

Jacobs and two of his colleagues checking the patrol plans. Photo Katharina Moser
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SPECIAL PAGES (/SPESIALE-BLADSYE)

NWP SERIOUS ABOUT CONSERVATION

Two hundred rangers employed

Namibia Wildlife Protection rangers receive training in, amongst others, weapons handling, tactical movements and tracking.

Katharina Moser

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Katharina Moser – In camouflage attire, black boots and a semi-automatic weapon in his holster, Marcus Jacobs is ready for action in the morning.

What may sound like a military operation is, in fact, the daily routine of a man on a mission: protecting endangered wildlife from poachers.

Jacobs is the general manager of Namibia Wildlife Protection (NWP), a private security company in Namibia, that protects endangered wildlife species in Namibia from poachers. These include "high target species" such as rhinos and elephants.

"We can no longer protect our precious species without weapons. We all wish for a world where it is not necessary, but the reality is different," says Jacobs, who since 2015 has been involved in units aimed at curbing poaching in the country.

Jacobs has been the company's general manager since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Namibian Salmon Entertainment founded NWP in 2017 and the protection of rhinos and elephants is close to his heart.

He decided to specialise in rhinos and elephants and now employs more than 200 rangers on about 700,000 hectares of private farmland.

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"There is a high demand for anti-poaching units in the local agricultural industry," Vermaak believes.

He says many farms have tried to establish their own anti-poaching units, but this is believed to be unsustainable.

"This is because the rangers are mixing with the other farm and lodge workers, which threatens operational security.

"Outsourcing anti-poaching is much safer and more efficient," he said.

According to Vermaak, this is also due to the equipment and the level of responsibility his rangers take on themselves.

The NWP follows the trend of "militarisation in conservation" implemented by many countries in Africa and therefore all the rangers are equipped with semi-automatic weapons.

"You have to understand the different types of poachers. First, there are poachers who illegally hunt for meat for their own use. Secondly, there are commercial poachers who illegally hunt with firearms at night and sell meat for a profit. Both are harmful to wildlife, but not an extraordinary threat to endangered species or to our rangers.

"However, the third kind is a bigger problem. This includes syndicates that hunt illegally and smuggle wildlife products of endangered species abroad via established trade routes.

"They are well equipped and willing to walk over corpses. I will never send my rangers into the woods unarmed to act against these poachers," Vermaak said.

He says his rangers often run traps and that shots are fired many times. However, it is believed to be only in exceptional cases where deaths are recorded.

In the past eight years, Entertainment's rangers have killed only two or three poachers.

Jacobs, who is responsible for training new rangers, is also convinced of the importance of a military approach.

"All anti-poaching units take a military approach. This is especially important for discipline. You can't just hand out weapons to 'hooligans' and tell them to please protect the farm."

A VICIOUS CYCLE

One of NWP's challenges is that the poachers are constantly better equipped and better informed.

"We always have to keep up with the poachers. We now use drones and even a gyrocopter on the farms," Jacobs says.

However, the fight against poachers – he calls it a "war" – is a vicious cycle: "The problem is that we can only act against the little man who approaches the rhino with a weapon, but not against the syndicate behind him. If we arrest one poacher, a new one takes its place," he says.

Only four rhinos have been poached under the watchful eye of rangers on NWP's customer farms since the company was founded.

The NWP sees their work as an important contribution in "the war against poaching".

Rangers experience confrontations in the forest daily and witness the brutality of poaching. They have seen dead rhinos, poachers and rangers.

"When it comes to poaching, I have good news and bad news," Vermaak says.

"The bad news is that in general we are losing the battle against poaching. Anyone who says otherwise doesn't want to accept reality. The good news is that we are slowly losing it and with our work we can at least apply the brakes."

NWP's rangers have captured eight poachers in recent years and handed them over to police.

"The Criminal Procedure Act in Namibia, according to which we act as private individuals, allows us to arrest someone if they commit a crime in our presence, or if there is reason to believe that they have committed a crime. This allows us to arrest poachers," Vermaak explains.

"The law also states that if the person resists arrest, you can use reasonable force. That's all we need. We must then hand over the poacher to the police as quickly as possible," he says.

The NWP is working with the Blue Rhino task force and the government's protected resources unit, both of which Entertainment says are "doing an excellent job".

HOWEVER, CORRUPTION AND BRIBERY

Jacobs is also convinced that corruption and bribery in other sections of the authorities stand in the way of efforts to combat poaching.

"In my experience, certain sections of the police and military sometimes choose to look the other way or are even directly involved in poaching. I am sure that some NDF soldiers hunt illegally and even use the military's equipment for it," Jacobs claimed.

In recent years, there have been numerous media reports about the involvement of police officers, soldiers and state game wardens in poaching cases.

He believes the only solution is a high presence of rangers on farms. Each farm where the NWP is active is guarded by at least two rangers and the number

The appointment of external rangers is an expensive process for farmers.

According to Jacobs, one NWP ranger costs a farmer more than N\$8 000 per month.

One significant problem is the protection of the endangered black rhino. To assist with their protection, NWP established the Black Rhino Protection Fund.

Here, foreign sponsors can donate money to help NWP protect black rhinos. NWP also offers an international program for volunteers who want to be trained as rangers.

TRAINING

According to Entertainment, all of NWP's rangers receive trained in handling weapons, tactical movements, navigation, tracking, laws and military discipline.

Before NWP employees are considered full-fledged rangers, they undergo a one-year training phase, which begins with a two-week intensive training course.

Before candidates qualify for the training, they undergo an extensive background check and must submit a police clearance certificate. They also need to be fit, but there is also the human factor of confidence.

During the two-week intensive exercise program, Jacobs sends the candidates to run miles in hot afternoon heat and is further challenged with various exercises.

Between strenuous exercises, Jacobs also motivates his candidates.

"The uniform is heavy because protecting someone is a huge responsibility that rests heavily on our shoulders.

"When we work as rangers on a farm, it becomes our farm. Because we protect it, we are responsible for every living thing on that ground."


In addition to training in terms of weapons handling, first aid and tracking, operational security is an important part of the training.

The prospective rangers should exercise discretion to keep any information about rhinos on the farms away from the eyes and ears of the public.

Patrol plans, locations of observation points, the names of informants, the number and location of rhinos, the number of rangers, the size and maps of the farm, radio callsigns – these are all critical information that rangers must keep secret at all costs to protect the rhinos.

It is apparently not uncommon for farm workers or even rangers to act as informants for poachers in exchange for bribes – and to sell information about the rhinos on their own farm.

Thus, three months after a prospective ranger began his work, he was subjected to a polygraph test. The ranger receives his training certificate only one year after starting training.

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