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Free-running hounds deployed to curb mostly rhino poaching yield massive results in Kruger National Park

A dog handler and ranger with one of the free-running hounds introduced to fight poachers in the Kruger National Park. Picture: Mashudu Sadike

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Pretoria - Poaching in the Kruger National Park has seen a massive decrease in recent years attributed to the introduction of free-running hounds.

The dogs were introduced almost eight years ago to arguably South Africa's number one visited national park to curb mostly the poaching of rhinos for their horns.

During a SA National Parks tour in Mathekenyane, near Skukuza journalists witnessed the dogs in action when the park management simulated poachers getting arrested after being tracked by about six to eight free-running dogs.

The dogs were set off about half a kilometre from the hideout of rangers who pretended to be poachers.

Running at rapid speeds, the hounds tracked the scent to exactly where the rangers were within minutes while two helicopters roamed around to catch them off guard.

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A total of 451 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2021, 327 within government reserves and 124 on private property. Although there was a 24% decrease in rhino poaching compared with the pre-Covid-19 period in 2019, there has been an increase in poaching on private properties.

In 2021, 209 rhinos were poached for their horns in South Africa's national parks, whereas in 2020, 247 were poached.

"There have been massive, positive results after introducing the free-running hounds.

"We have obviously been trying different interventions to curb poaching and the dogs have been fundamental in changing the course, obviously in our favour," said regional ranger Steven Whitfield.

He said dogs in general had been one of the biggest successes in poaching intervention plans in the park, particularly the free-running hounds because they have been able to produce the speed needed to catch poachers.

"A dog on a leash can only move as fast as the handler can move. The handler also tires the dog because the dog would have to pull against the handler... so this has helped speed up the follow-ups and helped have a more gentle contact between rangers and poachers because it can get quite aggressive.

“With the helicopters, the rangers on the ground and the dogs on the ground, the poachers feel overwhelmed and want to engage and fight. They rather give themselves up.

“So it’s been our game-changing interventions.

“The operations have been very successful,” he said.

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Whitfield added that many challenges influenced the operations of the hounds and gave examples.

“There are so many different things that influence the operations. You sometimes have the dogs running really well, then they run into a pride of lions... And they get chased by the lions and get distracted to an extent that they lose the track.

“You might get a big herd of buffalo that walks across the poachers’ tracks and destroys the poachers’ tracks and they struggle to pick up the poachers’ tracks again,” he said.

He said the dogs were trained well enough to do the job at hand but were normally failed by the human element.

“The dogs normally do their work, but we fail to interpret their behaviour or interpret when they are having contact.

“So there are times that we fail, but in the majority we are successful,” he said.

Dogs have been found to be adept at sniffing out poachers and have led to more than 90% of the arrests made.

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