

Passing Out Parade for Rangers Democratic Republic of Congo

On Sunday 19th March 2006, forty five rangers stood tall and proud at their passing out ceremony on the new training centre parade ground, Ishango, Virunga National Park, eastern DR Congo. Rangers from the five stations around the park, had received communications, security, self-defence and weapons training, together with many other skills required for their difficult and often dangerous work protecting this World Heritage Site in Danger.

After many months of tough and challenging training, these rangers received much deserved congratulations and admiration on behalf of the 479 rangers who had completed the course from a variety of invited guests. It was an honour to be invited to Ishango, having visited many of the rangers back in July 2004 as part of a small delegation from the IRF. At that time, these extremely dedicated and committed rangers were nonetheless appearing in need of self-confidence, practical support and a boost to their morale. Watching their faces at Ishango, they certainly now had all of that and more besides.

Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) had enabled this training programme to take place through encouraging the co-operation of many partners within DRC and via funding from themselves and from different international sources. Support for the programme had had to be gained at the political level, from military leaders and from MONUC, the United Nations forces in DRC.

Amongst those attending the ceremony were the Assistant Provincial Governor of North Kivu, the military chief in the province, the Technical Director of ICCN (Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature) and representatives from FZS, DFGF, WCS and ZSL. Many speeches were given praising the grit, determination and perseverance of the rangers in completing the training and congratulating them on their tremendous success.

Robert Muir from FZS, together with partners and the skilled instructors had shown great determination in implementing this programme but the true stars of the day were the rangers themselves. They showed off their skills during a mock capture of poachers, marched in unison around the parade ground and stepped forward one by one to receive certificates and medals for their achievements.

I was honoured to present a short, congratulatory speech on behalf of David Zeller, President of IRF, together with another for the UK Government and a UK charity 'Gearing Up 4 Gorillas'. The applause from the rangers showed their appreciation of the support from the 'world family of rangers'. I hope to have a display at the Stirling World Congress depicting this significant event.

Although March 19th was billed as a 'closing ceremony', this is indeed now just the beginning.....The tremendous success of this initial programme has gained the admiration and ongoing support from all those present on the 19th, paving the way for Ishango to now welcome many more rangers from all around DRC, who will go on to benefit from the wide ranging training on offer. A resounding 'well done' to everyone involved!

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