

Top African wildlife park looks to villages to stop poachers

October 4 2016, by Cara Anna



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, recruits at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa explain conditions in the wild during their attempts to track poachers. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

On the edge of South Africa's largest wildlife reserve, the line between

poacher and park ranger can be uncomfortably thin. Sometimes, Marianne de Kock watches it disappear.

She oversees young South Africans during a yearlong ranger training and, on the final day, she looks graduates in the eye.

"Have you ever poached?" she asks. Some admit they have. "Give me three poachers' names," she says. And they do.

As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in Kruger National Park, nearly the size of Israel, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter.

The carcasses of more than 450 poached rhinos have been found in the park between January and the end of August, and elephant poaching is growing. Both are top issues at the conference of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES, which ends Wednesday in Johannesburg.

The aim is to use local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. In the two South African provinces where the park is located, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, the official unemployment rates were 29 percent and 18 percent early this year.

While well-off tourists with expensive gear bounce through the park on game drives and stay at upscale lodges, their money often doesn't make it to villagers. Poaching becomes an attraction.



In this photo taken Friday, Sept. 30, 2016, dog handler, Wisdom Makhubele is attacked by a dog during a simulated tracking exercise at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

At the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of the park, a new government-funded job program is training 119 young men and women "living in marginalized areas" to become field rangers and guides in wildlife reserves that are often near their homes.

"You get the poorest of the poor," de Kock said. Some who apply have never heard of wildlife conservation. They just want a job.

The applicants first must pass a week-long, military-style selection course that includes not being allowed to sleep more than two hours at a time. By day three, people are dropping out.

The trainers have learned to spot signs of determination, such as the hopefuls who arrive in borrowed sneakers a size or more too small. Day by day, pieces of the shoes are cut away to make room for fresh blisters.

"Those people are the quality that we want," said one trainer, Excellent McCabe.



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, a recruit marches during drills at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

Those selected are taught how to track, shoot, navigate and live in the bush, sometimes lying camouflaged in the grass for days at a time.

"Kids once learned to track from a very young age," said Gawie Lindeque, a head trainer and guide at the wildlife college. "The bush is not their school anymore." The training strips away basic comforts, such as electricity, and reintroduces nature skills. One lesson sends trainees into the bush to collect animals' dung.

As new rangers, the graduates will earn about 6,500 rand (\$475) a month. No training is foolproof; there have been cases of Kruger rangers and park staff involved in poaching in the past.

"One is not looking after money, just protecting nature," said one of the 28 women in the program, Dzunisani Ndhlovu. The tall 27-year-old from Limpopo said there are "too many poachers" in her home community who don't know the importance of wildlife, and she called the job of park ranger very challenging.

It's also dangerous. Unlike in neighboring Botswana, rangers in South Africa cannot shoot poachers on sight and have to prove self-defense. Poachers have even shot at Kruger National Park's helicopters as they scan the vast, dry landscape for intruders.



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, a recruit displays a camouflage technique at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa, where young men and women are trained to become field rangers and guides. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

"Better to shoot first" in a confrontation with an armed poacher, said one senior trainer, Wouter Combrinck. "Poachers, they don't care. As long as they get to that rhino, they will shoot."

In August, the shooting of a suspected poacher by Kruger rangers set off days of protests by people in the suspected poacher's nearby village. Burning tires were used to block a road, and tourists were advised to avoid one of the park's gates.

For park rangers from local communities, the risk from both poachers

and local sympathizers can follow them home.

"Some, we just meet in the town," Wisdom Makhubele said of poachers. He pretended to duck. "I'm just hiding myself. But my work is my work."

The 28-year-old from a nearby village used to stock supplies at a game lodge. A year ago, after completing his ranger training, he became a full-time trainer and handler of poacher-tracking dogs. He received a gun and the authority to handcuff poachers until the police arrive.

"I'd die for this," Makhubele said of his work in conservation. "This is our legacy. We have to look after it."



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, recruits being trained to become field rangers and guides salute during drills at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter

poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Friday, Sept. 30, 2016, an elephant walks through the bush at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, a rhino grazes in the bush on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, recruits stand to attention during inspection of their tents at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Friday, Sept. 30, 2016, dog handler, Wisdom Makhubele is attacked by a dog during a simulated tracking exercise at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, rhinos graze in the bush on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)



In this photo taken Friday, Sept. 30, 2016, a dog used for tracking poachers waits in his cage at the Southern African Wildlife College on the edge of Kruger National Park in South Africa. As teams of poachers stalk rhinos and elephants in the park, wildlife officials are turning to nearby communities to help stop the slaughter by using local knowledge to deter poachers, not join them. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

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