The perfect team

Our furry, 4-legged, loyal companions are often seen as man's best friend, and dogs are now proving an invaluable asset for those working to protect rhinos.

Katherine Ellis | Office and Communications Manager

The combination of a trained handler and their dog are well known as a powerful weapon against crime and are increasingly being used in the war against rhino poaching. With the handler's superior knowledge of crime and alert mind, along with the dog's powerful nose, incredible sense of hearing, and excellent eyesight, agility and power, the dog-handler duo make an impressive partnering.

Dogs can be used for several different purposes:

- **Human-scent tracking** Dogs can help speed up the hot-pursuit process and locate possible poachers by following their scent in the bush. Dogs can also be trained to help apprehend suspects

- **Protection** A dog can be taught to protect and defend his handler and those around him. Dogs can also be a major deterrent, especially the breeds that are known to bite. Dogs may also provide an early warning to their handler if they sense danger, which could include armed poachers or other dangerous wildlife

- **Detection of arms and ammunition** Poachers often stash their weapons, especially if there is a chance of being arrested. Dogs may help in locating these weapons, which could prove vital to linking the poachers to an incident

- **Rhino horn detection** This is useful when horns could have been stashed for a later pick-up, or to detect horns during road blocks or at security check points including airports

The main working breeds used include German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois, Labrador Retrievers, Border Collies, Beagles, Springer Spaniels and Bloodhounds. Cross-breeds may also be used depending on their individual traits. When sourcing a new dog, selection criteria include intelligence, self-motivation, trainability, confidence, friendliness, athleticism and either high ball-drive or high food-drive (meaning a dog who is highly motivated by a ball or food as a reward).

When it comes to detecting contraband, there really is no other detection device as efficient and accurate as a well-managed, quality handler-and-dog team. Additional benefits are that dogs cannot be bribed and they do not lie.

However, dogs are not a 'quick fix' – they require large amounts of time, and funding is needed to set up a facility, and to train the dogs and handlers. In addition, dogs are an all-year-round commitment; they have special needs, including kennelling, veterinary care, feeding, exercise and stimulation, training and transport.

Crucial to the working success of a dog is the handler, who should be selected for their passion, knowledge of animal husbandry, ability to work long and unusual hours and who can cope physically with the demands of the job. It takes years of experience to make a good dog handler and the training of the dog-and-handler team never stops.

Dogs are by no means perfect; however they can be an effective part of a multi-pronged approach to fighting against rhino poaching and the illegal trafficking of wildlife.

Thanks

Dog training exercise *(top to bottom)*

Rangers work closely with Belgian Malinois 'attack' dogs during training exercises.

The dogs pictured are from Ol Jogi and are used to patrol and ambush different locations at night. Attack dogs are trained to bite a poacher's arm and hold on, preventing him from using a weapon.

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