

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Wildlife's fallen heroes

Levels of corruption among wildlife rangers are probably worse today than they've ever been, and – according to the Australia-based International Ranger Federation – this seriously threatens efforts to protect elephants, rhinos, tigers and other endangered wildlife.

With soaring demand for illegal animal parts, poaching gangs are flush with cash and offering ever-increasing bribes to rangers throughout Africa and Asia. All the rangers have to do is turn a blind eye.

I have worked with anti-poaching patrols in many parts of the world, and they are my heroes of conservation. I remember going out with a team in the Russian Far East that was striving to protect Siberian tigers: poachers frequently attacked them with axes and guns, their families were regularly intimidated and their work took them far away from home on long, tough field trips, often sleeping rough. And for this they were paid just \$300 a month. Yet none of the rangers I got to know there would have dreamed of accepting a bribe.

But who could blame them if they did? Rangers' wages are often pathetic. One example is Cambodia where, due to government cuts, they have plummeted from \$100 to \$30 a month. Just like anyone else, rangers have

to feed their families, and the pressure to accept bribes must be overwhelming, not least because poaching operations are often run by scary people – organised crime syndicates and, in some cases, the military or rebel militia.

The African Wildlife Trust estimates that corruption rates among rangers in East Africa are running at about 50 per cent. And the corruption often goes right to the top. No wonder



Russian rangers: they could be heroes – but for more than one day.

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Tanzania, where the situation is particularly bad, is losing some 70 elephants a day.

It's inexcusable. Rangers are on the conservation frontline and, without them, there would be no animals left to protect. They need to be rewarded properly.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.