

Namibia's newest recruits help to **TACKLE WILDLIFE CRIME**

Historically, Namibia's Ministry for Environment and Tourism has focused on ecological aspects of conservation: building up wildlife populations, monitoring animals' daily habits and making sure that plants and habitats are thriving. More recently however, emphasis has been directed toward the law-enforcement component of conservation in an effort to protect the country's natural resources.

Piet Beytell | Senior Conservation Scientist / National Rhino Coordinator, Ministry for Environment and Tourism

Various 'tools' have been utilised to curb the onslaught of species such as rhino, elephant and pangolin that are especially sought after by poaching syndicates due to their black market value.

While you may not think of your pet dog being of help here, one of the most valuable tools we have are anti-poaching canines: after training, our dogs are able to detect, track and apprehend poachers. In early 2017, the Ministry, for the first time, began to explore the potential of dogs through a partnership with Invictus K9, a company that specialises in establishing and supporting law-enforcement canine units. Invictus K9 has an impeccable track record, establishing and working alongside dog units in multiple African countries.

With funds from Save the Rhino and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, we were able to construct kennels. In May this year, we contacted trusted vendors and brought in four dogs from Holland for their superior genetics and development. When they arrived they began six weeks of acclimatisation – the weather is quite different in the two countries! – and pre-training by Invictus K9's trainers, during which a solid foundation in detection and tracking was laid.

All four dogs have now been trained to search buildings, vehicles, baggage and open areas for firearms, ammunition and illegal wildlife products such as rhino horn, ivory, pangolin scales and bush meat. When something is found, the dogs indicate the presence of those items passively (e.g., sitting down in front of a suspect item) to ensure that they do not come in contact with any dangerous materials, whilst also preserving forensic evidence. Each dog is also capable of tracking human scent and any associated disturbance from start to finish, which they can do over a variety of different terrains, day or night.

A critical part of Invictus K9's work in establishing the K9 Unit is ensuring that the right handlers are selected.



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Of 32 applicants from Namibia's Defence Force, just five were chosen as handlers after a rigorous selection process. It's not just playing around with a dog all day: it's serious and technical work. Having the correct partners, dog and handler, is crucial.

The application process tested the handlers' abilities to problem-solve, multi-task and work as part of a team under both physical and mental stress. Their oral and non-verbal communication skills, natural empathy, integrity, anticipation, long-term commitment to the programme, as well as passion for conservation, were all evaluated.

The five successful candidates were introduced and paired with their canine counterparts in July, whereupon they immediately began a further 12 weeks of training. The first part of the course develops rapport between dogs and handlers, as well as basic health, safety and care. Each team continues through the 12 weeks improving their skills and abilities, developing them into a tough line of resistance to wildlife criminals.

These dogs are supporting us in the fight against poaching. They are the latest formidable force in stopping poachers and protecting rhinos.

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Above: Kennels for the new dogs and recent addition to the team, Nora

Below: The K9 team in Namibia have been training dogs to help stop poaching

