

Journal of African Elephants

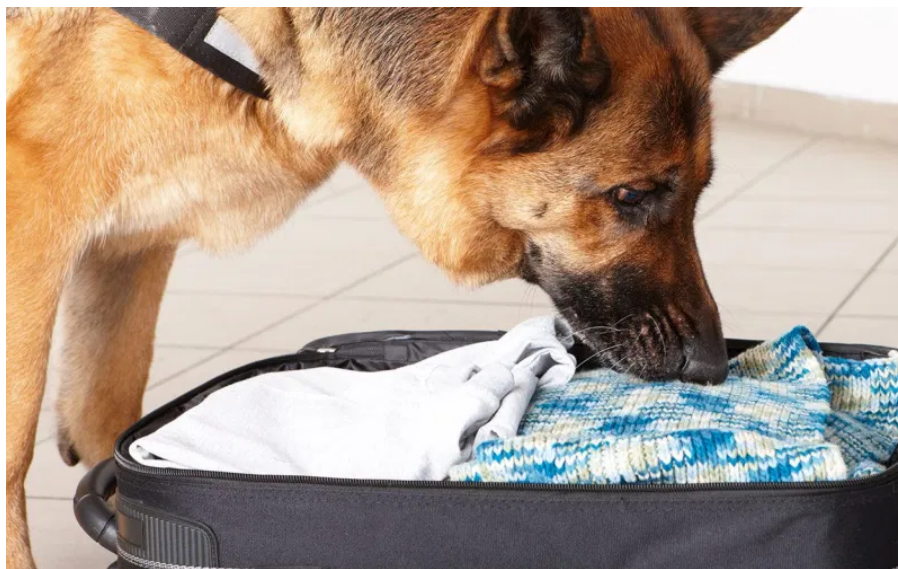
SPOTLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF AFRICA'S ELEPHANTS



NEWS

Stop The Illegal Wildlife Trade: The detection dogs sniffing out wildlife crime (Malawi)

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By Emma Ledger, The Independent



Until an illegal wildlife trade report was published in May 2015, Malawi's role in one of the world's largest transnational organised crimes was largely unknown.

The landlocked southeast African nation – bordered by countries with large wildlife populations – was revealed to be a major trafficking hub for ivory, pangolin scales, rhino horn and other illegal wildlife commodities.

Malawi's weak identification and enforcement systems were being systematically exploited by criminals to export their products to China, Vietnam and other demand countries.

In response to the report, the country's first Wildlife Detection Dog Unit (WDDU) in 2018. Sitting within the Malawi Police, the WDDU is based in the capital Lilongwe's airport but covers trading posts and the other airports.

Yet before the WDDU could even begin its intensive training programme it faced big challenges.

"In Malawi most people are terrified of dogs because rabies is still a big problem," says photographer Julia Gunther, who together with writer Nick Schönfeld, spent a week with the WDDU in March, just before the world was locked down. "There are also large packs of strays who roam the streets.

"That might sound like a good thing, as the presence of the WDDU's dogs – which are large German Shepherd and Belgian Malinois – can act as a natural deterrent for criminals. But it also meant it was hard to find people who wanted to be trained to work with them.

"Many of the nine WDDU handlers were afraid – or at best ambivalent – before their training. One of them, Ernest Masoo, previously worked as a National Park ranger and had to kill dogs in order to protect the wildlife. Now he adores his dog and cares for him impeccably."

It is a cultural shift for many Malawians to learn that dogs can be useful. Gunther's photo series examines the role the WDDU's dogs and handlers now play in combatting the illegal wildlife trade in Malawi.

"The success of the work is totally reliant on a strong bond between handler and dog," Gunther adds. "The training is relentless and exhausting.

"The dogs spent time being trained in Israel and their orders are all in Hebrew, which is helpful as no one in Malawi knows what they are



saying,” Gunther adds.

The two years since the unit was set up have seen impressive results. The WDDU contributed to the historic arrest of nine members of one of Southern Africa’s most prolific wildlife trafficking gangs, dubbed the Lin-Zhang syndicate, who had been operating within Malawi for decades.

The WDDU helped discover ivory chopsticks, pangolin scales and hippo teeth hidden so well in a building that another investigative department had been unable to find them.

The seven Chinese and two Malawian nationals were collectively sentenced to 56 and a half years in prison.

The case exemplifies just how far Malawi has come in its fight, and demonstrates how a dog unit can enhance inter-agency collaboration to tackle wildlife crime.

Yet the way evidence is treated by the judiciary is not always straightforward.

“Dog handlers and prosecutors must be very well trained to present dog evidence at court,” said Katto Wambua, senior criminal justice advisor to Space for Giants, the international conservation charity The Independent’s Stop The Illegal Wildlife Trade campaign is supporting.

“Dog evidence is extremely valuable because unlike humans, dogs can’t be corrupted. But in a recent case in Kenya where dogs had led investigators right from the scene of a crime to the underside of the bed of a very well known suspected poacher, the case was thrown out because the evidence was not presented correctly. There are many such examples.

“It’s no good having a prosecutor tell a court, ‘dogs led us to this man’s house’. They must testify to the dogs’ capabilities. Dog units are very expensive, so it’s bad that all that effort goes to waste.”

Since 2015 the African Wildlife Foundation [AWF] Canines for Conservation programme has deployed dog-and-handler teams at airports and other trafficking hotspots in five countries, and has uncovered millions of dollars’ worth of ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales and other illegal wildlife products.

Kirstin Johnson, AWF’s UK Director, notes that whilst progress is being made in some countries, agrees that there is still a great deal of work to be



done in translating evidence discovered by dog units into successful convictions.

There is also acknowledgement that the success of some dog units may in fact spell their demise; criminals move their operations elsewhere when the deterrent become too large.

Johnson believes there is value in maintaining the canine units “even when criminals move on, as an ongoing measure to protect the wildlife assets.

“We will soon be deploying dog-and-handler teams to Mozambique, Botswana, and Cameroon,” she adds. “The latter is groundbreaking because it is also a route for baby ape trafficking.

“Next in line is Ethiopia, which has been identified as a key transit hub for illegally trafficked wildlife, but currently has extremely limited capacity to respond.”

Standardising how authorities recognise evidence found by dogs across an entire continent is a lengthy and complex piece of work. Save the Rhino International’s Emma Pereira said “In the last couple of decades dog units have increased dramatically across Africa, but there is still a lot of work to do in terms of how the evidence dogs find is collected and treated in court.

“Save the Rhino works with law enforcers and the judiciary to strengthen learning across the board and help make it standard, to ensure that evidence found by dog units is better understood.”

In its training of investigators, prosecutors, and magistrates, Space for Giants includes a comprehensive session on how to present dog evidence. They have developed a pocket-sized guideline handbook on dog evidence, to help make this tool as effective as it can be.

Wildlife crime intersects with other transnational organised networks involved in drugs, arms, and human trafficking.

Man’s best friend is proving to be a valuable asset in establishing proactive wildlife crime investigations to disrupt these networks, tackle corruption and help to win the war against wildlife criminals.

When it comes to closing down the illegal wildlife trade, the dog days are just beginning.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/world/stop-the-illegal-wildlife-trade-the-detection-dogs-sniffing-out-wildlife-crime-b1048229.html>