

Rwanda: Inside Rwanda's Multi-Layered Strategy to Curb Poaching

10% of all park tourism revenue is channelled back to neighbouring communities.

Claude Hakorimana, 32, a former poacher from a community bordering Volcanoes National Park, says he was drawn into illegal hunting at a very young age because it was all he knew growing up. He recalls starting at just 14, watching his parents rely on poaching for food and income.

"I grew up seeing my parents hunt for a living. To me, it felt normal," Hakorimana said. "The meat fed the family, and whatever was left was sold for income. Poaching seemed like a reliable way to survive."

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Over time, his activities expanded in scale and distance. Together with others, he targeted animals such as buffaloes, zebras and wild boars, venturing deeper into protected areas as he grew older.

"As you grow, the area where you poach also grows. The practice continues well into adulthood," he said.

A turning point came when local leaders and conservation actors intensified community sensitisation, spelling out the long-term damage caused by poaching to wildlife, tourism and local livelihoods. Hakorimana says the message hit home as enforcement measures were strengthened and penalties tightened.

"We were taught about the negative effects of poaching, and it was made clear that anyone caught would face prison," he said. "The combination of awareness campaigns and stricter enforcement pushed me to abandon poaching and rethink my future."

The number of animal snares recovered in Volcanoes National Park has risen sharply, from 446 in 2019 to 2,336 in 2025. The Rwanda Development Board (RDB), however, says the increase does not signal a lapse in park protection.

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Instead, it reflects expanded patrol coverage and improved detection technologies that are uncovering traps that previously went unnoticed.

To curb poaching, RDB has shifted from a largely reactive approach to a proactive, multi-layered strategy that blends technology-driven enforcement, community participation and cross-border cooperation.

"Patrol frequency and coverage have increased, with specialised 'sweep' missions focused on locating and dismantling snares in high-risk zones," said Eugene Mutangana, Head of Conservation at RDB.

"Rangers now rely heavily on digital tools. GPS tracking is used to monitor gorilla groups, while CyberTracker and SMART Conservation technologies allow patrol teams to record the exact coordinates of each snare found," he said. "The data is analysed to generate heat maps of poaching hotspots, enabling more targeted deployment of personnel and resources."

Physical infrastructure has also been reinforced. A stone buffer wall, supported in some areas by deep trenches, has been constructed along much of the park boundary to limit human encroachment and prevent wildlife, particularly buffaloes from straying into nearby farms, a frequent trigger for retaliatory snaring.

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Recognising that poaching networks often operate quietly, RDB has also strengthened intelligence-led conservation. The agency works with trusted individuals in surrounding villages, community leaders and cooperatives to obtain timely information on illegal activities.

"Former poachers have been integrated into these efforts," Mutangana said. "They use their understanding of poaching methods and routes to support enforcement. Living within local communities, they provide early warnings on planned poaching, illegal wildlife trade and common entry points into the park."

Many former poachers have been organised into cooperatives such as the Gorilla Guardians, where their tracking skills are repurposed for conservation work and community education.

Beyond enforcement, RDB has placed local communities at the centre of its conservation model. Under the tourism revenue-sharing scheme, 10 per cent of all park tourism revenue is channelled back to neighbouring communities to support schools, health centres and water infrastructure--directly linking wildlife protection to local development.

Despite the gains, challenges persist.

Volcanoes National Park shares porous borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda, making cross-border poaching difficult to control.

While RDB works with neighbouring countries through the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC) on joint patrols and intelligence sharing, insecurity in parts of the region has contributed to a rise in snares and human-wildlife conflict.

"Volcanoes National Park covers about 160 square kilometres, leaving little room to separate wildlife from nearby communities," Mutangana said. "To address this, RDB has launched a park expansion project that will increase the area by 23 per cent about 37.4 square kilometres, creating a larger buffer between people and animals."

He added that snares remain a persistent challenge. "They are cheap, easy to make and hard to spot in dense forest, often fashioned from bicycle brake wires," he said, noting that RDB is testing advanced detection technologies to locate traps and monitor poacher activity.

Authorities are also pushing for stronger cooperation among Rwanda, the DRC and Uganda, including joint patrols, harmonised laws and penalties, and shared responsibility for conservation funding.

Inclusive community programmes and accountability mechanisms are being promoted to ensure all stakeholders play their part in protecting the Virunga landscape.