

Report from Zakopane:

The First World Ranger Congress

At 6:30 on the evening of Sunday, May 21, 1995, Gordon Miller, chairman of the International Ranger Federation (IRF), officially opened the First World Ranger Congress with the raising of IRF's flag—the green, blue, and white ying-yang symbol, representing the balance of the world's waters, lands and mountains—outside the Kasprowy Hotel in Zakopane, Poland, to the thunderous applause of 135 delegates from ranger organizations from 35 nations around the world.

That triumphant moment symbolized both an end and a beginning—the end of the three intense years of planning and organizing that followed the signing of the original IRF charter in July 1992; and the beginning of a true world community of park and protected area rangers. It was a watershed moment in the history of the ranger profession—and in the movement to bring together the people who are on the ground in protected areas worldwide, directly involved on a day-to-day basis with putting research and theory into practice to conserve and maintain the last fragments of the world's incalculably precious natural and cultural heritage.

The impetus for both the federation and the congress came from a meeting on the shores of Loch Lomond in the spring of 1991, when representatives from England's Association of Countryside Rangers

(ACR), the Scottish Countryside Ranger Association (SCRA), and the U.S. National Park Service's Association of National Park Rangers (ANPR) met in the corner of a hotel pub and agreed to work toward the creation of an international organization and a world ranger congress to formally inaugurate it. That meeting itself followed years of discussion and the laying of groundwork for such an organization by rangers in the United Kingdom.

After a year's work on a charter for IRF, the presidents of the three associations met in Peak District National Park in England in July 1992 and signed the document, formally establishing the International Ranger Federation.

The charter stipulated that member organizations (IRF is a federation of associations rather than an association of individual members) had united in order to:

- Further the professional standards of rangers throughout the world;
- Advance the aims of IUCN's World Conservation Strategy in all its efforts;
- Share knowledge and resources;
- Establish global communications among ranger organizations;
- Foster professional exchanges among rangers;
- Provide advice and guidance on travel contacts in parks in their respective nations;
- Arrange and conduct regular international meetings; and
- Undertake joint activities to directly support fellow member's operations where necessary and feasible.

The charter stipulated that membership as an affiliate association in IRF was open to all national associations of rangers or wardens "who perform the services associated with ranger work, including protection and preservation of wild lands and their resident flora and fauna, protection and preservation of historical and cultural heritages, provision of recreational opportunities in natural settings, interpretation of natural, historical and cultural themes, and administration of public lands."

Once the charter was signed, work began in earnest on two tasks—bringing in national associations and organizing the first world congress. Both have been successes.

Since the signing of the charter just over three years ago, IRF has grown from three to almost 20 members, with more pending. As of this writing, the federation has member associations from England and Wales, the United States (ANPR and the California State Park Ranger Association), Scotland, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Ireland, Italy, Denmark, Paraguay, Honduras, Costa

Rica, the Dominican Republic, Western Australia, Romania, Portugal, Iceland, and Nepal. National associations are currently being formed in Canada, France, Kenya, Finland, Sweden, Australia (including all territories), Malta, Germany, and elsewhere; these will come into IRF in the near future.

If anything, the first world congress in Poland—chosen because of its status as an emerging Eastern-bloc nation and for its outstanding parks (Tatra National Park, near Zakopane, is an international biosphere reserve)—was even more of a success. The delegates all came on their own time; most came at their own cost, though a number received partial support through the contributions of three major donors—Scottish National Heritage, R&R Uniforms, and National Parks and Conservation Association. Because of this, the delegates displayed an exceptionally high level of interest in their work, commitment to improving the lot of rangers and wardens worldwide, and devotion to the cause of natural and cultural resource protection.

The congress had themes for each day that reflected principal concerns of the delegates. On Monday, it was the federation and its purposes, then some of the issues and problems in protected areas; on Tuesday, resource management; on Wednesday, human resources; on Thursday, the means for balancing conflicts, particularly through interpretation and education; on Friday, IRF's future.

The approach to each theme was similar—a presentation or two on the subject, followed by workshops and discussions. The topics addressed in these sessions illustrated the diversity of issues that rangers must address; among them, providing environmental education, dealing with native or aboriginal peoples resident within parks, managing parks on the urban fringe, controlling poaching and other resource depredations, establishing ranger training programs, and integrating research into resource management.

Delegates were continually intrigued to find so many commonalities in issues faced by rangers wherever they lived and worked. Discussions revealed solutions found in one country that might resolve problems in another, and served to foster the already high degree of interchange among delegates. The text of the presentations and of the recommendations which emerged from many of the subsequent discussions will appear in full in the congress proceedings, which are to be published late in 1995.

But congress activities weren't limited to papers and position statements, nor to auditoriums and meeting rooms. Except for Monday, there were field trips each day of the week—a bit of good luck, as it rained on Monday but was mild, clear, and beautiful through the balance of the week. The trips on Tuesday and Wednesday were to different sections of Tatra National Park—a limestone gorge, a cave high on the side of a ridge, an alpine meadow. On Thursday, the group got to visit the park's new visitor center, then adjourned to a nearby meadow for vodka toasts, a roaring bonfire, and rounds of national songs sung by rangers from different countries. The final excursion of the week was a half-day raft trip down magnificent Dunajec Gorge in Pieniny National Park on the border of Poland and Slovakia.

There were also evening speakers and slide shows that provided some of the week's most memorable moments. Robert Swan, who has *walked* to both poles and is about to mount another expedition to the South Pole, gave an extraordinary slide show on his journeys in the Arctic and Antarctic, and concluded by urging that IRF develop a worldwide ranger network to educate the earth's people on their dramatically diminishing resources. He also proposed that Antarctica be declared an international park/protected area and that it be managed by a company of rangers from many nations sponsored by IRF.

On subsequent evenings, delegates gave slide and video presentations on their parks which again revealed both the remarkable diversity of their resources and the striking similarity of their management issues. Although there were inevitable differences in cultures and in the type and severity of local problems, the fundamentals were again the same—increasing visitation, accelerating impacts to natural resources, encroachments, insufficiency of funds and staff, political meddling, and so forth. But delegates also got to see the breath-taking beauty of the world's natural areas, from Kenya to Nepal, Tasmania to Alaska, Brazil to Finland. The effect was to give delegates a sense of *one* worldwide system of parks and protected areas and a realization that rangers preserve the very last fragments of this planet's wondrous natural diversity.

The week ended all too soon. On Friday, delegates got together to review decisions made at a Thursday night board meeting, to talk about IRF's future, and to ratify a declaration that was subsequently presented to reporters at a late-afternoon press conference. The congress concluded with a banquet, farewells, firm promises to write and visit each other, and a strong commitment to further IRF and the mission of rangers worldwide.

IRF is now in the process of following up on decisions made at the congress and in planning future activities, including:

- Preparation and dissemination of quarterly newsletters to member associations.
- Examination of two possible sites for the next congress in 1998—Costa Rica and South Africa.
- Preparation and dissemination of congress proceedings.
- Development of an international code of ethics for rangers.
- Establishment of a working group to prepare a list of issues to be addressed by IRF and strategies for advocating them to citizens and governments.

As noted above, IRF is an organization for associations whose members protect, preserve, and interpret parks and protected areas worldwide, work to support and advance professional standards, and strive to help each other in our common efforts to preserve and sustain the world's heritage. It is different from other international conservation organizations in that it is composed of people who do the work in the field, who fight in the trenches every day. We have come together to support each other and work together, and we are doing it on our own, without the direct support of any government or agency.

While drafting this article, I noted that the objectives of the George Wright Society are remarkably—almost uncannily—similar, to the objectives of IRF: “[P]romoting the application of knowledge, understanding and wisdom to policy making, planning, management, and interpretation of the resources of pro-

tected areas and public lands around the world.” We strongly encourage the board and membership of GWS to consider membership in the federation in order to further our common aims. [Ed. note: Following the preparation of this article, the GWS Board of Directors considered, and declined, IRF’s invitation to join. However, the GWS Board expressed its collective support of the IRF’s mission and activities, and we will continue to offer the pages of *The George Wright Forum* to the IRF for

reports on activities of common interest.]

Over the next decades, the last of the world’s unprotected areas will disappear due to the onslaughts of growing populations and resource demands. Those areas that have been designated as protected will also fall under unprecedented pressures for resource extraction, increased access, and deauthorization. It is time for us to work together to defend what little remains.

The following declaration, prepared by Juan Gambarotta of Uruguay (with the assistance of Rick Smith and Bill Halainen from the United States), was unanimously endorsed by delegates and issued by the congress at the end of the week:

Zakopane Declaration

We, the delegates here assembled in Zakopane, Poland, at the first International Ranger Federation Congress, representing rangers from 35 nations on six continents, do hereby declare our commitment to the following principles:

- That, as principal guardians of the world’s premier natural and cultural protected areas, we are uniquely positioned and qualified to monitor their health, assess their problems, and extrapolate current trends into probable futures;
- That, unless circumstances change, these natural and cultural areas under our charge will in many cases continue to slowly but inexorably decline;
- That the rangers charged with protecting these areas play a distinctive and essential role in identifying problems associated with this decline and proposing practical solutions to them;
- That these rangers also have a fundamental role in explaining the importance of natural and cultural resources to the public, thereby awakening in them the essential desire and interest in conserving them for future generations;
- That these rangers are involved in complex and highly important tasks in preservation of natural and cultural resources, but lack recognition of the importance of these tasks from the governments that employ them;

- That the majority of these rangers live in very difficult conditions, lack adequate institutional support and resources, receive meager salaries, and take significant personal and professional risks to protect these invaluable sites, which constitute core elements of the world's natural and cultural heritage;
- That they all too often sacrifice their lives in their commitment to protection of this heritage;
- And that, for all these reasons, we are firmly committed to seeking greater recognition and attention to their work, to their well-being, and to the critical status of the heritage that they protect and defend, and will exert ourselves in a concerted effort to resolve these problems, enlisting in this effort the support of the people and governments of this earth.



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