

The importance of **informer networks**



I am the Rhino Programme Coordinator for the MPT/BLF in the Chyulus Hills in Kenya. I have worked as a rhino game scout here since I was 17. There are 250 anti-poaching and monitoring scouts, but only about 10 are specialised rhino game scouts. Not everyone can be a rhino scout; you need to be dedicated and patrol for long hours in difficult terrain: our boots only last 3–4 months after the daily patrols. Rhino game scouts also need to be fast and good at climbing trees as tracking rhinos can be a dangerous job. There is also the risk from poachers who carry weapons.

“ Joseph Katoke | Rhino Programme Coordinator, Maasailand Preservation Trust/Big Life Foundation

I am in charge of managing all of the rhino watch outposts and their teams. Most days are quite different, but one particular day in February started off normally enough. I was with Richard Bonham, the boss, for a 4-hour meeting and then flew back with him in his plane to the main base.

I always call all of the rhino camps when I am back to ensure everything is OK. Unfortunately this time, when I spoke to one of my scout teams, they had just heard gun shots. This was obviously a massive concern, as a poacher may have entered the Park and killed an animal.

While the scouts were searching in the bush, Richard called to say that an elderly lady had contacted us with some information regarding the gun shots. As part of our anti-poaching work we run an informers' network, offering rewards for information that helps lead to arrests or prevent a crime.

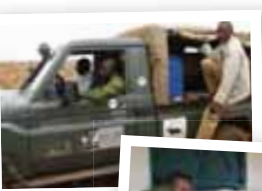
I went to meet her in a secret spot, as it would be dangerous if people saw her talking to me. She told me that she had met four people in the Park while collecting firewood; she knew that nobody was supposed to be there (even her) and they told the lady to go away. She knew two of them; the other two were strangers. The next day, when the old lady heard the gunshots, she realised these must have come from the same people.

The lady drew a map of the area where we could find the poachers. At around 2.30am we went to the men's houses. We parked far away so that no-one would see or hear us approach. Our teams quickly entered all the houses simultaneously and arrested the men; we knew they could be armed. We found used AK47 cartridges; one of the suspects had a leopard skin and an elephant tail in his house.

Even though the men didn't kill an animal this time, they had intended to kill and would almost certainly attempt to poach an animal another time. This demonstrated how important our informant network is: I was very relieved that we managed to arrest these men before they could destroy any more of our precious wildlife.

Grants

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Our very grateful thanks to Chester Zoo for its grant of £15,000 towards the creation of a second waterhole and pipeline inside the Chyulu Hills National Park, as one of the steps towards upgrading the Chyulus to IPZ status. We are giving just over US \$16,000 from our own core funds.



Meetings and camp visits are essential for the team



It was 5pm by this stage but we needed to move quickly to find both the animal and poachers.

We have 14 mobile patrol teams and I sent as many of them as I could to monitor the area for a carcass and the poachers. My team and I ended up staying the whole night, lying in ambush, but with no success. The next morning, Richard flew over the area where he spotted four rhinos, two females each with a calf, and several buffalos with one lying down in an awkward way. We thought that the buffalo might have been shot, so we drove to the animal and approached on foot. Luckily it was alive; so alive that it began to charge us and we needed to run for safety!

We continued to search for a wounded animal, by dividing our team into smaller teams searching as much of the 926,925km² area as possible for seven hours, but didn't find a carcass. It is important to identify if an animal has been killed, how and where for our records.

