

**WOW Subcommittee Hearing**  
***Protecting Human Rights in International Conservation***  
**October 26, 2021**  
**Chair Huffman Opening Statement**

[883 words, ~ 5.5 mins]

Thank you all for joining us today. Today's hearing will focus on human rights and indigenous rights in conservation projects around the world.

In 2019, BuzzFeed News published a series of investigative reports focused on the mistreatment of indigenous and local people around parks managed or co-managed by the World Wildlife Fund.

These reports were horrifying and included gross violations of human rights by park rangers tasked with protecting the park and its wildlife. Murder. Gruesome torture. Dozens of reports of rape. Burning a village, killing men, women, and children. Conducting night raids and terrifying local community members.

When I saw these articles, I immediately asked the committee to start an investigation. I believe that we must conserve nature in the United States and abroad, but any hint of abuse in the name of conservation cannot be tolerated. Chair Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop launched a bipartisan investigation into WWF's practices and the Department of the Interior's administration and oversight of international conservation funding.

To be perfectly blunt, I, and others on this committee, have been extremely frustrated with how WWF handled this situation.

WWF knew about many of these allegations, and in fact, its internal investigations confirmed many of the reports. To give you fair warning, these reported incidents are graphic and jarring, but I feel it's necessary to properly illustrate the horrors WWF knew was occurring.

In one report, park rangers in Salonga National Park whipped and raped four women carrying fish by a river. Two of the women were pregnant, and one later had a miscarriage.

In another case, a 52-year-old woman said she was arbitrarily detained and raped for two consecutive days, and her husband had to pay a fine for her release. Another victim alleged he and several other men were detained while fishing and were tortured by rangers, beating them and tying their penises with fishing line, and hanging them by the branch of a tree. In other cases, victims were tortured and killed by rangers through beating and stabbings. And most park rangers who perpetrated these acts were never brought to justice.

From the beginning, WWF tried to distance itself from the allegations, pointing to the fact that they don't employ the park rangers; they are units of the government in the country in which they are operating and that the political situations and corruption in those countries make things difficult. In one meeting, WWF mentioned that they would stop allowing park rangers to drive around in WWF-labeled trucks because it confused the locals.

But, I think this response misses the point. WWF and other big-name non-profits bring large amounts of money into countries where they work, which can translate into political influence if they choose to use it. If organizations like WWF want to work in these places, they must be fully present, active, and accountable.

These allegations have also highlighted the continued impacts of colonialism in conservation. The old way of doing conservation—Westerners coming into a country, setting up a national park with strict borders, and ridding the area of its inhabitants—is still causing conflicts today. If indigenous and local community members no longer have access to their lands and the resources they provide, there can be conflicts between those local communities and the people protecting the park.

And let's be clear—the areas we are talking about today need protection and conservation. These areas have some of the richest biodiversity in the world and are at risk from deforestation, mining, and development funded by countries like Russia and China. Wildlife trafficking originating in these areas supports international criminal activity and threatens our national security.

We need to stop thinking that using a conservation park with heavily guarded borders will solve complex geopolitical issues. Conservation and community development must be integrated. You cannot have successful conservation without thinking about the people.

Today, we will talk about what happened and who needs to take responsibility for the actions of park rangers. WWF's President and CEO Carter Roberts declined to testify because of commitments in the lead-up to the Glasgow UN climate meeting (although, others participating in this hearing have managed to appear in spite of the same obligation), so instead we will hear from Ginette Hemley, Senior Vice President for Wildlife Conservation at WWF, about how they are changing their practices and if those changes are enough.

We have so many outstanding questions: can WWF fully deliver on their human rights standards across their entire organization? Are they improving reporting mechanisms, transparency, and accountability? Moving forward, what are they doing to invest in communities and effectively wield their political power in challenging places? And how can other organizations learn from all of this?

We have the opportunity to start addressing human rights and oversight issues and map out what our investments in conservation should look like in the coming decades. Thank you to our witnesses participating today for helping our committee understand what a rights-based approach for conservation should be.

This is a heavy, heartbreaking topic that I suspect will leave all of us at least a little uncomfortable. But if we are serious about human rights, and if we are serious about conservation, we must work to find a pathway that elevates standards across the board to protect both people and nature.

With that, I'll turn it over to our Ranking Member for his opening statement.