

## Journal of African Elephants

SPOTLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF AFRICA'S ELEPHANTS



NEWS

# This All-Female Army Protects Elephants From Poachers In Zimbabwe

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By **Rose Minutaglio** – Elle/Yahoo!Life

In Zimbabwe, where an [estimated](#) 85,000 elephants live, the fight to save vulnerable species isn't just a full-time job—it's a lifeline.

Among Zimbabwe's most dedicated anti-poachers are the Akashinga women, a radical all-female unit that patrols five former trophy hunting reserves for illegal activity. The highly-trained, quasi-military troop is an arm of the nonprofit [International Anti-Poaching Foundation](#). They call themselves Akashinga, which means “brave ones” in local dialect, and view themselves as guardians of the land—protecting elephants, rhinos, and lions from [cyanide](#) and snare traps. Many of its members are survivors of domestic abuse or sexual assault.



While some critics [question](#) the effectiveness of sending armed women into nature reserves to fend off notoriously dangerous and violent poachers, Akashinga's founder Damien Mander, a former Australian army sniper, says the group's success is in its receipts. Since 2017, Akashinga rangers have made hundreds of arrests and [helped drive an 80 percent downturn](#) in elephant poaching in Zimbabwe's Lower Zambezi Valley.

[Akashinga: The Brave Ones](#), a new National Geographic short documentary from James Cameron (now available to stream [on YouTube](#)), explores how Mander's all-female army puts their lives on the line every day to protect the animals they love.

ELLE.com spoke with two rangers featured in the film, Nyaradzo Auxillia Hoto and Petronella Chigumbura, about the extreme risks—and high rewards—of being an Akashinga woman. Hoto, 28, is from Huyo Village, Nyamakate, located in Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley. After escaping an abusive marriage in 2017, she joined Akashinga and rose through the ranks to become a sergeant. Now she supports her 8-year-old daughter Tariro with her ranger earnings. Chigumbura, 30, is a single mother of two from Zimbabwe's Mashonaland West Province. She joined Akashinga after getting divorced in 2016 and struggling to feed her two young children. She is now an assistant instructor sergeant and is building a new home for her family.

### **Why did you decide to join Akashinga?**

**Petronella Chigumbura:** As a woman, I was focused on using Akashinga as a tool to fight my battle for a better life. I can now feed my kids and pay school fees for them. I acquired a driver's license, which is a big deal for women in Africa! I am also building a big house for my children. Now I have the pride of having my own future.

**Nyaradzo Auxillia Hoto:** Before, it was commonly accepted that a ranger was always a man, but after the introduction of the Akashinga program, I wanted to prove that no job is only meant for men. At first, my community couldn't believe a woman could be a ranger. But the sky is the limit, and women can also be rangers. I managed to pursue my educational dreams. I dropped out of school many years ago; I am now a part-time student at one of the universities in Zimbabwe, pursuing a bachelor's degree with honors in science, wildlife, ecology, and conservation. I also managed to buy a plot of land in our community.





Photo credit: Courtesy Nat Geo

**Protecting elephants and other wildlife from poachers can be dangerous. According to the BBC, more than 1,000 rangers were killed globally over the past decade by poachers, animals, and accidents. What's the riskiest part of your job?**

**Chigumbura:** Poachers use guns, snares, and even poison. Some use cyanide that kills a thousand animals in a few minutes. Many poachers here in Zimbabwe are driven by poverty, hunger, and the search for survival. One day we arrested a poacher who was not complying. He was very resistant. It was difficult for us to guess what he was thinking about us because he had a very sharp spear and a big knife.

**Hoto:** During patrols, it's very hard to know what the poachers will be thinking, especially when we're tracking them. At the beginning of the lockdown in March, some elephants had succumbed to poisoning by locals. It's also difficult to assume there's no threat during patrol times, because you might encounter dangerous wildlife or even armed poachers. One day, we came across a lion just 10 meters [almost 33 feet] away. It was my first time meeting a lion that close.



Photo credit: Kim Butts

**What's your relationship like with the animals you save?**



**Chigumbura:** The way I love my kids is the same way I love wildlife, and this has helped me to create a strong bond with the animals. Akashinga ladies just live as a family with the wildlife. We've got a motherly, caring heart. I don't want to see any cruelty inflicted on any animal. It pierces my heart. Because our unit is a community-based program, I once had to arrest one of my relatives. I had no option but to arrest them, because it's my top priority to save wildlife. If we don't catch [poachers], nothing will be left for the next generation. Whenever we make an arrest, I feel that the animals are being defended and getting justice. Animals can't speak, but I can stand up to save their lives.

**Hoto:** Animals were afraid of us when we first started to protect them. They only thought of being shot. Animals shouldn't suffer or feel pain for the sake of our needs and desires. They have the right to live and enjoy their life. They also have an aesthetic value, a natural beauty and artistic value that I find so lovely. When justice is served in terms of the arrests and convictions...Now the animals feel secure and we have a strong bond with them. We are like family.



Photo credit: Kim Butts

### **What still needs to be done to protect vulnerable species in Zimbabwe?**

**Chigumbura:** Educating the community on how important wildlife and nature is can be a great step toward saving more animals. Supporting community members with different projects, since most poachers are driven by poverty and hunger, can help them sustain their families. Incorporating modern, technologically advanced equipment to monitor wildlife movement and a poacher's actions will also help rangers save more animals.

**Hoto:** Creating more vegetation projects for community members so that they can sustain their families, as well as keep them occupied by not having to waste time [hunting].

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