



WWF scandal (part 11): Dutch documentary exposes the shoot on sight policy in Kaziranga National Park, India

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Kaziranga National Park in the north east of India has a [shoot on sight policy](#), used against poachers and villagers found inside the park. Violent evictions of communities who lived in the national park have taken place, and park rangers are accused of serious human rights violations. Kaziranga was the subject of a recent documentary by the Dutch documentary TV series, [Zembla](#).

The documentary, directed by Zembla journalist Jos van Dongen, focusses on WWF's role in supporting the National Park, and in carrying out birth control programmes

that include sterilisation of men and women near the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. The [documentary](#) is available, with English subtitles, on Zembla's YouTube channel:



Before travelling to India, Van Dongen approached [WWF](#) and had a preliminary interview at WWF Netherlands' head office in Zeist. When the film crew got back to the Netherlands, they shared their findings with WWF. They sent the questions they wanted to ask and made an appointment for an interview. WWF cancelled the interview, without giving any reason. WWF Netherlands issued a written response saying that it is "shocked by these allegations", and that, "human rights abuses are unacceptable to us". WWF Netherlands has promised to conduct an independent investigation and "take measures where necessary".

The allegations of human rights abuses at Kaziranga National Park are well known to anyone who has been paying attention.

Survival International has been [campaigning to stop the shoot to kill policy](#) at Kaziranga for [several years](#).

In February 2017, the BBC broadcast a [documentary from Kaziranga](#). The documentary includes an interview with Dr. Dipankar Ghose, director WWF's species and landscapes programme in India, and asks the question: Shouldn't WWF speak out about the shoot to kill policy?

The Zembla documentary includes a long and interesting interview with [Bram Büscher](#), Professor and Chair at the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. REDD-Monitor will feature that interview in a future post, while this post focusses on what the Zembla documentary found on their visit to Kaziranga.

Violent evictions

In September 2016, villagers were violently evicted from Kaziranga National park. The documentary shows footage of the evictions. Park rangers use elephants push over people's homes. Armed police officers and park rangers hit women with sticks. They shoot at the villagers.

Two people were killed. Many people were injured.

Van Dongen and the Zembra film crew find some of the people who were evicted living in another village on the edge of the park. They speak to a man who was shot in the face with a rubber bullet.

The villagers have documents showing their rights to live on the land. Some of them have lived there for more than 60 years.

Someone hands Van Dongen a mobile phone with pictures of two people who were shot during the evictions.

One man's niece, Anjuma, was killed. The bullet hit her in the chest. He says,

"The park rangers and police troops came with about 1800 men. With 600 people we were no match. They opened fire. Two people died. What could we do?"

The police have not made any apologies.

Van Dongen interviews the deputy chief of the park, Rohini Ballav Saikia and asks him about the violent evictions.



"That was before I was posted," Saikia replies. "That land was evicted by the civil authorities. Kaziranga National Park had nothing to do with that."

Saikai laughs and asks Van Dongen why he called the evictions violent.

"Two people got killed," Van Dongen replies.

Van Dongen asks whether WWF is an important sponsor of Kaziranga National Park. "Yes it is," Saikia replies. "WWF is working very closely with the government and the park authorities on various levels."

There is a poaching problem in the park. Every year about 10 rhinos are killed for their horns. Last year, the park rangers received new weapons to fight poaching.

"The Indian government provides the weapons, WWF takes care of training the rangers," says the voice-over. "WWF also organises combat and interrogation training and provides equipment like clothing, night vision cameras, GPS equipment, and thermal imaging scanners."

“We don’t trust WWF”

Van Dongen interviews Soneswar Narah from the human rights NGO, Jeepal Krishak Shramik Sangha. Narah works to help people who have been wrongly accused of poaching by park rangers.

“For generations we had the right to collect herbs in the park and to fish. That’s why we loved Kaziranga. We built houses of straw and bamboo from the forest. But now they see us as enemies. They treat us like criminals. They only see us as poachers.”



“It’s so sad that in the beautiful surroundings of Kaziranga such cruel and horrible murders have taken place. All problems have been resolutely swept under the rug.”

Between 2014 and 2016, 50 people were killed by rangers, according to figures produced by the park rangers themselves. Many of these people were innocent, Soneswar Narah says.

“WWF represents a policy of distrust. They sow distrust and hostility amongst friends and in families. They use bribes to get people to spy on the community and that creates a lot of conflict. Sowing dissension within Kaziranga is their way to drive us off our own land.”

Van Dongen refers to an internal draft [document](#) titled, “WWF and TRAFFIC Guidelines for Managing Informants”. The document was uncovered as part of the recent [BuzzFeed investigation into WWF and human rights abuses](#) in the name of conservation.

WWF pays informants to give information about poachers. “There is no record of who gets paid, and it can also lead to false accusations,” the voice-over says.

Van Dongen interviews a farmer who had been beaten by park rangers. They accused him of having a gun and being a poacher, based on what an informant had told them. “They hit me with a stick and said: Are you a poacher, yes or no? I cried, I begged, but they wouldn’t listen. They gave me electric shocks. In my joints, here, here, here. All over my body. And in my private parts.”

Villagers protested when he was released and demanded an apology from the park rangers. “The head park ranger wrote that I would get compensation within 10 days, also for the medical costs,” the farmer says. “That’s three years ago now and I haven’t received a single penny.”

Soneswar Narah says,

“We don’t trust WWF. They spend millions of rupees on park management but to the inhabitants who live around the park and who in fact protect the park they give nothing.”

“We say: Believe in the people here. We protect Kaziranga. Commercial organisations like WWF don’t have to sponsor us. We will protect the forest from our own goodwill with our own laws and rights.”

WWF’s birth control programme

In the documentary, Van Dongen sits in a cafe and says, “WWF not only has programmes for protecting the animals and the national parks, it also runs birth control programmes. These are designed to reduce the pressure on the national parks, the press of population.”

WWF’s family planning programmes are supported by USAID, and Johnson and Johnson, the pharmaceutical corporation. WWF runs family planning programmes around national parks in many countries.

The film crew tracks down Dr Priya Panday, who worked for WWF for five years from about 2005 on family planning programmes. Panday says he worked in medical camps, health check-up camps, and distributing medicines. “In some camps I was also involved in the family planning”, he says.

Van Dongen asks what he did in family planning. Panday replies,

“In family planning I was doing NSV, no scalpel vasectomy of the males. A single hole or puncture is made in the skin of the scrotum, we pull out both the cords, cut them and tie them off. The procedure only takes five to ten minutes.”



“It is very difficult to make people understand that they should adopt family planning methods. It is very difficult to make them understand that this is not going to harm them. You will feel much better and you will feel much more enjoyment from having sex with your wife after getting it done. Then they will be convinced.”

“I was the only person qualified as far as I could see. The people who were distributing the medicines and conducting the camps were not qualified. You’ll be surprised to hear that WWF only gave me 600 rupees, US\$9. That wasn’t even enough to cover my petrol. I didn’t even get that money.”

WWF was running a family planning programme at the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. Van Dongen and the film crew travel to a village where WWF and Dr Panday were working. After they check in at a nearby hotel they are visited by the police, who check their passports. The police let them go after they explain they are journalists, but they are told they are not permitted to film.

On the way to the village the police stop them repeatedly. The film crew drive 10 kilometres and are pulled over four times. They are not allowed to talk to the villagers. The police escort them back to their hotel.

“Kill the unwanted”

The park rangers at the Kaziranga National Park are accused of shooting on sight.

In the documentary, Van Dongen refers to a 2014 report, “Detailed Report on Issues and Possible Solutions for Long Term Protection of the Greater One Horned Rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park”.

The report was written by the then-director of Kaziranga National Park, M. K. Yadava IFS. WWF had several representatives on the report’s “Expert Panel & Peer Review Group”, including Ravi Singh, Secretary General and CEO of WWF India.

Van Dongen tells us that the report states that, “Wildlife crime is the worst crime that exists in the fact of which human rights are not that important.”

And here is the quotation from the report that confirms what Van Dongen is not exaggerating:

Whatever the case be, or the institutional arrangements or systems of governance the basic principle should remain the same that crime against environment, forests and wildlife are the worst of crimes, and nothing can be more serious than these, not even human rights violations; and ever if a question arises as to which rights shall get higher priority, it shall not be the human rights.

It comes at the end of an extraordinary four-and-a-half page long section under the sub-heading “Crime and Punishment”. Later in the report comes an acronym: SMART COMMUNICATION. The first “N” in communication stands for:

“Never allow any unauthorized entry (Kill the unwanted)”.

Van Dongen interviews the parents of Gaonbura, a 20-year-old disabled boy, who was killed by park rangers. Gaonbura went looking for a lost cow.

“Neither the cow, nor the boy came back,” the father says. “He had three or four gunshot wounds. He had knife cuts in his hands, from a machete. They murdered him. Park rangers. Shot him dead.”

Gaonbura was disabled.

In his interview with Van Dongen, Rohini Ballav Saikia, the deputy chief of Kaziranga National Park, claims that there is no shoot on sight policy:

"We do not have any shoot on sight order. It is only used under extreme conditions where it has been necessary to use force. Because this area is sensitive in terms of rhino poaching."

Van Dongen asks directly whether there is a shoot on sight policy. Saika replies, "No, no."

Van Dongen continues. "But I have spoken to guards who told me: If somebody enters the park illegally we can shoot. We have to shoot."

"No, that is not true," Saika tells him. "Some poachers are being neutralised, that's true. But there are no innocent people being killed. We do not have any special powers to just shoot people."

The documentary cuts to footage of park rangers. The film crew ask them, "Are park rangers allowed to shoot when they see someone?"

The park rangers reply, "Yes, they are. If they are in the park. Yes, we have that right. If we get them in our gunsight."

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