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'What they are doing is sad and emotional' - poachers use snares to trap animals in Kruger Park

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- **Poachers are using snare traps to capture animals in the Kruger National Park.**
 - **More than 100 snare traps were removed in October alone.**
 - **Small carnivores that roam freely or hunt near snares often fall prey.**
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Poachers have turned to snare trapping to capture animals in the Kruger National Park, including some endangered species, and use poisoned carcasses to lure them.

Many of the trapped animals die and their carcasses rot.

Rangers and other officials have been combing through the 19 485 km² Kruger National Park, which houses the country's Big Five, in search of injured and trapped animals.

Poachers have targeted almost all sections of the park. Wild dogs, lions and small antelopes are some of the animals that have been trapped.

A wild dog was rescued on Tuesday when its throat was nearly sliced in a snare trap.

The steel device hung from its neck, mere centimetres from its throat.

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To reach the injured animal, rangers played wild dog sounds via speakers mounted on a van to entice the pack.

Almost an hour later, a pack of wild dogs emerged from a bush and the injured animal was identified and darted.

Veterinarians have collared most wild dogs to track their movements around the park.



Field ranger hiding and waiting for poachers in the Kruger National Park

Some fell prey to traps that were strategically placed near the park's border with Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

One veterinarian, Louis van Schalkwyk, said a pack of male wild dogs usually roams through the two neighbouring countries.

"They run up to 15km per day. Wild dogs are energetic animals. They tend to become victims of snaring. We have collared every pack in the park to monitor their movements and if they are in danger.

"Once in a while they frequent high-risk areas. We then get notified and quickly jump to assist. You can't take a wild dog to the hospital because they are dependent on each other. They look after each other," said Van Schalkwyk.

If the snared one becomes too slow for the pack, the pack will split and some will stay behind and feed the injured dog.

"They are amazing animals," Van Schalkwyk said.

Last week, another wild dog was rescued from a snare.

Van Schalkwyk and his fellow veterinarian, Lufuno Netshitavhadulu, darted the dog and removed the steel device from its neck.

A few minutes later, the dog was injected, gained consciousness and jumped up before joining the nearby pack.

"We count and take photos of every wild dog we have here. We also obtain DNA samples. Due to their hunting and running skills, they easily fall prey to traps in the park.

"Once we catch the snared animals, the pack remains closer to it until the snare is removed. They protect and love each other," Van Schalkwyk said.

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SANParks ranger Dalton Mabasa said snaring was the cruellest method poachers used.

"It is an inhumane killing device they use. We usually remove many snare traps during the winter season. Poachers are aware that during winter, many of our dams are drying out.

"Our animals would [move] en masse...to dams that have water. Poachers would then set up their snares along paths leading to the dams. About 10% end up in the pots of poachers.

"The remaining 90% end up being eaten by secondary carnivorous animals. What they are doing is sad and emotional. Snares don't discriminate. They catch unintended animals, including sick and endangered animals," Mabasa said.

Some animals with anthrax end up spreading diseases to communities, Mabasa added.

Despite that, Mabasa said rangers were not deterred in their mission to safeguard the animals and search for the poachers.

"For the last quarter alone, we have removed 590 snares.

"Last month alone, we removed 108 snares. For the past quarter, we have arrested two people for poaching. Most poachers are illegal immigrants. They later graduate from snaring poaching to rifle-armed hunters.

"Hunters use high-calibre guns to kill big animals. None of the poachers will easily surrender to us. We will not give up. We will fight until we win this war," Mabasa said.