



WWF'S SECRET WAR

WWF Funds Guards Who Have Tortured And Killed People

The World Wide Fund for Nature funds vicious paramilitary forces to fight poaching. A BuzzFeed News investigation reveals the hidden human cost.



Tom Warren
Investigations Correspondent



Katie J.M. Baker
BuzzFeed News Investigative Reporter

Posted on March 4, 2019, at 3:26 a.m. ET

This is Part 1 of a BuzzFeed News investigation.

To read the other articles in this series, [click here](#).

Down the road from the crocodile ponds inside Nepal's renowned Chitwan National Park, in a small clearing shaded by sala trees, sits a jail. Hira Chaudhary went there one summer night with boiled green maize and chicken for her husband, Shikharam, a farmer who had been locked up for two days.

Shikharam was in too much pain to swallow. He crawled toward Hira, his thin body covered in bruises, and told her through sobs that forest rangers were torturing him. "They beat him mercilessly and put saltwater in his nose and mouth," Hira later told police.

The rangers believed that Shikharam helped his son bury a rhinoceros horn in his backyard. They couldn't find the horn, but they threw Shikharam in their jail anyway, [court documents filed by the prosecution show](#).

Nine days later, he was dead.



Hira Chaudhary
Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

An autopsy showed seven broken ribs and "blue marks and bruises" all over his body. Seven eyewitnesses corroborated his wife's account of nonstop beatings. Three park officials, including the chief warden, were [arrested](#) and charged with murder.

This was a sensitive moment for one of the globe's most prominent charities. The World Wide Fund for Nature

(WWF) had long helped fund and equip Chitwan's forest rangers, who patrol the area in jeeps, boats, and on elephant backs alongside soldiers from the park's in-house army battalion. Now WWF's partners in the war against poaching stood accused of torturing a man to death.

WWF's staff on the ground in Nepal leaped into action — not to demand justice, but to lobby for the charges to disappear. When the Nepalese government dropped the case months later, the charity declared it a victory in the fight against poaching. Then WWF Nepal continued to work closely with the rangers and fund the park as if nothing had happened.

As for the rangers who were charged in connection with Shikharam's death, WWF Nepal later hired one of them to work for the charity. It handed a second a special anti-poaching award. By then he had written a tell-all memoir that described one of his favorite interrogation techniques: waterboarding.

Shikharam's alleged murder in 2006 was no isolated incident: It was part of a pattern that persists to this day. In national parks across Asia and Africa, the beloved nonprofit with the cuddly panda logo funds, equips, and works directly with paramilitary forces that have been accused of beating, torturing, sexually assaulting, and murdering scores of people. As recently as 2017, forest rangers at a WWF-funded park in Cameroon tortured an 11-year-old boy in front of his parents, the family told BuzzFeed News. Their village submitted a complaint to WWF, but months later, the family said they still hadn't heard back.

WWF said that it does not tolerate any brutality by its partners. "Human rights abuses are totally unacceptable and can never be justified in the name of



conservation,” the charity said in a statement.

People living near Nepal's Chitwan National Park.

Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

But WWF has provided high-tech enforcement equipment, cash, and weapons to forces implicated in atrocities against indigenous communities. In the coming days, BuzzFeed News will reveal how the charity has continued funding and equipping rangers, even after higher-ups became aware of evidence of serious human rights abuses.

Make more work like this possible by becoming a BuzzFeed News member today.

bzfd.it

A yearlong BuzzFeed News investigation across six countries — based on more than 100 interviews and thousands of pages of documents, including confidential memos, internal budgets, and emails discussing weapons purchases — can reveal:

- Villagers have been whipped with belts, attacked with machetes, beaten unconscious with bamboo sticks, sexually assaulted, shot, and murdered by WWF-supported anti-poaching units, according to reports and documents obtained by BuzzFeed News.
- The charity’s field staff in Asia and Africa have organized anti-poaching missions with notoriously vicious shock troops, and signed off on a proposal to kill trespassers penned by a park director who presided over the killings of dozens of people.
- WWF has provided paramilitary forces with salaries, training, and supplies — including knives, night vision binoculars, riot gear, and batons — and funded raids on villages. In one African country, it embroiled itself in a botched arms deal to buy assault rifles from a brutal army that has paraded the streets with the severed

heads of alleged “criminals.”

- The charity has operated like a global spymaster, organizing, financing, and running dangerous and secretive networks of informants motivated by “fear” and “revenge,” including within indigenous communities, to provide park officials with intelligence – all while publicly denying working with informants.



World Wildlife Fund activists demonstrate on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change conference.

Jorge Silva | Reuters

WWF has launched an “independent review” led by human rights specialists into the evidence uncovered by BuzzFeed News. “We see it as our urgent responsibility to get to the bottom of the allegations BuzzFeed has made, and we recognize the importance of such scrutiny,” the charity said in a statement. “With this in mind, and while many of BuzzFeed’s assertions do not match our understanding of events, we have commissioned an independent review into the matters raised.” The charity declined to answer detailed questions sent by BuzzFeed News.

It continued: “We hope that an accurate picture of our conservation work on the ground, the challenges faced by all, in some of the most dangerous and hostile places on Earth, and the efforts being made to secure a future for people and planet can be reflected in the story.”

WWF was established by a small group of mostly British naturalists in Zurich in 1961. Since then it has expanded globally, establishing field offices in over 40 countries, which are coordinated and led by executives at its international headquarters in Gland, Switzerland. It aims to “protect the future of nature,” a vital mission that has galvanized millions of supporters, including famous patrons, from Leonardo DiCaprio to Prince Charles to Sir

David Attenborough. The charity's advertising campaigns, many of which promote rangers as "one of the planet's first and last lines of defense" against wildlife crime, inspire small donors to give in droves. In 2017 alone, WWF raked in more than 767 million euros, more than half of which came from members of the public.

"Some types of torture are done to obtain confessions, as the killing of a rhino is a very serious case."

The charity funnels large sums of cash to its field offices in the developing world where staff work alongside national governments — including brutal dictatorships — to help maintain and police vast national parks that shelter endangered species. It says it is active in more than 100 countries on five continents, and

showcases its collaborations with communities, whether in protecting reefs in the Pacific islands or facing off against illegal gold mining in the Amazon rainforest.

But many parks are magnets for poachers, and WWF expends much of its energy — and money — in a global battle against the organized criminal gangs that prey on the endangered species the charity was founded to protect.

It's a crusade that WWF refers to in the hardened terms of war. Public statements speak of "boots on the ground," partnerships with "elite military forces," the creation of a "Jungle Brigade," and the deployment of "conservation drones." The charity sells forest ranger children's dolls for \$75, branded as "Frontline Heroes."

WWF is not alone in its embrace of militarization: Other conservation charities have enlisted in the war on poaching in growing numbers over the past decade, recruiting veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to teach forest rangers counterinsurgency techniques and posting promotional materials showing armed guards standing at

attention in fatigues and berets. Ex-special forces operatives promote their services at wildlife conferences. But WWF stands out as the biggest global player in this increasingly crowded space.

The enemy is real, and dangerous. Poaching is a billion-dollar industry that terrorizes animals and threatens some species' very existence. Poachers take advantage of regions ravaged by poverty and violence. And the work of forest rangers is indeed perilous: By one 2018 estimate, poachers killed nearly 50 rangers around the world in the previous year. But like any conflict, WWF's war on poaching has civilian casualties.



Nepali army personnel burn wildlife parts seized from poachers at Chitwan National Park.

AFP / Getty Images

Indigenous people living near one park in southeast

Cameroon described a litany of horrors in interviews and documents obtained by BuzzFeed News: dead-of-night break-ins by men wielding machetes, rifle butt bludgeonings, burn torture involving chilis ground into paste, and homes and camps torched to the ground.

Their tormentors in these accounts were not poachers, but the park officials who police them. Although governments employ the rangers, they often rely on WWF to bankroll their work. Rangers are scattered thousands of miles apart across many countries, but WWF's international network of offices effectively stitches them together into one global force fighting under the same set of principles.

Staffers in the charity's in-country field offices are supposed to report any allegations of brutality back to its headquarters in Switzerland. But documents reveal WWF's own staffers on the ground are often deeply entwined with the rangers' work — coordinating their operations, jointly directing their raids and patrols alongside government officials, and turning a blind eye to their misdeeds.

Since 1872, when Native American tribes were forced to leave their ancestral lands to make way for Yellowstone National Park, hundreds of thousands of people worldwide have lost access to their land to ensure animals roam in people-free spaces. These communities, from the Tharu in Nepal to the Baka in Central Africa, remain on the outside looking in at land where their ancestors gathered food, built shelter, and made medicine out of natural resources for generations.

With deep knowledge of the land and its animals, these communities should be ideal partners in WWF's war against poaching, anthropologists and activists



said. Alienating locals only encourages them to assist professional out-of-town

A Baka woman fishes in the forest near Lobéké National Park.

Tom Warren / BuzzFeed News

poachers, making that battle harder. “The Baka are the eyes and ears of the forest and could really help conservation,” said Charles Jones Nsonkali, a Cameroonian indigenous rights activist. “But they are treated as the enemy instead.”

WWF said it does not see indigenous communities as its target: The goal is to catch organized criminals, not people struggling to feed their families. The charity vows to work hand in hand with these communities, and even has a written policy pledging that it will “not undermine” their human rights.

Yet, time and again, indigenous groups — both small-fry hunters and innocent bystanders — say they suffer at the hands of the rangers.

This is the untold story of collateral damage in WWF’s secret global war.





A sign near an entrance to Chitwan.

Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

On his knees outside Chitwan’s jail, Shikharam Chaudhary begged his wife, Hira, to get him out before it was too late. “He had told me crying that they might kill him if I cannot take him away,” Hira later told human rights investigators.

But all Hira could do was give her husband an ointment for his wounds. Shikharam insisted he was innocent, but he didn’t have a lawyer, and there was no judge to hear his case or grant him bail. No police officer or prosecutor had approved his imprisonment.

Nepal’s park officials were given this free rein decades ago, shortly after WWF first arrived in Chitwan in 1967 to launch a rhinoceros conservation project in a lush lowland forest at the foot of the Himalayas. Six years later, Nepal created Chitwan National Park, 360 square miles of protected land

for the area's one-horned rhinos, Royal Bengal tigers, and slender-snouted gharial crocodiles.

Got a tip? You can email tips@buzzfeed.com. To learn how to reach us securely, go to tips.buzzfeed.com

To clear the way, tens of thousands of indigenous people were evicted from their homes and moved to areas outside the park's boundaries. These people had lived in the area for centuries, building their roofs out of leaves, making medical ointments out of tree bark, and feeding their families with fish from the river.

The park's creation radically changed their way of life: Now they must scrape together money to buy tin for their roofs, pay hospital bills, and farm new crops. They also live in fear of the park's wild animals, which, while rising in number thanks to anti-poaching efforts, have destroyed crops and mauled people to death.

Rhinoceros horns can sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars on the black market. Professional poachers offer a tiny portion to locals who assist them, which can be hard for impoverished residents of villages to turn down.

Chitwan's forest rangers work alongside over 1,000 soldiers from the park's army battalion. Nepalese law gives them special power to investigate wildlife-related crimes, make arrests without a warrant, and retain immunity in cases where an officer has "no alternative" but to shoot the offender, even if the suspect dies. Chitwan's chief warden serves as a quasi-judge who for years had the ability to

"This was how I learned to pour water into the nose while interrogating. To tell the truth, after that we used this method many times in Chitwan."

dole out 15-year prison terms himself (a recent constitutional amendment transfers all criminal cases that require sentences longer than a year to district courts).

Starting in the 1990s, WWF Nepal set up “anti-poaching units” at the country’s parks. The charity provided monthly salaries for staffers, rewards for informants, and a variety of field gear for rangers, including “khukuris,” curved knives commonly used by the Gurkhas, the famously fierce army brigade, according to internal documents obtained by BuzzFeed News. A former WWF Nepal employee said he was once told to buy North Face jackets for the army officials inside the park — who donned them only after he replaced the North Face logo with WWF’s emblem.

Indigenous groups living near Chitwan have long detailed a host of abuses by these forces. Villagers have reported beatings, torture, sexual assaults, and killings by the park's guards. They’ve accused park officials of confiscating their firewood and vegetables, and forcing them into unpaid labor.



Shikharam Chaudhary's brother, who advocated for his case.

Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

When forest rangers locked up Shikharam in June 2006, park authorities were scrambling to curb the poaching that spiked alongside social unrest during the country’s Maoist insurgency. They managed to save more rhinos the following year — but the

success came at a cost.

Rangers had not just waterboarded Shikharam, according to eyewitness testimony in police records and a human rights report obtained by BuzzFeed News. Fellow detainees reported that they had seen the guards kicking him in the chest, beating him with bamboo poles, and stomping on

him with their boots. Indigenous rights activists who visited Shikharam in jail said they warned Chief Warden Tikaram Adhikari that he was in a bad state.

“We asked the chief warden to stop torturing him and requested that Shikharam be taken to a hospital for treatment, but he just shrugged off our request,” activist Chabilal Neupane told BuzzFeed News. “He told us it was necessary to put pressure on detainees during the investigation process.”

When Shikharam finally fell unconscious, one detainee told police he had heard guards say “the oldie has stopped breathing.” He died at a hospital soon afterward.

After Shikharam’s death, the park released a statement saying he had simply fainted and fallen off a bench after an uneventful week.

Tharu activists demanded a postmortem, obtained by BuzzFeed News, which found “a clear indication of physical violence.” The cause of death was declared to be “excessive pressure applied on the back and left side of the chest,” which rendered Shikharam unable to breathe.

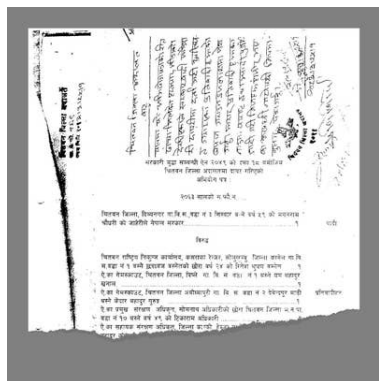
WWF responded to the Shikharam crisis with emphatic support for the park officials charged with murdering him, all of whom, including Adhikari, claimed Shikharam died of natural causes and told BuzzFeed News they weren’t involved in his death.

In a series of meetings hosted by the government’s forest department while the park officials awaited a verdict, staff from a joint initiative between WWF and the government of Nepal asked the Tharu activists to convince Shikharam’s family to drop the criminal complaint, multiple activists told BuzzFeed News.

The section manager of the WWF-backed initiative was then Purna Bahadur Kunwar.

“He would say, ‘Let’s not politicize the issue, it was an accident, who will be there to take care of animals?’” claimed Birendra Mahato, the chairperson of the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center.

Purna Kunwar, now the field coordinator for another WWF project, said he “could not clearly recall the incident in question.” He asked BuzzFeed News to email him further questions, but did not respond in time for publication.



Court documents from the Chaudhary case.

Obtained by BuzzFeed News

The family pushed ahead, but to no avail. The Nepalese government intervened and withdrew the case against the accused killers in March 2007.

WWF celebrated. “I have every confidence that this move will renew the motivation of park staff and other conservationists to save

Nepal’s rhinos and root out illegal wildlife trade,” WWF Nepal president Anil Manandhar declared [in a press release](#). “WWF will always be there to support this endeavor in any way we can.”

The government’s decision was later questioned in an investigation by a Nepalese human rights group, which reviewed medical records and re-interviewed witnesses. The group concluded Shikharam had died due to torture “at the hand of Park authorities” and called his treatment “inhuman, cruel and degrading.” Assuming that forestry officials could run their own system of justice was “as foolish as to suppose that a child can shoulder the load of a grown up person,” the report said.

The three men who had been accused of murder did not take part in the review, and continued to deny involvement

in his death. But another Chitwan official spoke to the group's investigators about general interrogation practices at the park. "Some types of torture are done to obtain confessions, as the killing of a rhino is a very serious case," he said. The report was later featured in a [book](#).

After Shikharam died, another indigenous man [was found dead](#) at the park's jail. His family insisted that he had been tortured and accused guards of murdering him. Park officials said he had hanged himself.

A 2008 [internal report](#) by a WWF consultant, obtained by BuzzFeed News, came to its own conclusion about Shikharam's death. The report referred to Shikharam as a "crime convicted individual" — even though he had never been formally charged — and lamented that the arrests of the three Chitwan officials had "widely demoralized park staff and paralyzed anti-poaching operations."

D E B I N

[Want to follow our WWF reporting? Click here to receive updates.](#)

bzfd.it

WWF's work with violent partners spans the globe. In Central Africa, internal documents show the charity's close involvement in military-style operations with both a repressive dictatorship and a notoriously fierce army.

In Cameroon, under authoritarian president Paul Biya, rangers have long been accused of beating and torturing people who live near the WWF-supported parks they patrol. The government believes "there are no human rights violations anywhere" in Cameroon, said spokesperson Loh Guillaume Kimbi. He added that taking "concrete steps to prevent poaching cannot and should not be considered at any moment as a gross violations of human rights."

Secret budgeting documents from Lobéké National Park in Cameroon show how closely WWF’s staff have worked with government forces. The charity has helped train them, paid their salaries, and built them homes. It has bought them radios, satellite phones, TVs, 4x4s, and boats. And it has allocated a significant portion of the millions in donor money it spends at Lobéké to “enforcement” activities, including patrols and raids.

Obtained by BuzzFeed News

Tableau 11. Evolution du budget investi par le WWF au segment Cameroun du Tri-National de la Langhe entre 2007 et 2014

Année	Total	Fonctionnement	Protection	Recherche et suivi écologique	Capacité	Services Fin. d'accompagnement
2007	154 647 956	118 763 864	30 977 726	37 409 296	162 009 296	
2008	300 631 143	144 218 904	124 109 728	52 479 256	64 792 217	
2009	365 280 700	173 481 905	64 037 913	48 039 435	79 652 286	
2010	364 497 833	132 769 848	68 909 713	44 629 113	194 149 162	
2011	311 486 076	125 383 310	78 564 549	47 919 741	54 564 114	
2012	245 442 220	105 370 495	43 640 033	43 640 033	28 054 307	24 937 142
2013	262 889 293	105 370 495	43 124 970	46 113 663	33 082 700	20 209 563
2014	313 134 000	125 556 133	56 209 138	64 407 429	32 477 403	
Total	2 190 389 196	1 027 896 204	594 233 832	408 822 646	696 589 336	48 224 747

Depuis 2009, le FPN Identifié également des fonds d'appoint de FTNS comme indiqué dans le tableau 14.

Tableau 12. Evolution du budget investi par le FTNS au Parc National de Lobéké entre 2009 et 2014

Année	Fonctionnement	Budget alloué (Fds)	Activités	Total (Fds)
2009	51 644 144 (Les fonds ont été affectés exclusivement à l'amélioration des infrastructures au niveau du FPN)			51 644 540
2010	48 212 840 (Les fonds ont été affectés exclusivement à l'amélioration des infrastructures au niveau du FPN)		29 586 000	77 798 840
2011			21 595 000	21 595 000
2012		50 000 000	70 399 500	120 399 500
2013	4 750 000			4 750 000
2014		149 857 386	121 580 500	271 437 886
Total				357 627 766

Les fonds FTNS en appui au FPN ont été destinés à l'amélioration des infrastructures d'accompagnement et à la conduite des activités de gestion.

Internal budgeting documents. Obtained by BuzzFeed News

The park’s management plan says WWF will help organize raids, known as “coup de poings,” on local villages suspected of harboring poachers. A confidential internal report found that such missions, frequently conducted in the dead of night with the help of police units, were often violent.

WWF also worked with the Battalion d’Intervention Rapide (BIR), a Cameroonian special forces unit that has separately been accused of killing unarmed civilians. (Kimbi, the government spokesperson, denied that

the BIR has been involved in human rights abuses.) The charity has long denied collaborating with the controversial unit, but emails obtained by BuzzFeed News show its staff in Cameroon responded enthusiastically when an official called on them to arrange a “well-armed” team to catch suspected poachers who they believed had just shot a ranger and suggested they seek the backing of “our colleagues from the BIR.” Three days later, a WWF staff member wrote that he had met with a BIR lieutenant to “solicit their participation” in “this important patrol.”

In neighboring Central African Republic (CAR), a failed state in civil war, WWF's staff embroiled themselves in something potentially even riskier: an arms deal.

WWF's local office plays a central role at the Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve on the southwestern tip of the CAR: The charity formally comanages the park and its forest rangers in partnership with the country's environmental ministry.

In 2009, WWF staff in CAR got involved with the purchase of assault rifles from the country's army, a force notorious for committing human rights abuses, including decapitating civilians and parading their heads through the streets.

Though the anti-poaching forces it works with are often armed, WWF itself has strict rules against buying or selling weapons. And the park was already in trouble: It was losing donor money in a haze of severe mismanagement. In one internal memo, a local WWF employee warned colleagues of "critical" problems: rules broken, "bad contracts" that paid out "exaggerated amounts," and other "certain abuses" found in the park's budget.

One former WWF employee in CAR told BuzzFeed News he was recruited to help "camouflage the deal because none of our funders were permitted to buy weapons."

But as he examined the invoices, he noticed that the numbers didn't add up. In an email, he prodded Jean Bernard Yarisse, WWF's top official in the country, for more detail. An AK assault rifle "should cost us" 266,666 Central African francs (around \$615), the employee wrote, "so for 15" weapons "it reaches 4 million." If so, he wrote, that would leave about 2 million francs unaccounted for: "Does that mean that two boxes of ammunition cost 1 million each?"

Soon it all unraveled. Yarissem explained what happened in a reply to an email sent to nine other officials under the subject line “scandale.” Members of the CAR army had “embezzled” funds meant for arms and ammunition. (The CAR government did not respond to a request for comment.)

Yarissem wrote he was upset the money from the deal had gone missing. Yet he betrayed no misgivings about purchasing the guns, which he referred to as “the weapons that we possess.”

Yarissem did not respond to requests for comment. One official copied on the email initially denied any involvement in the deal to BuzzFeed News, saying, “The idea of WWF buying weapons is unbelievable.” Reminded of details in the email, he backtracked, acknowledging there had been “some discussion” about such a deal, but he did not believe it had gone through.

WWF declined to answer questions about the botched arms deal when asked about it in detail last week.

After that deal went awry, the charity’s staff in CAR did not appear to shy away from involvement with weapons. The charity bought food and fuel for soldiers deployed on an anti-poaching mission during the peak of the country’s civil war, according to two former staffers who spoke to BuzzFeed News on condition of anonymity. One former WWF staffer said he had personally taught rangers how to safely handle AK-47s and how to conduct defensive combat tactics.

In the years after Shikharam’s death, WWF continued to support Nepal’s forest rangers. In 2008, the charity wrote about the success of their intensive campaign called

Operation Unicornis to increase the number of rhinos in Chitwan. The mission included “risky undercover investigations,” according to WWF’s internal newsletter.

The next year, Kamal Jung Kunwar, one of the three officials charged in Shikharam’s death, wrote a memoir about his time at the park. In *Four Years for the Rhino*, which was published by a Nepalese nonprofit, Kunwar claims to have arrested over 150 poachers, brokers, and smugglers over a three-year period. He insisted he was innocent, claimed he was out of the country when Shikharam was detained, and speculated that the damning autopsy results were fabricated.

But Kunwar freely admitted that the forces he oversaw as coordinator of the park’s anti-poaching operation unit regularly beat suspects. He wrote about giving a suspect a “hard slap,” buying packets of chilli powder for sprinkling into suspects’ eyes, and watching as a fellow ranger punched a boy in the nose until it “started bleeding profusely.” In another, he described a Tibetan boy who refused to speak during interrogation until soldiers poured water into his nose and eyes — the same waterboarding technique Shikharam had described to his wife.

“This was how I learned to pour water into the nose while interrogating,” Kunwar wrote. “To tell the truth, after that we used this method many times in Chitwan. This method was useful in obtaining information.”

Narendra Shrestha/ EPA-EFE

In an interview, Kunwar told BuzzFeed News he stood by his memoir: “Everything is in my book,” he said, “just read my book.” He defended his tactics. “It was not torture,” he said. “It was interrogation.”

“I could have hidden the truth and not talked about it in the book,” he added, “but I didn’t because I wanted to present the real scenario. I wanted to let people know about the situation at the time and say, “This is what had to be done to save rhinos.”

In a follow-up email, Kunwar added that it was important to show “respect to others’ human rights,” even if they “are suspected of killing pregnant rhinos, child rapist, human murderer etc.”

WWF spent nearly \$3 million on the area including Chitwan National Park in 2009–10, nearly double what it had spent only five years earlier. In 2010, the United Nations released a report documenting six recent extrajudicial killings by army personnel patrolling national parks around Nepal, including Chitwan. Park officials “played an active role in obstructing criminal accountability,” the report said, by falsifying and destroying evidence, falsely claiming the victims were poachers, and pressuring the families of the victims to

withdraw criminal complaints.

In one case, soldiers shot and killed two indigenous women and a 12-year-old girl while they were gathering tree bark at Bardiya National Park in 2010. The victims weren't criminals, another human rights report concluded, just "very poor people who had hardly any source of income."

Neither report mentioned WWF or made any findings about its relationship with the parks or their officials. The charity has funded anti-poaching enforcement at each of the national parks where the killings took place. One of its major celebrity board members, Leonardo DiCaprio, funds tiger conservation efforts at both Bardiya and Chitwan national parks. (DiCaprio did not respond to a request for comment.)

Two years after the report was released, a Tharu woman was cutting grass near the banks of the Rapti River when a soldier patrolling Chitwan National Park attacked her, she told BuzzFeed News. He stepped on her hands, threw away her sickle, and pushed her into the bushes, where he ripped off her clothes and attempted to rape her. When she resisted, he beat her with a bamboo stick until she lost consciousness.

Got a tip? You can email tips@buzzfeed.com. To learn how to reach us securely, go to tips.buzzfeed.com

The soldier was arrested, and a park-affiliated committee tasked with improving local relations stepped in. The woman and her family told BuzzFeed News she was pressured not to press charges against the soldier. "I didn't get justice," she said. Her knee is still so damaged that she's unable to work.

"I am still suffering," she said.

The sexual assault made national headlines. Despite WWF's

deep involvement with Chitwan National Park and its commitment to protecting indigenous people from abuse, no one from the charity ever met with the woman to discuss the attempted rape, she said. A few months later, WWF gave the soldier's army battalion an award for combating rhino poaching.

Chitwan park officials continued to lock people up. As of November 2013, there were 80 people detained in Chitwan custody, some whom had been there more than 15 years, according to the Kathmandu Post.

Chitwan National Park did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

During this time, Chitwan's former chief warden, Tikaram Adhikari, continued working for Nepal's forest department — and closely with WWF. In an interview with BuzzFeed News, Adhikari denied any involvement with Shikharam's death and said he was only arrested because of political pressure from Maoists. Shikharam's autopsy results were fabricated, he said.

After the case was dropped, Adhikari's influence expanded.

Chitwan's Rapti River

Frank Bienewald / Getty Images

In 2014, M.K. Yadava, then director of Kaziranga National Park in India — where WWF has backed rangers with supplies and arranged combat and ambush training — produced a document laying out an extraordinarily hardline anti-poaching strategy in which due process would take a backseat.

“Never allow any unauthorized entry (Kill the unwanted)” was a key principle. “If a question arises as to which rights shall get higher priority,” Yadava wrote, “it shall not be the human rights.”

He called on the government to grant him the same sweeping powers to arrest and detain suspects as his Nepalese neighbors. “This is also what we need to do in

India,” he wrote.

Yadava personally thanked Adhikari in his proposal. He had invited Adhikari to an international conference where, with a senior WWF representative looking on, Adhikari “shared his positive experiences of controlling poaching in Chitwan by conferring magisterial powers to the Chief Warden,” Yadava wrote.

Yadava’s strategy may have helped curb poaching, but in 2017 the BBC reported rangers at the park had killed dozens of people under his watch, including innocent villagers. “The instruction is whenever you see the poachers or hunters, we should start our guns and hunt them,” one guard told the BBC. “First we warn them — who are you,” another guard said. “But if they resort to firing we have to kill them.” The story led to international outcry, but there was little mention of WWF’s role at the park. “We do not support any procedure that advocates an alleged ‘shoot on sight policy,’” WWF said in a statement, denying that such a policy existed.

“I could have hidden the truth and not talked about it in the book, but I didn’t because I wanted to present the real scenario. I wanted to let people know about the situation at the time and say, ‘This is what had to

But BuzzFeed News can now reveal that WWF India was not only aware of Yadava’s proposal, but supported it. Documents reveal that five WWF employees — including the chief executive of its India office — were listed on his proposal as members of an “expert panel and peer-review group.” One WWF India staffer responded to the paper by offering to help park officials motivate and train its “frontline staff.”

Indigenous people have also reported abuse by rangers near other WWF-backed protected

**be done to
save rhinos.”**

areas across India. Just last year, a man who was out collecting wood near Pench Tiger Reserve was found beaten to death. Eight forest rangers were arrested, and police said one of them had confessed that they had burned his body in the forest to destroy evidence.

BuzzFeed News sent a detailed letter seeking comment to numerous Indian Forest Service officials, as well as Yadava. None responded.

Financial documents show that, over the years, WWF has supplied Indian rangers with hundreds of batons and anti-riot helmets, and night vision binoculars for patrols. It also donated uniforms, evidence kits, and a range of vehicles, from jeeps to four-wheelers to trucks and boats.

“In India, if anyone is in uniform they have powers and can abuse anyone at any point,” a former employee of WWF India told BuzzFeed News on condition of anonymity.

WWF’s war on poaching extends beyond its support for boots-on-the-ground patrols. Documents obtained by BuzzFeed News reveal the charity has assumed the role of a global spymaster in its efforts to protect wildlife.

Forest rangers often pay people in villages to act as “informants,” documents show. That tactic is risky even when it’s used by trained law enforcement and intelligence agencies, since an informant can be tortured or killed if their cover is blown. Charities shouldn’t get involved with such a “dangerous” enterprise, conservation expert Rosaleen Duffy told BuzzFeed News, because they can lack training in how to collect and transmit sensitive information to keep sources safe.

WWF officials have repeatedly claimed that the charity steers clear of direct involvement in the recruitment and running of informants. “We aren’t law enforcement agencies,” said Drew McVey, a regional officer overseeing operations in Africa, during a recent conference at the London Zoo.

But WWF has been deeply involved in the controversial practice for some time. The charity has helped establish informant networks in authoritarian states, documents show, and it has handed over intelligence to rangers and soldiers accused of human rights abuses.

“If a question arises as to which rights shall get higher priority, it shall not be the human rights.”

Internal documents obtained by BuzzFeed News show WWF has offered staffers detailed instructions for finding and cultivating informants, who “help to solve crimes.”

A global training manual drafted in 2015 declared that people who disclose sensitive information do

so with a range of motivations: “Fear; Revenge; Money; Repentance; Altruism.” When they find a potential source, the manual instructs WWF staffers to deploy a three-step approach. Step one: “establish rapport.” Step two: “orientation and guidance.” Step three: “explain safety policies.”

It makes clear that those safety policies only go so far, saying WWF has “a limited means to extract” an informant from a dangerous situation.

In India, Nepal, Cameroon, and CAR, emails and other internal documents show WWF’s active on-the-ground involvement with informant networks. The charity has purchased information and arranged bounties — \$170 for a

seized assault rifle, for example. For regular informers, it has paid salaries and transportation costs.

One WWF staffer emailed his managers in CAR in 2010 to warn that morale of the secret informants would run low if the charity wasn't paying them swiftly enough. The staffer proposed a "slush fund" to pay them faster.

The road to Lobéké National Park in Cameroon.

Tom Warren / BuzzFeed News

This past rainy season, the muddy red road from the Cameroonian capital of Yaoundé to Lobéké National Park was studded with crater-sized potholes and carcasses of unlucky trucks as it wound through logging towns and jungle villages plastered with reelection posters for President Biya. The three-day drive ends with a welcome sign bearing the name of the Cameroonian Ministry of Forestry and Fauna. WWF's famed panda logo is stamped

alongside it.

WWF executives at its headquarters thousands of miles away in Switzerland claim to keep the Cameroonian government at arm's length. But this local bureau of "Programme WWF" shares its office with forest rangers employed by the government — meaning WWF administrators work just a few doors down from an ad hoc jail cell where guards have locked up suspected poachers before carting them away to prison.

WWF promises that if it learns of possible abuses by forest rangers, it will "leave no stone unturned" to find out what happened, but its complaint process is not straightforward. In 2016 it established a "complaints resolution process," overseen by officials in Switzerland, in which WWF pledges to respond to allegations within 10 days. The charity told

A sign outside the program office near Lobéké National Park.

Tom Warren | BuzzFeed News

BuzzFeed News that it informs people of the process through churches and other community organizations.

Yet Baka people throughout Lobéké told BuzzFeed News they were unaware there was anyone they could complain to. Others only learned they could complain because a British NGO called Survival International, which campaigns for indigenous rights, has recently helped dozens of people submit complaints through a separate reporting system for WWF whistleblowers, which is advertised outside the Lobéké bureau on a tattered piece of paper. One complaint submitted online, signed by five people from a village near the park, alleged that forest rangers had tortured an 11-year-old boy.

“If the guards find you, even with just one antelope, they beat you and make you take your clothes off,” they wrote.

BuzzFeed News traveled to the village and confirmed the account with both the boy and his parents, MOUNGUE and Janine.

The family of three was out harvesting cocoa near the park one day in 2017 when a team of forest rangers and soldiers approached demanding information about weapons used for poaching.

“I said, ‘I don’t have weapons, I’m just working the fields, I don’t know which weapons you’re talking about,’” MOUNGUE told BuzzFeed News. “At that point they said, ‘If that is so, get on your knees, sit down, sleep here.’ That’s when they started to hit me.” They beat the mother, father, and son with machetes, using the blunt ends to hit the soles of their feet.

It was October 2018, three months after the villagers submitted their complaint. No one from WWF had met with them, they said. The original complaint never received a response, according to records obtained by BuzzFeed News.

Last week, WWF issued a [press release](#) announcing a “historic” new agreement between the Cameroonian government and the Baka people. It grants them “greater access rights” to the forest, and promises to “tap into” their “traditional knowledge” of the region.

Hira Chaudhary

Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

Hira Chaudhary said she received a few thousand dollars from Chitwan after her husband's death. She never heard from the park or from WWF again.

"I am all alone," Hira told BuzzFeed News.

Near the on-site detention center where Shikharam sobbed into the night, a gold-plated sign from 2016 celebrates the anti-poaching efforts of the "joint conservation operation cell" where park officials and soldiers from Chitwan's army battalion work together.

Recent changes to Nepalese law mean park officials must now seek approval from a judge to detain someone for longer than 24 hours. But they can still launch cases without involving the police and dictate prison sentences with a maximum of one year. It's still not an offense for a ranger to shoot a poaching suspect to death in self-defense.

WWF cites Nepal as a shining example of what can happen when the government and people in villages work together.

But on the ground, villagers tell a different story.

In December, indigenous people from a village bordering Chitwan gathered behind a mustard seed field and discussed their recent run-ins with park officials. One man told BuzzFeed News that Chitwan soldiers had beaten him so badly the year before that they had broken his eardrum. Others said their fishing permits were abruptly denied for no apparent reason. Even those who have permits said they couldn't walk near the Rapti River, long the lifeblood of the community, without being hassled by park officials. The president of the nearby community forest — one of the initiatives championed by WWF — said even he wasn't allowed to enter the forest without permission from the warden.

The villagers said they would be eager to speak with WWF about these issues, and to learn more about how they might look after the land better. “We'd be lucky if they would come to us and talk to us,” said community leader Jaya Mangal Kumal. “They have to consult us, educate us, teach us.”

Yet WWF had never once come to speak with them, the villagers said. They live less than a mile away from the park.

People gather by a mustard seed field to talk to BuzzFeed News.

Tsering Dolker Gurung for BuzzFeed News

The three rangers originally charged with causing Shikharam's death continue to thrive. One, Ritesh Basnet, got a job at WWF Nepal after the charges were dropped. He told BuzzFeed News he "was innocent" and that he "had done nothing wrong."

Kamal Jung Kunwar's memoir, in which he admitted to waterboarding suspects, has been adapted for the big screen. A February trailer for the upcoming movie, on which he has a writing credit, portrays rangers slapping poaching suspects before Kunwar is "jailed by the corrupted system" as part of a "conspiracy."

In 2014, WWF gave a Leaders for a Living Planet award to Chitwan National Park. The charity handed the award to Kunwar, who by then had become the chief warden.

A photograph shows him smiling with the charity's top officials, including then-president Yolanda Kakabadse and then-director general Jim Leape.

Kakabadse did not respond to a request for comment. Leape told BuzzFeed News in a statement he "was not aware of concerns" about Kunwar. "As I expect they have told you, given the seriousness of the allegations WWF has decided to launch an independent review to determine exactly what happened," Leape said.

In an interview for WWF's website, Kunwar had warm words for the charity. The support WWF provides "is really helping us to do our job well," he said. "I thank them for this." ●

Want to receive updates on our WWF reporting? Click here.

bzfd.it

BuzzFeed News reported from Nepal in partnership with the Kathmandu Post, which has today published its own investigation into WWF's work in the country. Read the Post's story here.

Tsering Dolker Gurung, François Essomba, Cecile Dehesdin, Alice Kantor, Morgane Mounier, and Emma Loop contributed reporting to this story.



Tom Warren is an investigations correspondent for BuzzFeed News and is based in London.

Contact [Tom Warren](mailto:tom.warren@buzzfeed.com) at tom.warren@buzzfeed.com.

Got a confidential tip? [Submit it here.](#)



Katie Baker is an investigative reporter for BuzzFeed News and is based in London.

Contact [Katie J.M. Baker](mailto:katie.baker@buzzfeed.com) at katie.baker@buzzfeed.com.