



## Dogs on the trail of poachers

### Man's best friend combats wildlife crime

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The environment ministry's new anti-poaching dog unit has already recorded several successes, which includes apprehending a poacher in the Etosha National Park.

This happened during the dogs' first operation, just 16 days after their handlers started training with them.

Two rifles, one shotgun and 50kg of bush meat were confiscated during the unit's training exercises.

The unit was inaugurated at Waterberg National Park last week.

Environment minister Pohamba Shifeta said the ministry last year began to explore the potential of anti-poaching dogs in partnership with Invictus K9, which specialises in the establishment of canine police units.

In May this year kennels were built at Waterberg and four dogs, named Benso, Baron, Alex and Nora, were procured from specialist breeders in Holland.

"They were imported to Namibia and immediately began six weeks of acclimation and pre-training by Invictus K9, where a solid foundation in detection and traction was laid," said Shifeta.

He said all four dogs were trained to search buildings, vehicles and open areas for firearms, ammunition and illegal wildlife products such as ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales and bush meat.

The dogs are also all capable of tracking human scent in a variety of different terrains during day and night.

The four dogs will join Ezaro, who is already stationed at Etosha National Park, on operations.

The dog unit will be used in the Etosha and Bwabwata national parks, all conservation areas regarded as strategic points, as well as at airports and border posts.

Shifeta said the ministry planned to acquire three more dogs to have at least eight by next year.

"We also want to introduce horses for rangers to use in rough terrain, as it is sometimes difficult to travel in some areas."

Shifeta said the dog unit is part of the ministry's Wildlife Protection Division.

With regard to the national anti-poaching unit, Shifeta said the ministry was struggling to recruit members, especially young people.

"The unit consists of about 500 members and most of our employees you find cannot be retrained again, because this training is very tough. We need people between 20 and 23 years old that can go through this training.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-on-the-trail-of-poachers2018-09-180.jpg>)

FETCH!: A demonstration of how the dogs detect rhino horn hidden in a vehicle. Photos: ELLANIE SMIT



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-on-the-trail-of-poachers2018-09-181.jpg>)

"I once again say enough is enough, these illegal activities on our wildlife species must completely come to an end. Those involved must stop the illegal hunting of our rhinos, pangolin and elephants now."

According to Mike Hensmen, an instructor for Invictus K9, a risk assessment of Etosha and Waterberg was done in June 2016 and in October last year a kennel site was identified at Waterberg.

In May this year the dog procurement started and the dogs were transported to Namibia, where the handler selection started. Their first operation on 10 August was successful, only 16 days after the training of handlers started.

He said handlers were selected from the country's Special Forces and must show dedication and empathy and rapport with the dogs.

"This is a 24-hour job and takes a unique set of skills and not everybody can do it. We started with 60 people and 30 were selected, after which 14 dropped out on the first day. Five handlers were finally selected."

He said one dog costs about US\$5 million but is worth US\$20 million once training is completed.

The US ambassador to Namibia, Lisa Johnson, said at the occasion that Namibia continues to be a model for conservation in the region.

Johnson said poaching became a growing problem in Namibia just a few years ago, with the number of poached rhinos peaking at 95 in 2015.

Since then the number has dropped significantly and as of August this year 35 rhinos had been poached.

"Despite the progress, Namibia is not poacher free," Johnson added.

She said dogs have been used successfully to detect illegal wildlife products and wildlife trafficking in many places including Asia, Europe and elsewhere in Africa.

"Earlier this year I had the chance to meet the dog posted at Etosha and observe first-hand his skill at detecting bullet casings and rhino horn."

The United States government supported the ministry by funding the purchase and training of the dogs, as well as supplies and equipment for the dogs and dog handlers.

The US is funding ongoing wildlife projects in Namibia valued at more than US\$20 million.

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