

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on conservationists being killed for trying to protect wildlife and wild places and invites your thoughts on the crisis.

There has never been a more dangerous time to be an environmentalist. Figures just released by the brilliant campaigning organisation Global

Witness reveal that, last year alone, a shocking 197 people were murdered in 18 countries while trying to protect wildlife and wild places. That's nearly four people every week. And they're just the ones we know about: many more go unreported.

We're only now beginning to understand the full scale of the crisis. And, with that in mind, here's another shocking statistic: the number of environmentalists being killed has quadrupled in the past 15 years. But even this fails to paint an accurate picture. Murder is the ultimate tactic, but campaigners are repeatedly faced with death threats, torture, sexual violence, beatings, and wrongful arrest to keep them quiet.

The culprits are big businesses and corrupt governments, who routinely break the law to force through major commercial projects, and silence any opposition. It's a sinister thought, but politicians and businessmen are the people who hire the assassins. At the very least, they turn a blind eye.

The biggest offender is agribusiness – feeding supermarket demand for soy, palm oil, sugarcane and beef – and that is closely followed by mining. Meanwhile, tackling poachers and criminal gangs involved in illegal wildlife trade continues to be one of the most dangerous jobs in the world, with 21 recorded deaths last year.

Nowhere are you more likely to be killed for standing up to companies that trash the environment than in

Honduras. More than 120 people – campaigning against dams, mines and illegal logging – have died there since 2010. But if Honduras is the most dangerous place per capita, Brazil is the most dangerous in terms of sheer numbers killed. A quarter of the killings (46) last year were in Brazil, where local campaigners are trying to stop illegal logging of the Amazon rainforest. The Philippines (41 murders), and Colombia (32) are not far behind.

In collaboration with the *Guardian* newspaper, Global Witness has undertaken to name every single victim. Behind the statistics are real people trying to do the right thing. Some are high profile: Esmond Bradley Martin, for example – whose groundbreaking investigations were instrumental in the fight against elephant and rhino poaching – was

“Behind the statistics are real people trying to do the right thing.”

stabbed to death in his home in Nairobi, Kenya. Others are not: three people trying to stop illegal logging in a wildlife sanctuary in Cambodia, were recently killed by government soldiers.

There is a solution, albeit not a simple one. International pressure needs to be put on those responsible. The answer is to hit where it hurts. Financially. And the good news is that this is already starting to happen.

The Dutch Development Bank, for example, has declared that the safety of environmentalists will be a key factor in all its future investment decisions (following the murder of Berta Cáceres, for campaigning against the Honduran hydro project, which it funded). Foreign governments need to act, too. As Honduras's biggest aid donor, the US wields significant influence – yet much of its bilateral aid goes to the police and military implicated in heavy violence against environmental defenders.

We sometimes forget how lucky we are in the UK. We can publicly call government ministers big fat liars for claiming that badger culling will solve the TB problem in cattle, and we can point accusatory fingers at the owners of grouse moors who persecute hen harriers – without fear of being murdered. Here, at least, it's not considered a crime to defend the environment. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Campaigners want justice for Honduran activist Berta Cáceres.