



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I've just been working with anti-poaching patrols in Way Kambas National Park, southern Sumatra. These small teams of men, dedicated to protecting Critically Endangered Sumatran rhinos, carry out two-week patrols on foot. They have to endure excruciating heat and humidity, brave venomous snakes and an implausible number of leeches, occasionally come face-to-face with Sumatran tigers, and survive by living off the land. And they have to be ready to tackle armed and dangerous poachers at a moment's notice.

Anti-poaching patrols are the unsung heroes on the conservation frontline. I've worked with many over the years, all over Africa and Asia. They receive very little remuneration or recognition, work under incredibly tough conditions and risk their lives on a daily basis, yet they are some of the most unassuming, upbeat and determined people I have ever met.

So, I was deeply saddened to hear about yet another wildlife ranger being killed in the line of duty. Heavily armed rebels recently attacked a patrol of nine men in Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), killing one and seriously injuring another.

Rangers in Africa's oldest park, struggling to protect mountain gorillas and other wildlife, live in constant fear for their lives. More than 100 of them have been murdered in the DRC in the past decade – and that's excluding many more who have been caught up in the country's relentless civil war. There have been five separate attacks on Congolese rangers in the past week alone.

The story has been little brighter elsewhere in the world in recent years. Three rangers (and four poachers) were killed in a shoot-out in Kenya's Tana River District in 2007, and a forest ranger was killed and three others injured by poachers in India's Corbett National Park in 2001.

These remarkable men often pay the ultimate price for being the first and last line of defence for many endangered species around the world. They deserve all the support, both moral and financial, that we can possibly give them.



In the line of fire: being a ranger is a tough job, and someone has to do it.

Sumatran rangers endure excruciating heat and humidity, brave snakes and leeches and survive by living off the land.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist and tv presenter, and will be presenting a *Last Chance to See* rhino special with Stephen Fry later this year.