

A Report from the Second World Congress of the International Ranger Federation

[Ed. note: this is an abridged version of an account which appeared in the IRF's fall 1997 newsletter.]

During the last week of September, an extraordinarily diverse and dedicated group of more than 200 rangers from 41 nations on six continents attended the International Ranger Federation's Second World Congress at the Cariari Hotel in San José, Costa Rica.

Over the course of six full days of workshops, general meetings, field trips and social activities, rangers from parks around the globe—from Panama to Portugal, Belize to Botswana, Nicaragua to Northern Ireland, Argentina to Australia—engaged in animated discussions about the problems facing our profession and the parks we protect.

As was the case at the congress in Poland in 1995, these problems proved to be remarkably similar. Whether a guardaparque from Peru, a countryside ranger from Scotland, or a vigilanta from Portugal, it was more likely than not that you would find many things in common in conversations with your peers from other countries—insufficient funding, encroachments, political interference, endangered species, poaching, impacts from high visitation, and so on.

But it was also likely that you would find one positive element in every discussion—the uniqueness of the area that you worked in. Collectively, the rangers of the world protect the last vestiges of its once spectacular natural diversity, and the delegates

to the congress invariably spoke with pride and passion about the places in which they worked, often providing illustration through evening slide shows, videos, posters, and, for the hosting Costa Ricans, trips to the sites themselves. It was therefore particularly appropriate that the congress was held in one of the richest natural areas in the world.

Although Costa Rica has only 0.01% of the earth's total surface area, it is home to approximately 5% of the world's total species—an estimated 350,000 species of arthropods, about 10,000 species of terrestrial plants (1,500 of them orchids), 850 species of birds, 218 species of reptiles, 160 species of amphibians, and another 160 species of freshwater fishes. These live in a dozen life zones and 56 discrete climates. A country with such extraordinary biological variety should have a significant percentage of its lands protected as natural areas, and Costa Rica in fact has a remarkable quarter or more of its countryside under such forms of protection.

Opening of the Congress

The beauty and lushness of the land was matched by the graciousness of the hosts. Beginning with first greetings at the airport by members of AGUA, the Costa Rican ranger association, delegates to the congress were received with hospitality and friendliness. The arrivals occurred over several days, and included some impressive journeys, such as several flights from Africa that required almost all of 24 consecutive hours in airliners. AGUA rangers met virtually all incoming flights and escorted delegates through customs and to the Hotel Cariari.

The hotel in many ways captured the biodiversity of the land. The central registration and meeting areas were flanked by wings which consisted of rows of rooms separated from a central covered walkway, thereby allowing sun and rain on the tropical plants which filled the gardens in between. Walking to your room during the regular afternoon showers was akin to a stroll through a rain forest, replete with floral scents and the sounds of dripping rain and myriad birds.

Rangers met in and about the hotel lobby toward the afternoon of the opening day, but it wasn't possible to get a sense of numbers until the flag ceremony which, as at Zakopane, opened the congress. Delegates gathered slowly in front of the hotel. Most were in what seems to be a standard, worldwide ranger off-duty "uniform", what might be called "ranger motley"—rag socks, running

shoes or hiking boots, faded shorts or hiking pants, high-tech outerwear, and the inevitable ball caps, floppy hats and sundry head gear. A few wore uniforms, including the splendid and ever-popular Saudi ranger burnoose. Chairman Gordon Miller said a few words, and the green and blue ying-yang of the IRF flag was raised to a pole on the gateway over the entrance to the hotel—the center piece of a scene which included the rich greens of surrounding tropical trees, the brilliant oranges and pinks and myriad other colors of flowers, the dark greens and blues of the surrounding volcanic mountains, and the grays and whites of the tiers of clouds over San José.

This opening ceremony was followed by a dinner-potlatch in which native Costa Rican foods provided by the hotel were augmented by indigenous food and/or drink brought and shared by the delegates. More than 200 people gathered on a covered patio and worked through the offerings, simultaneously engaging in spirited and energetic discussions with new friends from other nations. It was networking at its best, particularly among the Latin American nations. There were delegates from virtually every country in Central and South America and it was the first time that rangers from across the continent had ever had a chance to get together in such numbers. It was apparent that many connections made that evening would last a lifetime. As one person said, "Even if this was the only event at the congress, it

would be worth the time and effort to get here." The evening closed with a slide show and program on the congress in Zakopane given by U.S. ranger Mark Herberger. Recollections of that first gathering of rangers from around the world set the tone for the coming week of dialogue and camaraderie.

Formal Sessions

The official opening of the congress occurred the next morning in the hotel's main meeting room. The international flavor of the gathering was underscored by the flags flanking the podium, which acknowledged many of the nations represented at the congress, by the several languages heard around the room, and by the uniforms of a dozen or more national ranger organizations. The latter attracted particular attention, as rangers eyed each other's uniforms with both professional and acquisitive interest (many uniform components were swapped during the week, and by the weekend it wasn't unusual to see rangers wearing components of two or three other national organizations).

The first order of business was picking up a receiver and headset for translation purposes. Spanish and English were offered; both, in fact, served as official languages during the week. Although the professional translators sometimes stumbled over specialized terminology, they did an admirable job in keeping up with the often voluble speakers.

The official greetings of the

morning were followed that day and on three of the next four days by a series of keynote speeches, panel presentations, workshops, and group discussions on the themes of the week—sustainable development and its impacts on parks and protected areas, ecotourism, constituency and partnership building, ranger training and development, and the organization and direction of IRF in coming years. Space precludes even summaries of these many presentations; a few—but by no means all—of the memorable moments follow:

- During his opening greetings, Luis Rojas, director of SINAC, the Costa Rican national parks agency, gave a strong tribute to rangers who work to protect parks, then asked that everyone present stand, link hands, and observe a moment of silence in honor of the several Costa Rican, United States and other rangers who had died in the line of duty during the previous year.
- Dr. Carlos Rivas spoke with passion about the struggle of salvaging El Salvador's protected lands after the devastation of years of civil war.
- Speaking again later on the first day, Luis Rojas followed a slide presentation on the spectacular diversity and beauty of Costa Rican parks with a list of problems that had many heads nodding in agreement—poaching (survival, commercial and sport hunting), illegal harvesting of plants, massive

tourism, private lands within protected areas, encroachments, and lack of resources (equipment, money and rangers). He stressed that Central America has gone through a "period of wars and deterioration" and that rangers from nations throughout the area must work together.

- Argentinean ranger Adriana Ferrante and her colleagues, summarizing a workshop on sustainable development, spoke with passion about the need to resolve numerous problems—insufficient funding, insufficient ranger training, insufficient enforcement of regulations to protect parks—and concluded that if parks "continue to be islands, we will all disappear."
- IUCN's Juan Carlos Godoy, after talking about the extraordinary growth of protected areas in Meso-America (from 25 in 1969 to 411 now), stressed that grants are going to nations in that area and that rangers need to press to assure that money gets to the field.
- Chris Styles, John Forrest and Fraser Smith gave a disturbing workshop on the rapid destruction of wildlife in Africa, particularly the death of rangers trying to protect them in nations throughout the continent and the massacre of white rhinos and other big game animals by professional poachers in Garamba National Park in the Republic of Congo, which concluded with Forrest's statement that rangers are not just engaged in anti-poaching operations in many

places, but are actually in shooting wars.

- Anna Baez, president of a tourism organization, gave an articulate presentation on the benefits of ecotourism, but equally thoughtful warnings about the dangers, particularly the impacts of increased visitation to fragile areas.
- Minister of Environment and Energy Rene Castro, in the concluding presentation of the week, outlined Costa Rica's innovative idea of selling oxygen produced by the country's forests to polluting nations who must meet international standards, thereby adding a strong economic justification to parks and protected areas.

The full text of as many presentations and workshop summaries as can be gathered will appear in the congress proceedings, which IRF hopes to issue later this winter.

Social Activities and Field Trips

These meetings and workshops comprised only part of the day, which began for some with bird watching in the pre-dawn hours and continued for others with exuberant dancing into the late hours of the night. In between were myriad opportunities for socializing. There were, to name a few, the breakfast and lunch buffets, coffee breaks in the morning and afternoon (and what coffee!), extended evening dinners at the hotel, forays to bars and restaurants and stores in San José, slide shows and video presentations on national parks and protec-

ted areas from around the world, and marathon trading sessions (where everything from uniform components to pins and posters were swapped in a truly international bazaar).

Although language was sometimes a problem, a solution was almost always found. Typical was an evening slide show which was given in Russian, then translated from Russian to Spanish by a ranger familiar with both languages, then simultaneously interpreted into English for non-Spanish speakers. On other occasions, rangers dusted off language skills not used since college to struggle through conversations. Some of these went very slowly. One ranger who spoke no Spanish and only a little English summed up what was an experience for many—that it can be exhausting to speak and listen so carefully for an entire day. But it was a testament to him and to the several other rangers who weren't fluent in either language that they both attended and worked hard to keep up with the presentations.

The undisputed high points for many were Saturday's field trips to several nearby national parks and protected areas—Parque Nacional Volcan Poas, Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo, Parque Nacional Volcan Irazu, Parque Nacional Tapanti, and others. There the nation's great biodiversity became evident—its rugged mountains and volcanoes, its luxuriant forests, its many, many species. It was common to have a spectacularly beautiful bird appear, then find that none of the two dozen

rangers in a particular group had any idea of either its species or genus. That experience occurred repeatedly. It was fortunate that each group was guided by both a Costa Rican ranger and a guide from one of the travel services, most of whom appeared to have backgrounds in natural sciences.

The congress ended with a closing banquet. The evening opened with a parade which featured a band and costumed dancers wearing huge painted head pieces who lead a line of dancing rangers through the hall. After a few awards and presentations, the evening—and the congress—concluded with a slide show by Arrie Schreiber of South Africa on Kruger National Park, site of the next world congress in either 1999 or 2000.

For some delegates, the banquet marked the end of a great week. But others went on to work side by side with Costa Rican rangers for a few days, or to raft whitewater rivers, or to visit other parks. Their reports upon returning have been the same: "What gracious people, what an incredible country!"

The congress culminated with the issuance of two important documents—a resolution and a declaration. The former was introduced by the Game Rangers Association of Africa, the latter was prepared as a statement summarizing the important points made during the week regarding sustainable tourism. Both were unanimously endorsed by delegates. The text of each follows:

Resolution: Establishment of a United Nations Wildlife Protection Unit

The International Ranger Federation (IRF) and its affiliate, the Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRA), have become extremely concerned at the increasing and indiscriminate destruction of wildlife (including endangered species) in many countries on the African continent. For what are often very good reasons, governments are no longer in a position to stem this slaughter, which more often than not is being carried out by large groups of well-organized, well-trained and heavily-armed poachers, many with military backgrounds, who can and do move great distances from neighbouring countries to carry out what in fact are commercial poaching operations.

Rangers, under-trained, under-equipped and often lacking effective leadership and backing, have in many instances become demoralized and intimidated. They are no longer a deterrent. It appears that in Africa, at least, we are entering an era of slaughter of wildlife unprecedented in this century.

Even World Heritage sites, such as the Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, will soon cease to exist as conservation areas, unless effective action is taken soon. Some 10,000 elephant and 24,000 buffalo will probably be shot within the next 12 months, amongst numerous other species. Unless effective anti-poaching operations are commenced before the end

of December, 1997, the remaining northern white rhino, the last in Africa, will be reduced to what could be an unsustainable level, if not extinction.

Many national parks in African countries have had most species of game poached to a level of non-sustainability, i.e. these parks exist in name only. Angola, for example, has some of Africa's largest parks; however, many of these areas do not even enjoy the presence of a ranger. Hence, animal numbers have decreased dramatically and localized extinctions have occurred. The potential for much-needed revenue from ecotourism is already lost.

A similar situation exists in Mozambique. Here, though, with the large proposed trans-frontier parks with South Africa and Zimbabwe, it is hoped that the situation can be rectified, combined with an injection of game animals from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The following plan of action is suggested:

- The GRA has among its membership some of the best anti-poaching and conservation expertise on the African continent.
- The GRA has the ability to draw the necessary personnel to address the problem(s) at hand from the pool of rangers throughout Africa.
- The GRA believes that, if this expertise is correctly used, there is still a chance of reversing the situation in areas like Garamba.

Practically, this is possible; however, politically such an initiative is extremely difficult.

After much consideration and consultation with the GRA, the IRF believes that a wildlife protection unit should be formed by the UN as a part of its operations world-wide, with specific reference to Africa at present. This unit should be comprised of selected professional rangers from the countries concerned, who would be used to:

- Assist governments to reduce the level of uncontrolled commercial poaching in threatened conservation areas.
- Train rangers employed by those governments, using accepted training techniques, as developed by internationally accepted conservation bodies like the GRA.
- Conduct regular re-training, as required, in the interests of ensuring the sustainability of field efficiency and standards.
- This should be carried out with the cooperation and assistance of relevant ranger associations.

This will ensure the integration of local people around the management and protection of their natural resource. Moreover, through maintaining the ecological integrity of these areas, high revenue generating processes like ecotourism can be developed to provide socio-economic uplift around these areas.

It is inconceivable that the nations of this earth can sit back and allow this tragedy in the making to proceed to its inevitable end. Given the above, the IRF thus recommends to this congress that:

A resolution be passed, requesting U.N. assistance to develop a U.N. wildlife protection unit, and that the IRF create a council to follow-up and assist in the forming of this unit.

The San José Declaration

We, the delegates here assembled in San José, Costa Rica, at the Second International Ranger Federation Congress, representing rangers from 41 nations on six continents, do hereby declare our commitment to the following principles regarding the practice and application of sustainable development in the world's parks and protected areas:

- That the world's parks and protected areas represent the last vestiges of our common natural and cultural heritage, and, as such, are unique, invaluable and irreplaceable;
- That, as principal guardians of the these areas, we are uniquely positioned and qualified to implement, evaluate and advise on the effectiveness of sustainable development;
- That sustainable development—that is, the practice of satisfying the needs of the present without compromising the legacy of the future—can be an effective tool, if properly utilized, for simultane-

ously protecting the world's natural and cultural heritage and accommodating the needs of indigenous and other peoples living in and around parks and protected areas;

- That sustainable development also provides an effective tool for increasing public support for parks and protected areas, critical to the future protection of these often fragile areas;
- That it is nonetheless of paramount importance to assure that the integrity of parks and protected areas are not compromised by improper application of sustainable practices, as these areas represent a tiny and diminishing fraction of the world's natural and cultural heritage;
- That the practice of sustainable development should not negatively affect biodiversity and ecological integrity of parks and protected areas, nor be applied to wilderness or highly protected areas, nor compromise the mission and purpose of any park or protected area or portion thereof;
- That the practice of sustainable development should not be employed as a subterfuge to open

parks and protected areas to special interests, private or public, which seek to capitalize on their resources for financial, political or other advantages not in the public interest;

- That the practice of sustainable development should not be employed as a means for replacing rangers and other park professionals, who have the requisite conservation ethic and work in the public interest to protect the public's heritage, with private entities, who lack a similar ethic and mandate;
- That there should be no further loss of protected lands, whether through the improper application of sustainable practices or other causes, as they represent the barest minimum appropriate to the preservation of the world's imperiled natural and cultural diversity; and
- That, rather, a concerted effort should be made to expand the number, size and variety of parks and protected lands, to strengthen and expand the ranger profession, to protect natural and cultural resources, and to foster a conservation ethic worldwide.

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