

WWF STATEMENT: EMBEDDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN CONSERVATION

24 NOVEMBER 2020

WWF's work takes us to complex and remote landscapes, where conflicts over natural resources regularly occur, and where community members and park rangers have lost their lives. We feel deep and unreserved sorrow for those who have suffered.

Reported abuses by government rangers against communities horrify us and go against all the values for which we stand. Human rights abuses are never acceptable, and we are determined to do more to make communities' voices heard, to have their rights respected, and to consistently advocate for governments to fulfill their obligations to protect human rights.

In certain places where we work, communities face instability, diminished rule of law, and disturbing histories of human rights abuses. These are the frontlines of the illegal wildlife trade, the fourth-largest illicit transnational activity in the world. Criminals and external actors exploit the wildlife and forests upon which communities depend. Governments employ rangers, often from local communities, to combat wildlife poaching and secure their countries' natural resources for the public good. But in certain landscapes in Central Africa, Nepal, and India, reports emerged that some rangers committed human rights abuses.

When the reports were raised, we commissioned investigations through local human rights organizations, escalated concerns with governments, and engaged judicial authorities. When allegations were raised regarding WWF, we commissioned [an independent panel of global human rights and conservation experts](#) to conduct a systemic review of our practices and provide recommendations. We wanted a tough and unbiased evaluation of our efforts in order to continue to learn and improve our programs.

The panel's report, "*Embedding Human Rights in Nature Conservation: From Intent to Action*," reflects 19 months of inquiry and found:

- The rangers accused of abuses were employed and managed by governments, not WWF.
- No evidence that WWF staff directed, participated in, or encouraged any alleged abuses.
- No evidence that WWF purchased or procured weapons for rangers.

The panel also recognized that WWF was one of the first conservation organizations to embrace human rights principles, that our commitments often set higher standards than the laws and practices of the states in which we work, and that WWF took steps to support communities in the places it reviewed.

As expected, the panel also found shortcomings, most particularly that we:

- Did not consistently create accessible grievance mechanisms and should have been more transparent in following up on complaints.
- Need to more firmly engage governments to uphold human rights and better use our influence if they don't.
- Need to strengthen our governance and management systems to consistently manage risks, more rigorously implement our policies, strengthen compliance, and increase transparency.

We appreciate the panel's diligent work and welcome their recommendations as important guidance in our evolution as a conservation organization. We can and will do more. Our [Management Response](#) details the specific actions we are taking in response to each of the panel's recommendations. We will regularly and transparently assess our progress, beginning in 2021.

WWF has long recognized that conservation and human rights are at the heart of sustainable development. We are committed to constantly learning and improving how we can more consistently integrate both. Over the past two years, we designed and implemented measures toward this goal. With the panel's advice now in hand, we will continue this process, including through the steps outlined below.

We have instituted changes to ensure that the voices of communities are heard and to improve our ability to meet our commitments. We hold ourselves to high standards on people and conservation, and we recognize that we haven't consistently implemented those standards across our entire network. In July 2019, we adopted new safeguards to bring more rigor to how we engage communities in designing, monitoring, and implementing field-based projects. These safeguards provide a disciplined approach to identify potential conflicts, manage risks, and establish effective grievance mechanisms so complaints can be raised, received, tracked, and addressed. The Human Rights Center we launched in the Central African Republic has become our model for integrated grievance mechanisms in complex landscapes. We hired a director and dedicated team for social policies and safeguards to support implementation, and we trained all 7,500 WWF staff around the world. We are also setting up an Office of the Independent Ombudsperson—the first such position for a conservation organization—to keep us accountable and to provide conflict resolution services. WWF's safeguards are living and adaptive, and we will continuously evolve them to meet best practices. To this end, we will open our safeguards for public consultation in early 2021.

We will better use our influence to support governments in fulfilling their obligations to protect human rights. In doing so, we also create the enabling conditions to better meet our own commitments. In 2019, after years of work, we successfully advocated to increase access rights for Indigenous peoples in Cameroon. We have changed how we screen potential partners and will embed human rights commitments in new contracts. We have defined clear boundaries on what we will and will not fund, and we are prepared to suspend projects if our safeguards are not met. In the Democratic Republic of Congo's Salonga—one of the most challenging landscapes assessed by the Panel—we have clearly defined the terms and conditions under which WWF could continue as a conservation partner, including new partnerships with independent human rights and law enforcement organizations as part of park management. These partnerships must be in place before WWF will sign any new contracts. In Nepal, when new allegations arose, we engaged the government and have suspended funding for enforcement until appropriate actions are taken.

We are taking additional steps to reduce conflicts between communities and government rangers. Though only a small part of our work, WWF provides research, training, equipment, and other support to government agencies for their efforts to combat wildlife crime. Our engagement with law enforcement is now [clearly defined by our safeguards](#), and human rights trainings are compulsory for projects involving rangers. In 2020, we became a founding member of the Universal Ranger Support Alliance, a coalition of leading international organizations dedicated to evolving the profession by developing a global code of conduct, embedding human rights commitments, and building the capacity of active rangers.

We are strengthening our governance and management systems to better deliver on our commitments. We have updated our [network-wide values](#)—to Courage, Respect, Integrity, and Collaboration—and explicitly linked them to corresponding policies to which every staff and office is accountable. We have instituted a stepwise process to ensure compliance. As of early 2020, high-risk programs must be vetted by a new Conservation Quality Committee comprised of leaders from across the WWF network. This committee defines the conditions required to respect our policies and commitments before program work can begin. We will continue to evaluate and improve our governance and management systems to build capacity and improve oversight, particularly in the most fragile places where we work.

This has been an important and constructive process in our evolution as a conservation organization. For decades, WWF has partnered with communities worldwide to achieve both conservation and development gains. Nature is our life support system. Our ability to provide food, water, and livelihoods for current and future generations depends on stabilizing the climate and safeguarding Earth's natural resources. Communities that directly rely on the world's most important natural areas play a central role—locally and globally—in building a future in which people and nature flourish.

We believe the actions we have taken and will continue to take will lead to improved outcomes—for the communities with whom we work, and for the natural systems upon which we all depend.