

NEWS RELEASE

Safer anti-poaching efforts in sights as UP and international partners conduct pivotal research on injury prevention in game rangers



A ranger's work is physical demanding. Here rangers are busy with a White Rhino capture and dehorning to reduce the risk of poaching. © Peter Chadwick, GRAA Ranger Legacy Programme.

PRETORIA - Ahead of World Ranger Day on 31 July, the University of Pretoria (UP) announces a key partnership in a new 10-year research programme focused on injury prevention among game rangers.

Drawing on expertise from UP, the NGO Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA), and expert researchers in injury prevention from the United Kingdom, South Africa and the Netherlands, the programme will run from 2024–2034, focusing on rangers involved in African anti-poaching operations.

Rangers, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), will be called upon to protect nearly a third of the planet in the next decade.

In the past year, however, 140 rangers were killed in the line of duty throughout the world. With 42 of those deaths taking place in Africa, African rangers face the highest exposure to life-threatening situations.

The research programme aims to build a repository of data that can be used for future research projects geared towards injury prevention strategies among game rangers in Africa.

An important contribution will come from UP's Departments of Physiotherapy and Section Sports Medicine, which has extensive experience in supporting sports athletes through research aimed at finding injury prevention solutions.

"When we think about wildlife conservation, we think about the animals' well-being," explained Prof Carel Viljoen, Head of the Department of Physiotherapy at UP. "We rarely think about the rangers protecting these animals behind the scenes.

"Our team of physiotherapists, medical doctors, sport scientists, and biokineticists acknowledge these rangers' vital contribution, and will be combining all our injury prevention expertise to support anti-poaching rangers in their job to better protect wildlife."

Anti-poaching heroes

Rangers don't only safeguard natural areas, provide critical data and respond to environmental emergencies. They also play a central role in tackling poaching, which has had a devastating impact on wildlife conservation efforts across the globe – in southern Africa especially.

Rangers face significant safety risks at the frontlines of the fight against poaching. Ranging is also extremely physically taxing work, requiring similar exposure to physical activity to that seen in multiday endurance athletes.

Nearly 9 out of 10 African rangers (88.6%) have reported facing life-threatening situations in the line of duty, yet there remains a dearth of literature on the incidence on injury, type and mechanisms of injury, severity, risk factors and other critical data.

Such data plays a pivotal role in injury prevention strategies for game rangers.

Guarding the guardians

The new research will firstly focus on gaining a better understanding of the rangers' injury profiles and the injury risk factors at play. Rangers will also be interviewed in order to assess their perceptions of injury risk and prevention, as well as barriers to injury prevention in wilderness areas.

Because occupational injury prevention strategies are more effective when focused on the context where an individual works, the research will initially be wide-ranging and eventually narrow down to specific parks – since risk factors most likely differ for rangers working in, say, Table Mountain National Park versus the Kruger National Park.

"The Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) is the oldest, largest and most representative ranger association in Africa," said Louise de Bruin, Administrator of the GRAA. "We provide rangers across Africa with the necessary capabilities and support to perform their vital duties to conserve wildlife and wild spaces across the continent.

"We are therefore delighted to partner with the University of Pretoria in this important study that will provide tangible benefits to rangers' physical well-being. Ensuring injury prevention among rangers will contribute to their well-being and optimal performance, working on the frontline of conservation."

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za