

Report on 9th World Ranger Congress - Chitwan National Park, Nepal - 11-16 November 2019

The International Ranger Federation is growing rapidly, now having almost 100 member associations, representing over 25000 Rangers in more than 50 countries. As it increases its influence as a major voice in protected area management, it is in need of formalising its structures in order to better establish itself as a global, not-for-profit NGO. This was one of the objectives of the 9th World Ranger Congress which was held 11-16 Nov in Sauraha, Chitwan National Park, Nepal. The Congress was the largest to date with over 550 Rangers and protected area staff from 70+ countries (including 10 from CMA and 4 from the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association), all coming together to discuss a range of topics and issues.

We were welcomed at the flag raising ceremony by Sean Willmore (IRF President) and Rohit Singh (Asian Ranger Federation) and Dr Krishna Prasad Acharya (Conservation Association of Nepal) the principal organisers of the Congress. The programme for the first 4 days followed a similar pattern, starting with a plenary session followed by workshops and presentations on each of the Congress themes, these being -

1 Ranger Welfare – Improving the working conditions of Rangers and ensuring minimum standards of job related/occupational health and safety,

2 Rangers and Local Communities – Improving and valuing the essential relationship between those who safeguard, and those who live in close proximity to and are dependent on protected areas and their natural resources.

3 Indigenous Rangers – Recognising the essential role of indigenous communities in wildlife protection and conservation, as well as supporting indigenous rangers,

4 Ranger Capacity – Training, motivating and equipping Rangers to ensure they are responsible, professional and effective,

5 Women in the Ranger Workforce – Addressing the under-representation of women in the Ranger Workforce and the challenges associated with their jobs,

6 Role of Ranger Associations – Connecting local Rangers to each other, learning and sharing best practices and raising awareness to support the critical work of Rangers, and

7 Technology – Highlighting new and available technologies which play an important role in supporting Rangers in their day-to-day work.

As well as the formal sessions, there was obviously a lot of networking done during tea breaks and over lunch and evening meals, several of which were combined with a series of video presentations. These included the documentary 'The Rhino Man' looking at an Anti-poaching training centre in South Africa, and 'Ranger to Ranger' visiting a number of projects supported by The Thin Green Line Foundation. Meeting Rangers who regularly face poachers armed with anything from machetes to AK47s and who are never certain that they are going to get paid, or having to deal with potentially deadly wildlife such as elephants, tigers, rhinos, leopards etc. is quite humbling. However, many of those who face such dangers insist that Rangers in developed countries have a harder job, because the environment is either fragmented or degraded such that any further damage could be the end of either a species or habitat.

Part of any Congress is to see the local environment and this was done via a series of jeep safaris and canoe trips within the National Park. We were all allocated a day for each of these, meeting at the Park entrance for a boat ride across the river to the waiting jeeps at 06.00, and getting back around 09.00. The canoe trips were sponsored by the local forest guides association in a fantastic gesture of goodwill. Although the local wildlife was not in the most cooperative mood, some of the groups did see tigers in the Park and most participants saw the Greater One-horned (Indian) Rhino. Indeed, there were several sightings of the latter in the main street of Sauraha, one of only two things to bring the normally chaotic

traffic to a standstill. The second traffic stopper was a spontaneous parade, laid on by the town to welcome and thank the world Rangers for holding their congress there. Groups of musicians and dancers turned up at the congress venue and after playing in the main square for 10 minutes, they headed out in to the town followed by the Rangers. All the shopkeepers and hoteliers came out into the street to watch and offer their support, making it a superb end to the main business of the congress.

In addition to the organised trips above, many delegates made use of the local guides to arrange their own trips. I went on a bird walk along with Will Stewart from Norwich and Tony Wilson from Scotland, seeing in excess of 40 species of birds (and a few mammals) in the space of two hours. A New Zealander who had done the same walk a couple of days earlier had seen over 60 species of birds.

The final day was handed over to official IRF business, the election of the new executive committee and adoption of a new formal IRF constitution, as well as finalising and passing the Chitwan declaration, summarising and adopting the main outcomes of the congress.

Whilst the roles of IRF President and most of the regional representatives were uncontested, that of IRF Vice President had three candidates whilst those of Treasurer and Secretary had no nominees. For the latter, nominations were called for from the floor and the Treasurer was subsequently elected uncontested. There was a frantic few minutes adding the two new nominees for Secretary to the ballot papers but once this was accomplished the member association representatives were called up to cast their votes.

The successful candidates for each post were as follows -

President – Chris Galliers, (South Africa)

Vice President – Linda Nunn, (UK)

Treasurer – Mike Lynch, (USA)

Secretary – Jessica Korhut (USA)

European Rep – Urs Wegmann (Switzerland)

Asia Rep – Rohit Singh (India/Singapore)

Oceania Rep – Jolene MacLellan (Australia)

Africa Rep – Koutoua Amon (Ivory Coast)

Latin America Rep – Werhner Atoche Montoya (Peru)

Central America Rep - Leonel Delgado Periera (Costa Rica)

North America Rep – Andrew Wright (USA).

As always, the World Ranger Congress was inspirational, thought provoking and enjoyable in equal measures, and I would recommend anyone that gets half a chance to attend to grab that opportunity and go. The next European Ranger Congress will be held in The Bavarian Forest National Park in Germany in May 2020, whilst the next World Congress is likely to be in the Azores or Peru in 2022. Contact the CMA International coordinator Ian Brooker for further details or to express interest in attending either of these.

Derek Evans.