https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/3683-violation-of-indigenous-peoples-human-rights-in-chitwan-national-park-of-nepal.html?highlight=WyJsYWh1cm5pcClslmxhaHVybmlwJ3MiXQ==>