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Poaching, trafficking cases drop as use of dogs in conservation picks up

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By Caroline Chebet, Standard Media

On March 18, 2016, detection dogs attached to the canine unit at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport helped to bust a pangolin-trafficking network

after sniffing out a consignment that had been declared as feathers.

The unaccompanied consignment from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo was destined for Bangkok, Thailand. The journey was, however, cut short by dogs which have since almost disrupted the illegal trade and trafficking of wildlife products.

“In 2016, we started seeing a changing trend and we realised people were trafficking pangolins and we had to train our dogs to detect them. When we put our canine teams to task, we started recording a lot of trafficking cases which then started going down drastically,” Mark Kinyua, head of the Canine Unit at the Kenya Wildlife Service said during a webinar organised by Internews.

The incorporation of dogs in conservation, according to experts, has drastically led to a reduction in poaching and trafficking cases, not only in Kenya but also in the region.

Trained dogs are effective in tracking, patrolling, and detecting poaching hotspots and investigating wildlife crimes.

Data from the Kenya Wildlife Service indicates that between 2014 and 2022, dogs led to the documentation of 102 incidents of wildlife trafficking. About 114 people linked to these incidents were arrested and prosecuted during the period.

“The dogs are key in deterring these crimes. These cases have gone down because traffickers are now aware of the strict security deployed in our borders, airports, and even ports. Numbers do not lie,” he said.

KWS data reveals a declining trend from 2014 where 22 incidents of trafficking were recorded to 2022 where the KWS canine unit recorded one incident.

According to Dr Philip Muruthi, a species conservation and science expert and senior director of conservation science at Africa Wildlife Foundation, dogs have played a key role in combating wildlife trafficking cases.

“Dogs have a highly developed olfactory system up to 100,000 times as acute as a human nose. They are also fast and can differentiate up to 30 different

scents. Search areas where detection dogs come in handy include vehicles in roadblocks and borders, shipping containers, air cargo, and people's houses," Muruthi said

For successful assignments, handlers are also trained alongside the dogs to ease the interpretation of body language and reactions.

"The dogs are trained to give cues to the handler. In cases where the smell is positive, the dog will sit," he said.

But pairing a dog and handler, he said, is also key in forming a strong team.

"The relationship between a dog and its handler is paramount. Often, a dog handler is chosen from a pool of rangers. They must meet the requirements of highest integrity levels," he said.

While the KWS canine unit started off in the year 2000 with three dogs from Germany, they have increased to include breeds such as the Belgian Malinois, German shepherd, Springer spaniel, and bloodhound are both tracker and detection dogs.

Kinyua said that KWS tracker dogs are deployed in different areas, including Meru National Park, which is a rhino sanctuary. They are also deployed in Solio Ranch, Lake Nakuru National Park, and Tsavo East and West National parks.

Detection dogs, on the other hand, have mostly deployed in border checks and roadblocks and in major airports and ports including Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Mombasa International Airport and the port of Mombasa.

In neighbouring countries like Uganda and Tanzania, dogs have also been key in combating crimes.

Data from AWF indicates that since 2016, 449 trafficking incidents have been documented by dog teams in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The years 2017 and 2018 recorded the highest finds in the three countries, with 104 finds recorded in 2017 and 118 in 2018.

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001466134/poaching-trafficking-cases-drop-as-use-of-dogs-in-conservation-picks-up>



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