

SMART work in Zambia

Wildlife Police use SMART technology to track poachers

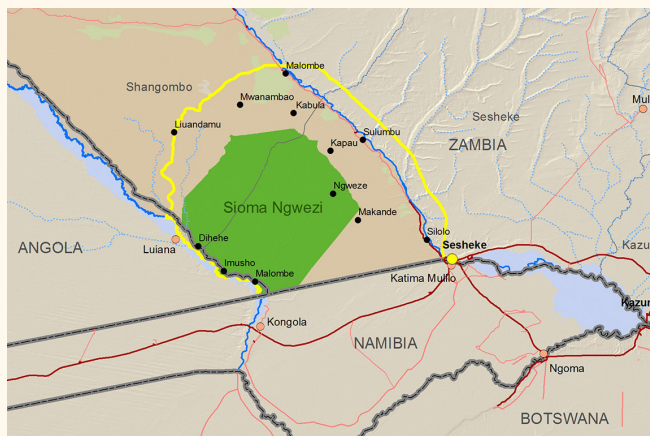


Two elephant tusks, each cut in half: 22.8 kilograms of ivory, led to the arrest of two suspects in the western Zambian town of Senanga late in 2018. The team of Wildlife Police Officers who took part in the operation were pleased with the day's work.

One of the female officers from the team only joined the force in January 2017. The officer (identity withheld) is normally based in the bush, deep inside Sioma Ngwezi National Park, patrolling as part of a team of four men and two women. She is not afraid of wildlife. "Poachers are more dangerous," she says.



The park is adjacent to Angola to the west and Namibia to the south. People have always crossed the borders here to trade for food. Zambia's Wildlife Police, with assistance from USAID, are committed to stamping out a more deadly trade.



Sioma Ngwezi is unfenced and partly surrounded by a game management area used for farming, but where elephants are also found – and killed for their ivory. Zambian Wildlife Police are in regular contact with Angolan and Namibian law enforcement to share information about suspicious movements.



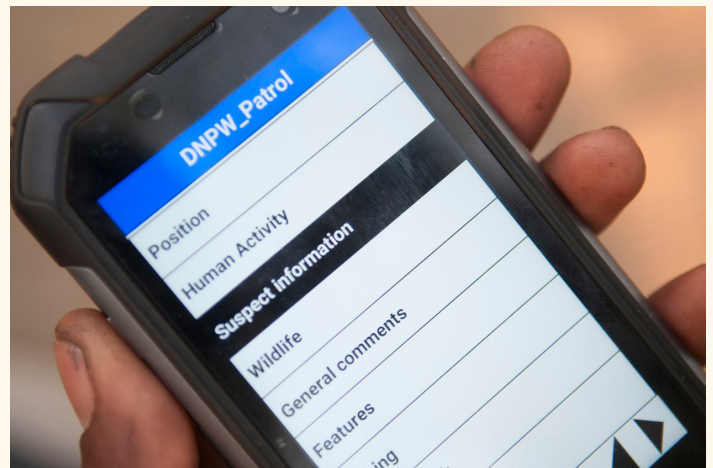
Wildlife police officers are armed with AK47 rifles, but they have another weapon in the fight against wildlife crime: local knowledge. Village scouts recruited from the Game Management Area patrol with the police in groups of five or six. The scouts are chosen by their villages, taken for a special 3 month training, and are supported by WWF Zambia, which provides uniforms, camping gear, and sponsors the training of the selected community scouts.

Wildlife Police officers, like the one who nabbed the suspected poachers, may come from as far as the capital Lusaka, but the scouts are locals who know the wooded trails around the park like the back of their hands, and can tell at a glance if something does not look right.

There is another weapon joining the fight against poachers: SMART, which stands for Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool. Paid for by USAID, SMART devices look a bit like large cell phones. The devices record the patrol's track once a minute without the need to enter GPS data, and if a patrol finds a suspect in the park, all of his/her details will be loaded into the device.

Information from all SMART devices is downloaded at the park headquarters and analysed to detect patterns of illegal activity.

The patrols are dropped off by vehicle from HQ to do a ten day patrol on foot, relying only on their knowledge of the bush, their weapons and, in the future, better contact to base. GPS radios are planned for the patrols, and another vehicle based at the forest camp, which will make it possible to drop patrols deeper in the woods.



A SMART device in use with Wildlife Police and village scouts



All of this costs money. The new grant from USAID to a 12 partner initiative led by WWF to combat wildlife crime in the Kavango and Zambezi river areas is hugely important, says Sioma Nagwezi Park Warden Alfred Phiri. "With SMART we can see where the guys are patrolling. We can identify water holes where wildlife will go – and poachers. We have just trained 40 scouts and a data analyst." A refresher course took place in October 2018.

USAID is also funding aerial surveillance. Trained spotters look out for meat drying racks, and for marks cut in trees by pangas – a way that poachers often mark their trails. Another Zambian NGO called Wildlife Crime Prevention is receiving grant funding from the US through WWF, to give training on wildlife crime to prosecutors and magistrates, resulting in more successful prosecutions and stiffer sentences.

A meal of Nshima made from maize flour is served up before the evening debriefing and planning for the next day's patrol.



As the poaching suspects contemplate a future in jail, the patrol group in the forest sits around the fire and debriefs: “Report: Started 6:57, went NE for 2-3km, then NW 3 km to area where others are patrolling. Saw common duiker, lion and leopard spoor, but no signs of illegal activity.”

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