



PROTECT: An aerial surveillance project was undertaken in the Kunene Region to protect wildlife from poachers. Photos: ECOWINGS

ENVIRONMENT

SAFEGUARDING NAMIBIA'S WILDLIFE THROUGH AERIAL SURVEILLANCE

Eyes in the sky, boots on the ground

Key conservation partners launched a joint aerial surveillance initiative in the Kunene Region from 17 December to 7 January, intensifying efforts to combat wildlife crime and bolster conservation.

Ellanie Smit

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An aerial surveillance project was undertaken in the Kunene Region during the festive season to deter poaching activities during this crucial period.

Key conservation partners undertook this vital initiative between 17 December and 7 January to combat wildlife crime and strengthen conservation.

Dr Conrad Brain was appointed to oversee the festive season operation in collaboration with Ecowings Namibia.

Brain, a member of the Wilderness Impact team, leads conservation projects in Namibia supported by Wilderness.

According to Wilderness, the project also aimed to protect Namibia's unique biodiversity and raise community awareness about conservation.

Operating from Palmwag Airfield, two aircraft – a Cessna 182 and a Piper Super Cub – flew a combined 60.8 hours, covering an impressive 12 800 kilometres during the period.

These flights, conducted at an average altitude of 200 feet above ground, provided invaluable observation and monitoring across vast and often inaccessible terrain.

Fuel for the operation was generously supplied by the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF).

The primary aim of the aerial surveillance was to deter poaching by ensuring a visible presence in the skies.

“Even if we don’t see much from the air, everyone on the ground sees us,” Brain explained.

This visibility acts as a powerful deterrent, signalling that illegal activities such as poaching, illegal mining or plant theft are being closely monitored.

Boots on the ground, eyes in the sky

Flights were also instrumental in assisting Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) teams on the ground.

When on-the-ground rangers found rhino tracks but not the animals themselves, the aircraft surveyed vast areas to pinpoint the animals’ movements, enabling more effective ground-based monitoring.

According to Wilderness, in addition to observing wildlife, pilots and observers monitored signs of disturbance, carcasses and shifts in animal movement patterns – crucial indicators of potential threats to the ecosystem.

Meanwhile Ecowings also extended its impact to local communities. Brain took children from surrounding villages on flights, giving them a rare and inspiring aerial view of the ground below. Such initiatives help to foster a deeper appreciation for conservation among the next generation.

Additionally, in his veterinary surgeon capacity, Brain treated mules and donkeys used by SRT in their monitoring operations, demonstrating the programme’s holistic approach.

Wilderness said the operation also highlighted the critical role of local knowledge, with SRT’s Epson Rukuma providing invaluable expertise about the region’s terrain and wildlife.

Future operations

Wilderness said the success of the festive season operation sets a strong precedent for future initiatives. Plans include introducing a pilot training component in partnership with Westair Aviation, allowing trainee pilots to gain experience in remote-area flight operations. This will further enhance Namibia’s capacity for conservation-focused aerial missions.

“As the Ecowings initiative demonstrates, conservation is not just about protecting wildlife. It’s about creating partnerships, fostering community involvement and building a sustainable future for both people and nature. Through continued collaboration and innovation, Namibia’s iconic wildlife and landscapes can remain a source of pride for generations to come,” Wilderness explained.

The project brought together organisations such as the Namibia Chamber of Environment, Rooikat, the Namibia Nature Foundation, Skycore, Medical Rescue Africa and Westair Aviation, in addition to SRT and Wilderness.

It was further supported by the environment and tourism ministry and the Namibian Defence Force (NDF), among other private stakeholders, who contribute expertise and resources.



COMMENTS