

The DRC's Garamba National Park lies in a cauldron of conflict, where poachers vie with the Lord's Resistance Army to decimate the local wildlife. Yet progress is being made to rid the park of both elements, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of Paul Onyango and his team of rangers. **Stephen Cunliffe** gets a first-hand account of some of the challenges they face.



the price of protection

JOHAN BORGSTAM



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

ABOVE Conservation without borders is epitomised by Paul Onyango, a Kenyan working to rid the DRC's Garamba National Park of poachers and insurgents.

TOP On patrol in the open grasslands of Garamba National Park.

THE WINDSCREEN SUDDENLY exploded. Strange popping sounds were all around and I couldn't work out what they were. There was blood everywhere. Then I realised: we'd driven into an ambush.'

Paul Onyango, a quietly spoken but engaging Kenyan, has an unquestionably challenging job: to train and lead a force of rangers employed by the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) as they endeavour to re-establish control of Garamba National Park in war-ravaged north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Elephants, buffaloes, Lelwel hartebeest, Uganda kob, Defassa waterbuck and hippos still roam the park's gently undulating grasslands, but in recent decades it has been plundered by a succession of guerrilla groups, commercial poachers, destitute refugees and even the Congolese army. The most recent pillagers have been the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a notoriously violent rebel group from northern Uganda. By 2008, with the LRA firmly entrenched on Garamba's western boundary, the situation

was spiralling out of control and even for rangers the park was largely a no-go zone.

'In February 2008 a captain from the Congolese army told me that a group of LRA guerrillas was hiding close to the park's southern boundary,' recalls Onyango. 'We decided to take a force of rangers and soldiers to investigate. The Landcruiser picked me up last, so I was sitting on the back. That's what saved my life.'

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As the bullets started flying, he dived off the back of the truck, rolled across the road and squinted into the dappled forest light, trying to determine where the shooters were hidden. Once he'd located them, he gave his companions covering fire as they fled from the vehicle. During a pause in the shooting

he crept back to check for survivors. He continues, 'The driver and the warden were in the front, both dead, but the army captain was still alive. Underneath the truck, four women and children who'd hitched a lift with us were screaming. I moved them and the captain behind a termite mound.'

Forty minutes into the ambush another lull enabled Onyango to take stock of the situation. He was one of only four men still fighting: five had run off at the initial contact, six were injured and four were dead. The break didn't last for long. Part of the LRA force had circled round and

opened fire on them from behind. As the ranger dived for cover, a searing pain in his stomach told him he had been hit.

Against all odds, the remnants of Onyango's unit held their attackers at bay until the men who had escaped managed to alert the Congolese army from a nearby village. With the help of the reinforcements, the dead and wounded were loaded onto the Landcruiser. Amazingly, it started first time and the exhausted survivors were able to retreat. In the small clinic at the park headquarters, doctors removed two bullets from Onyango's stomach.

While there is no doubt about the high-risk nature of the Kenyan's work, he has the experience and a rare skills-set that makes him the ideal candidate to rein in the poachers at Garamba and in the process turn the disparate crew of ICCN rangers into a highly effective anti-poaching unit.

His love of nature and dedication to protecting it developed from an unlikely



GARAMBA NATIONAL PARK

Established 1938
World Heritage Site since 1980
World Heritage Site in Danger since 1996
Extent 4 920 km²
Habitats mixed woodland, dry forest and riverine forest in the north; grassland and savanna in the south.



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE (2)

beginning. 'After I'd finished school, my uncle got me a job digging elephant trenches around Samburu National Park,' Onyango explains. 'As I worked there, I acquired a passion for wildlife and decided I wanted to become a ranger.' On joining the Kenyan Wildlife Conservation and Management Department in 1978, he was sent for paramilitary training and over the next 12 years worked in the country's most heavily poached parks. He says that serving under Richard Leakey and the revamped Kenya

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Wildlife Service (KWS) has been the highlight of his career. 'In 1990 Dr Leakey established a new KWS unit specifically to combat the heavily armed Somali poaching gangs. I was transferred to it and promoted to officer-in-charge of operations for East and West Tsavo. My mandate was simple: to stabilise Tsavo and neutralise the Somali poaching problems. To accomplish this I was given 200 well-trained men and, by the will of God, we succeeded.'

Onyango moved into the private sector after resigning from KWS in 1999 and a decade later James Isiche, a former park warden who had worked with him, was asked

to suggest someone capable of training Garamba's rangers. Isiche recommended the Kenyan. 'I was only supposed to stay six weeks, but when my contract expired I told them that I had not yet accomplished my mission. The guys were still raw and not ready for the challenges of anti-poaching work in such an unforgiving environment.' Two years later he is still stationed thousands of kilometres away from his family. What, I asked him, makes him want to stay?

'It's not the money; I made the same back in Kenya. I am here because someone identified me as the man to train these rangers. I need to stay and see the job through.'

As the volatile security situation in north-eastern DRC appears to be stabilising, poaching in Garamba is being curbed and an expanded ranger force, under Onyango's leadership, is wresting back control of the park. For the first time in years, anti-poaching patrols have crossed the Garamba River and started to retake the northern sector. 'With the LRA out of the picture, my biggest problems come from the Congolese soldiers. Those guys eat everything from monkeys to elephants, but Garamba is a resilient place. It has a lot of shock absorbers, and that gives me hope that we can save it and its elephants.' **AG**

For more information about Garamba National Park, go to www.african-parks.org/garamba

ABOVE Garamba's large elephant herds have long been a target for poachers.

LEFT Military-style training for the ICCN rangers is an important part of their battle to protect Garamba National Park and its wildlife.

