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WORLD FEMALE RANGER DAY

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Celebrating the women protecting Africa's wildlife. By Sue Watt

In April, two women – **Anety Milimo** from Zambia's Mosi Oa Tunya National Park and **Nkateko Mzimba** from South Africa's Greater Kruger – were recognised in the IUCN International Ranger Awards for their unwavering dedication to wildlife protection. Yet women constitute just 11 per cent of the global ranger workforce, often experiencing inequality and inadequate facilities and support.

Aiming to raise awareness and funding, the new World Female Ranger Day was launched on June 23 by UK charity How Many Elephants, founded by Holly Budge. The ongoing campaign will focus on Africa during this inaugural year.

I spoke to **Nkateko Mzimba**. She's a member of the Black Mambas, Africa's first all-female anti-poaching unit, formed in 2013, which patrols areas of the Greater Kruger unarmed. The 36-strong team has dramatically reduced bushmeat poaching and the use of snares, providing crucial links between conservation and their communities, some of which support poachers.

Why did you join the Black Mambas?

I always wanted to be a tour guide. We don't have a father and I'm the breadwinner for my mother and five siblings. My younger sister became a Black Mamba in 2013 and said I should join. I said: "Do you want me to become a snake?" But she explained the job and I really wanted to do it. At first, my mother was against it, worried we'd be killed by poachers. Now she says she's proud.

Q How does your community feel about your work?

Initially, people approached me to come into the reserve for rhino poaching. Maybe they thought I'm useless and can't do what they think is a man's job. But we ask them to change, to protect wildlife for their kids, trying to show we love and support them, and we give them food. Things are better now. They say they poach because of poverty or hunger and it's painful to hear. We take children into the bush, sharing it with them to show they are a part of us and to build bridges between us. The women always support me; we stand side by side. I try my best to help them – I'm here because of them.

Q Would you feel safer with guns when you find poachers?

I don't need a gun. We're not here to fight, we're here to protect wildlife. If we see rhino poachers, we call for armed backup. I'm not scared to face meat poachers

RIVONI MKANSI



because they only carry knives and we know how to catch them. We have been trained to be safe in the bush.

Q Why do women make good rangers?

Women love this work so much, they become very strict. When people try to bribe us, we say no, we'll have to arrest you if you come to the reserve. And we're secretive; we don't share information with people outside the reserve.

Q What do you think about World Female Ranger Day?

It's good to learn from other teams around the world. If they employ more women in women's ranger teams, that's fantastic. Women were always undermined but now, they see the importance of us in the bush.

Q What do you feel about working in an all-female team?

I love it because we've proved to so many that we can do this job. We want to empower other women too. I would die in the bush because I'm so proud to be a Black Mamba.

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