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TUSK & FANG

By some estimates, an average of 96 African elephants are slaughtered each day for the ivory trade. At the current rate of poaching an ancient species will be gone within a decade, two at most. **Dogs are helping to catch the bad guys.**
By Erika Mansourian



Armed with deadly poison and specialized arrows, four elephant hunters entered the Enduimet Wildlife Management Area in search of the tusks of the slow-moving, gentle giants.

They didn't bother to bring guns or bows. They knew the poison could kill an elephant within half an hour after the arrow pierced the skin. Tracking a herd from West Kilimanjaro's Kitenden Corridor to an area outside Tingatinga village, the gang had planned to set an ambush. What they couldn't know was that they were the ones who would be trapped.

Days earlier, an informant had contacted one of Big Life Foundation's commanders who works alongside the village rangers of Enduimet. He knew the poachers' plans and made the courageous decision to come forward. In the pre-dawn hours, Big Life's Dog Unit joined forces with Enduimet's Mobile Unit. The dogs quickly zeroed in on the exact bush the poachers had slept under the night before. The men had barely stretched and rubbed their eyes before they found themselves in custody.

Shooting Photos, Finding Shooters

In July 2010, photographer Nick Brandt returned to Amboseli National Park in Kenya, a pristine and treasured location for his books. Amboseli is a crucial ecosystem, with the most spectacular remaining population of elephants to be seen in East Africa. Over the previous

eight years, Brandt had spent months at a time photographing the iconic animals there, and had come to know them and their habits intimately.

But what he witnessed on that trip was a chilling and new experience. In the past, Brandt could approach the relaxed elephants as they quietly made their daily rounds. This time they ran in terrified panic when his vehicle



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came within half a mile.

It was also on this trip that Brandt discovered that a 49-year-old bull elephant, Igor, had been killed. So had Marianna, the matriarch upon whose knowledge and authority her herd relied. As Brandt saw devastation unfolding—not just for elephants, but for rhinos, lions, giraffes, zebras, gazelles—with virtually no effective protection for them or their habitat, he knew anger and passivity wouldn't change anything. He got angry and active. With his friend Richard Bonham, a renowned Kenyan conservationist, Brandt created Big Life Foundation.

It became obvious that a trans-border anti-poaching operation was needed, with teams of rangers in Kenya and Tanzania working in close collaboration, to track and apprehend poachers crossing the border. The few existing rangers worked mostly on foot, with no vehicles to patrol and give chase, and without basic equipment such as cameras, GPS, or even radios. Mobility. Communication. Support. Little would be accomplished without them.

Twelve anti-poaching outposts, nine patrol vehicles, 85 rangers, and a Microlight plane later, Big Life was up and running. Within three months they had their first major coup, splintering the worst of the three main poaching gangs operating along the Kenya-Tanzania border. And then came Rocky and Jerry.

Interspecies Assistance

The catalogue of ways dogs serve people is as varied as it is long. But it's not often that dogs come to the aid of their fellow non-humans. Especially not ones who weigh four tons or more. In January 2011, Big Life added a Tracker Dog Unit to their arsenal in the battle against poachers. German Shepherd Rocky and Belgian Shepherd Jerry, born in the Czech Republic and Netherlands respectively, underwent eight months of specialized training by Will Powell of Canine Specialist Services International (CSSI), in Arusha, Tanzania. They learned to pick up the scent of humans from footprints or materials left behind, and follow it to the poachers.

Well-organized crime syndicates and vast geographic range present huge challenges, so training is an ongoing process, both at the kennels and in the field. It includes focused tasks designed to keep the dogs' attention on the scent, and to distinguish one track from another.

Dogs can track a trail from the kill site a full day past

Mutinda:

From poacher to ace ranger and dog handler

He left a trail of butchered animal carcasses in his wake. Sometimes he left a note, taunting his pursuers.

When Big Life received information that Mutinda was trying to sell a rhino horn, two elephant tusks, and six leopard skins, they worked with the Kenya Wildlife Service to set up a sting, and quickly had all the evidence needed to lock him up. But Mutinda again slipped from justice. When he was brought to court, the contraband had been "misplaced" at the police station. Mutinda returned to his small village on the edge of the Chyulu Hills.

"We thought, if we can't beat him, let's get him to join us," says Richard Bonham, Big Life co-founder and Director of Operations in Africa. Bonham wrote to Mutinda, with money enclosed, suggesting they meet at a bar on the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. After waiting for over an hour, Bonham was getting up to leave, when a man with an open, smiling face held out his hand. "I am Mutinda." After a few tongue-loosening beers, Mutinda boasted about his trophies, but also admitted that with little formal education he didn't know how else to support his family.

Bonham spoke to him passionately about Big Life's mission, and how Mutinda's cultural heritage was at stake. The lure of a steady paycheck and the status of a game ranger's uniform also didn't hurt, convincing Mutinda to change sides. He has become one of the most reliable and trustworthy game scouts Big Life has, bringing with him a trove of bush knowledge that has led to successful ambushes. Mutinda is no longer killing his way through his homeland, and he has been directly responsible for stopping others. The real long-term benefit, however, may be the example he sets to his old poaching fraternity that there is a better way to prosper.

the event, often leading the team right to the poacher's door. Even if they aren't ambushed or stopped before the crime, dogs will almost certainly catch them afterward. This fact is not lost on the poachers. The Maasai in particular are terrified of tracker dogs, to the point of regarding their abilities as supernatural.

"The dogs act as a very effective deterrent to further poaching," says Brandt. "The risk of arrest is regarded as too great. The dogs' reputation has spread."

Rocky is exuberant, social, and communicative. The cut-up of the unit, his handlers can't resist his pleas to play. Unfortunately for local criminals, his favorite game is "Track that Person." When it's time to get to work, Rocky drops his nose with purpose, undaunted through swamp and marsh. Jerry is a stoic, silent and steady. A burly but tireless worker, he takes his responsibilities seriously. His trust in his handlers can be seen in his quiet eyes.

"I love working with Rocky and Jerry. They're my friends," says Lempris Kephias, a Big Life anti-poaching sergeant and head of the dog tracker unit in Tanzania. "We keep training and playing with them, and they make



Left to right: Lempris with Rocky; Kalasinga, and Shinini with Jerry

our jobs much easier.” The dogs are loved and cared for, and dog and handler live side-by-side. Low-tech and high-endurance, it’s easy to imagine them as comforting companions for gazing up at the African night sky.

A Rescue to the Rescue

An abused stray stumbling around a suburb of Nairobi found herself in a cage at the Kenyan ASPCA—from one bad situation to another. That the youngster didn’t remain there long was a blessing to her and to the wild things of the Amboseli-Tsavu ecosystem. Richard Bonham, Big Life co-founder and Director of Operations in Africa, had decided to give a rescue dog a try. With her cheerful bark and keen work ethic, Didi has become a valuable member of the Big Life team. Despite her history of rough treatment by humans, Didi now has an unshakeable bond with her handlers, Leyian, Joel, and Mutinda (himself a former poacher; see sidebar).



As with her purebred co-workers, when Didi’s harness goes on she knows it’s time to get busy. She goes out twice a day, tracking a scent laid by a “poacher” who has hidden in the bush. The team varies the length of time between laying and tracking the scent; she needs challenges to stay sharp. Says Leyian: “When we are on the track we can switch off our minds; Didi is our eyes and we trust her. She will take us where we want to go.”

Didi has already brought in six wildlife poachers, as well as finding two lost community members, one of them a small child. “She has to work harder than the so-called professional dogs, but once she learns something she never forgets it,” says Big Life intern Jeremy Goss.

Nose On the Prize

After hearing about Big Life’s dogs, the Chief Park Warden of Tarangire National Park called for their support: An elephant had been

shot and the park terrain made it difficult to follow the tracks. The dog team was coming from West Kilimanjaro, so they didn’t arrive until late afternoon. They set off on the trail, which wound in and out of the park, through the village and back again. The scent was lost when a large herd of cattle crossed the path of the poachers’ tracks. It was getting dark and rest was needed.

The next morning the dogs set off again, but with a new strategy: They would pass by every village and, through a process of elimination, reduce the possible options.

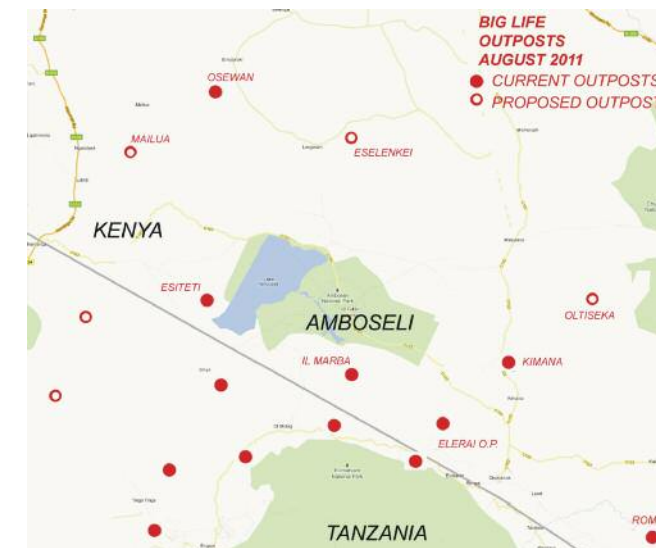
In each village, young men were lined up and Rocky and Jerry gently “interrogated” them via scenting, one by one. When they began their sweep of the town of Makuyuni, they were able to pick up the scent again, then the tracks disappeared once more. They were still able to determine that the poachers had boarded a car at a certain spot, so the pursuit heated up. Within half an hour, a vehicle was intercepted with three men not from the area. The dogs were called in for another line-up. Rocky picked out both men, then wouldn’t leave them—he knew they meant he’d get his reward.

Failure is Not an Option

With an increase of missions to game reserves and conservation areas, Big Life plans to expand its use of tracker dogs, and a new dog post will be developed in the Manyara area, allowing the dog unit to cover community conservation areas and national parks within this area. Tanzania’s Director of Wildlife visited the dog unit in March 2013 and indicated that the Serengeti National Park and other areas also needed the support of the dogs. Big Life now has more than 300 rangers and 31 outposts. The organization plans to move the dogs to a centralized location in the Tarangire-Manyara ecosystem, where they can more easily access remote areas where poaching is running amok.

World leaders have begun to recognize the crisis. President Obama earmarked \$10 million dollars to investigating solutions, Princes Charles and William hosted the London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade in February, and the Clinton Global Initiative is lending support to government leaders and conservation groups. Even China is beginning to acknowledge its role and educate its citizens. (Research shows that an estimated 80 percent of Chinese think tusks fall off naturally!) Meanwhile, though, the decimation of wildlife continues to escalate. The temptation to poach on behalf of criminal syndicates is irresistible to many villagers.

Poachers, particularly of high-value species like elephant and rhino, are becoming more and more skillful at evading capture. Intercepting them is the ultimate objective, but often it comes down to the chase.



Sobering Facts

In 1980, roughly 1.2 million elephants roamed Africa. Today, fewer than 400,000 remain, and their numbers continue to plummet. Illegal wildlife trafficking is the fourth largest transnational crime, and poachers are sophisticated and heavily armed. Ivory—sometimes called “the white gold of jihad”—helps fund the operations of notorious terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab and the Lord’s Resistance Army. The explosive economic growth of the Chinese middle class has brought with it an insatiable appetite for the coveted status symbol, which can sell for \$2,000 a pound on the black market. Perhaps saddest of all is that ivory ends up as trinkets and decorative objects. The U.S. also bears a heavy burden: We are the second largest consumer. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world.”

“The Dog Unit shows how a small, well-disciplined team can have a big impact on poaching,” says Tanzania Project Manager Damian Bell. “New technology is critical, but sometimes it pales in comparison to the amazing tools provided by nature. It is needed now more than ever in Tanzania.”

We know our smart, soulful dogs are emotionally complex and sensitive, with a remarkable capacity for empathy. These qualities are amplified in the noble—and besieged—elephant. Today they are relying on us to come to their aid. And as dogs have done for thousands of years, they are here to help us help others. Which is encouraging, since it’s unfathomable to imagine a world where an ancient, supremely intelligent animal is found only in the images of photographers like Nick Brandt. 🐾

For more about the work of Big Life, visit biglife.org.