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Holding the thin green line

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In 2003, Victorian park ranger Sean Willmore set off to record the untold stories behind the deadly work of fellow rangers across the world. The resulting documentary and foundation, The Thin Green Line, continues to help rangers who risk their lives guarding the world's protected wild areas.



Sean Willmore meets and thanks the vital rangers of Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. His foundation has given thousands of dollars to support the families of their murdered colleagues and has hundreds more families to assist.

Credit: Thin Green Line Foundation

As a young ranger working in Victoria's Wilsons Promontory, Mr Willmore met some of his colleagues from around the globe at the 2003 International Ranger Federation conference held at the promontory. Moved by conversations he had with rangers – who in the line of duty had been shot, slashed with machetes, and witnessed up close their workmates being murdered – an idea was born, and his life took a very different direction.

'I found it difficult to believe that people who were doing a similar job to me were putting their lives on the line like this,' says Mr Willmore. 'These guys are tasked with protecting the beautiful, valuable wild places and endangered species for all of us – and they're being killed for it, their families left destitute.'

Mr Willmore decided that he had to take a stand. After re-mortgaging his house and selling his car, he set off – with no film-making experience, and a hand-held camera – to document the plight of rangers around the world. He managed much more than anyone ever expected.

After a year travelling through 23 countries, with unique access to many magnificent and wild places because of his ranger status, Mr Willmore had tapped into something special.

Upon returning home, his documentary *The Thin Green Line* was a huge triumph, premiering in 35 countries and touching the hearts of many thousands.

'I never ever thought any of this would happen,' says Mr Willmore. At best I thought I'd get some footage and maybe raise some bucks for a few rangers in need.'

Forever changed by meeting rangers putting their lives at great risk, and buoyed by the film's ability to connect with audiences, Mr Willmore decided to start the Thin Green Line Foundation, an organisation dedicated to providing support to rangers, their widows and children, and their communities.

Sacrifice in defence of natural capital

Over the last 15 years, about 1000 rangers – predominantly from the poorer, developing countries – have been killed while policing commercial poaching, illegal logging and militia activities in protected areas such as national parks. The major threat is from those hunting animals for sale and consumption, but there is also aggression for access to rare minerals and timber – priced highly in the West – and land for agriculture.

In one park alone – Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park, home to some 230 of the world's 750 remaining mountain gorillas – 178 rangers have lost their lives in the line of duty, mostly against armed militia who seek to commercially plunder the park's riches.

The recent conflict in the Ivory Coast has also taken a heavy toll on rangers and their critical work.

Wildlife smuggling by sophisticated organised crime syndicates operating around the world is now an industry reportedly worth US\$10 billion a year, surpassed only by the drugs and arms trades. Ivory, for example, can fetch close to US\$2000 per kilo in China.

Illegal logging in public lands globally is conservatively estimated to cause losses in assets and revenue in excess of US\$10 billion annually.

The compounding impacts of this plunder on Earth's biodiversity and ecosystem services are significant, and uncoded. It brings the value of underpaid rangers into poignant focus. They do an amazing job, and their presence has a significant deterrent and protective effect, yet rangers receive as little as \$50 per month – if they're paid at all.

This begs the question of why the world can't find a way to invest more in ranger resources and protection.



An early morning armed ranger patrol heads out across the savannah of Virunga National Park to protect the reserve's borders.

Credit: Thin Green Line Foundation

Every month, The Thin Green Line reports the deaths of ten more rangers around the world, most in gruesome circumstances – and, these are only the incidents that are recorded. Mr Willmore says not even the International Ranger Federation knows how many rangers are actually in the field working for the cause.

'Eighty per cent of the ranger deaths reported are due to commercial poachers,' he says. 'Ten per cent are due to subsistence poachers, and the other 10 per cent are just an artifact of the natural dangers.'

Providing foundation support

Despite significant personal and administrative challenges faced by its founder, the Thin Green Line Foundation has provided vital packages of financial and ongoing assistance to the widows of hundreds of rangers. It has funded cows, food carts, and small farmlets for family incomes, and also helped put their children back in school. It has given working rangers simple necessities such as mosquito nets for protection.

'Before, rangers who faced death while at work also faced the prospect of their families being left with nothing if they were gone,' says Mr Willmore. 'The Thin Green Line Foundation says "We've got your back if you need it" to them.'



The widow of a Cambodian ranger slain in the line of duty is presented with a cheque to support her family's livelihood. The funds purchased a food sale cart and a house buffalo.

Credit: Thin Green Line Foundation

Today, the foundation is providing help to rangers every way it can, critically bolstering frontline conservation, and by extension, supporting Earth's biodiversity. For this, the organisation has the endorsement of many high profile people, such as Bryce Courtenay and David Attenborough.

'We need greater capacity to further our cause,' says Mr Willmore. Corporate donations are really vital for administration assistance, and 100 per cent of general donations support the rangers and their families, as well as our community conservation projects.'

Mr Willmore met with Dr Jane Goodall and her institute directors in June to look at potential partnerships supporting rangers, and is seeking a roundtable with the United Nations and International Union for Conservation of Nature to discuss support for rangers in high?conflict zones.

'I can't change the world. However, for the people we've assisted already, the world has changed,' says Mr Willmore.

More information

To donate to The Thin Green Line Foundation (all donations of more than \$2 are tax deductible), see www.thingreenline.org.au