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Despite national and international laws designed to protect endangered species, almost all wild species are traded. Elephant ivory, rhino horn, big cats parts, pangolins, reptiles, birds and illegal timber are traded illegally in large quantities. This illegal trade is driven by demand for rare plants; bones, scales and other ingredients for traditional medicines; pets and zoo exhibits; collectors’ trophies; decorations and luxury items; as well as wild meat and other products.

With species being removed from the wild faster than they can repopulate, their inputs to critical natural processes and ecosystem resilience are lost – a knock-on effect that causes other species to disappear. Left unchecked, wildlife trafficking threatens to unravel entire ecosystems.

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At the African Wilderness Foundation (AWF) Emergency Rhino Summit in Kenya (April 2012) and the National Rhino Conservation Dialogue held in South Africa by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) in May 2012, it was decided that the primary tier to ensure the survival of the species is ‘boots on the ground’ – an increase in the deployment of well-trained and equipped rangers.

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The African’s Park Ranger Qualification

by JC Strauss

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Currently, there is no new generation of anti-poaching rangers to meet the huge demand in national parks, provincial parks and the private reserves and farms.

The ‘park ranger’ initiative uses proven models, with new processes and approaches, to train a new generation of anti-poaching rangers with theory, skills and practical abilities to address this challenge and save our wildlife heritage for future generations.

The initiative

• 2013 October: Scoping Meeting was held at CATHSSETA HQ in Sandton, Gauteng.
• 2013 November: Community of Expert Practitioners (CEP) was selected by the QCTO.
• 2014 May: Development of the new national qualification commences.
• 2015 March: Posted for public comment (only one comment was received: ‘excellent work’).
• 2015 April: Submit to the QCTO for implementation.

Although all stakeholders in South Africa were invited to the scoping meeting, the splinter groups and Boy Scout AFUs tried to derail the process for their own benefit. Successful inputs and participation came from SANParks Kruger National Park, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Free State Environmental Affairs, Game Rangers’ Association of Africa (GRAA), Professional Firearm Training Council (PFTC), Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA), Private Rhino Owners Association (PROA), Southern Africa Wildlife College (SAWC), Ntomeni Ranger Services, Game Reserves United (GRU), Secret Eye, Reserve Protection Agency, International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF), Eco Ranger Conservation Services and CATHSSETA.

Furthermore, all inputs from the rhino anti-poaching workshop ‘Breaking the Chain’, held at Hoedspruit on 25 and 26 September 2014, hosted by Quemic, were applied where relevant. The challenges of the current situation, combined with proven combat and tracking experience from bush wars, have been absorbed into the new qualifications.

What has changed?

• The previous qualification, ‘Conservation Guardianship’, had only 8 credits on a NQF Level 2.
• New qualification park ranger:
  - Field ranger – NQF Level 4 with 143 credits.
  - Tracker – NQF Level 4 with 80 credits.
• Anti-poaching ranger – NQF Level 5 with 166 credits.
• Ranger (area integrity) – NQF Level 6 with 140 credits.
  - Minimum criteria for trainers: 10 years’ operational experience.
  - External assessment partner.
  - No more fly-by-nights, Rambos and Boy Scout games – only one ‘anti-poaching ranger’ national qualification that will create “a conservationist that fights like a soldier and a soldier that thinks like a conservationist”.

The focus of the operation is to support and assist the reserve managers / section ranger / joint operational centres (JOC) / game ranchers in protecting the integrity of the area in line with current legislation, management plans, rules and guidelines through compliance with tactical, legal, safety and organisational requirements related to specialised operations in the fight against biodiversity crime. The curriculum focuses on:

- Gather intelligence and handle informers.
- Develop a detailed knowledge of a criminal element and their tactics.
- Develop an informer network and handle informers.
- Explore all information sources.
- Cooperation with other law enforcement agencies.
- Advanced combat training and tactic.
- Execute tactical combat techniques in an operational environment.
- Neutralise a target at close quarters during operations.
- Advanced combat tracking.
- Give an accurate spoor report up to 30 minutes.
- Execute reconnaissance tracking.
- Execute follow-up and chopper-borne operations.
- Safely dispatch with fast-roping from helicopter.
- Use tactical operations to combat wildlife crime.
- Perform observation and reconnaissance operations.
- Apply advance combat tactics.
- Execute way-lay operations.
- Execute search and seizure.
- Execute the correct arrest procedure.
- Secure and manage crime scene.
- Secure and protect evidence at the crime scene.
- Chain of custody of evidence.
- Provide a statement (elements of a crime).
- Understand court procedure.

Conclusion

The South African park ranger qualification is the first of its kind in the world and will be the most elite ranger qualification worldwide. It is on par with, but also more comprehensive than, similar courses found in regional military units and will specialise in training rangers as field rangers with a broad education in conservation monitoring and reporting and specialised combat tracking.

They will qualify as elite anti-poaching rangers and area integrity rangers that can proactively lead other rangers in the African bush.

Rangers are the principal guardians of the world’s premier natural biodiversity.