

South Africa:

The backbone of conservation management

Field rangers are often described as "the backbone of conservation management". Within Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), they patrol on foot or horseback and sometimes camp out in the field for extended periods. Their main functions are law enforcement, anti-poaching work and biological monitoring.

Dave Robertson
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The objectives in the integrated management plan for HiP make clear the emphasis on effective and relevant training as an essential part of protected area management:

- To ensure that the Park and its staff are adequately resourced and trained to achieve all its objectives
- To maintain effective and professional law enforcement in order to ensure Park integrity

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is the official nature conservation agency for KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa, in which HiP is located, and it manages some 96 reserves throughout the province. The organisation has its own training department, based in the KZN Midlands, providing training and also sourcing training providers.

Every ranger who starts work in the organisation must complete a ten-week basic field ranger training course. The content of this course, and the trainers and assessors are accredited with SQA - the national qualifications authority. The course includes use of firearms, knowledge of firearms legislation, arrest procedures

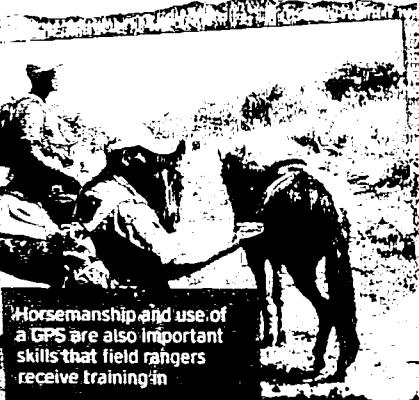
and legal aspects of the use of force and includes a military-type drill to foster discipline and a sense of teamwork. It covers the 'why' aspects of what we do, and explains conservation philosophy, as well as basic wildlife monitoring techniques. Once the new field rangers have completed their training, they are sent out to various protected areas across the province.

Although the training centre provides a good basic grounding, most of the skills that the rangers need can only be perfected through years of experience in the field. Field craft skills such as tracking, observation and dealing with potentially dangerous animals only come with time and experience. New recruits are generally placed in outposts with seasoned veterans who can mentor them in these skills. Formal and informal training continue at Reserve level. Regular shooting practice takes place under the guidance of qualified range officers, and there are three shooting ranges within HiP for this purpose. Black rhino monitoring is another important skill, and formal courses are given from time to time in the Reserve. Other important courses organised regularly are first aid and HIV/AIDS awareness, use of GPS and horsemanship.

Both Hluhluwe and iMfolozi have a dedicated anti-poaching unit (APU) in addition to the regular field ranger force. Although anti-poaching is a major part of any field ranger's job, the APU is a more specialised, better-equipped unit that is a lot more mobile than regular field rangers. They spend a large amount of time camping out in poaching 'hotspots' and receive more specialised training.

'Compliance and control' type courses are essential. More than half of iMfolozi is designated as a wilderness area, and managed to very strict wilderness principles, so the APU even does 'leave no trace' camping training, so it doesn't impinge on these principles.

The organisation also assists a few promising individuals each year by providing some bursaries to study for a national diploma in nature conservation, making them eligible for promotion to section rangers or conservation managers. This helps to ensure that people who end up in more administrative type jobs have a thorough knowledge of work requirements and conditions in the field, and can better contribute to the training and mentoring of their subordinate staff. All of this expert training, knowledge and experience provide vital foundations for effective rhino conservation in the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.



Horsemanship and use of a GPS are also important skills that field rangers receive training in



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Grant

Our thanks to Safari Club International's London chapter, which raised £6,275 from the auction in September to buy field equipment for the rangers in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi. SCI Foundation added a further £1,979. The relationship between SCI, SRI and Hluhluwe-iMfolozi is now three years old and going from strength to strength.