

CANINES FOR CONSERVATION



Every year, ivory, rhino horn and other wildlife products are smuggled from Africa to markets abroad, particularly in Asia, where demand for these products has skyrocketed. The tonnage of ivory seized at ports across Africa and in Asia is a sobering reminder of the number of elephants killed annually. Rhinos, too, are feeling the heat from this multibillion-dollar illegal wildlife trade.

Meanwhile, the volume of cargo passing through African ports to destinations abroad continues to increase. Unfortunately, resources and personnel to inspect these shipments remain limited and strained.

To address the challenges faced by African law enforcement in detecting and seizing smuggled wildlife products, African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) in 2014 launched its Canines for Conservation Program. The program trains and deploys detection dogs to trafficking chokepoints—airports, sea ports, border crossings—to uncover illegal shipments of ivory, rhino horn and other wildlife products.

Early Success

The first class of detection dogs, together with handlers from Kenya Wildlife Service and Tanzania Wildlife Division, graduated in July 2015 and deployed to the primary airports and seaports of each country. In the short time since their deployment, these detection units have successfully made dozens of wildlife busts. In fact, in the scant eight-month period from January through August 2016, AWF-trained teams based in Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport have made more than 26 finds of ivory, rhino horn and pangolin scales. The dogs have even uncovered wildlife products they have not been trained to sniff out, such as live tortoises. These busts are said to represent half of the finds at Jomo Kenyatta in the past seven years.

In Jomo Kenyatta and other locations, these AWF-trained canine detection teams have proven to be a deterrent to would-be traffickers.

The Canines for Conservation Programme continues to build upon this success, having recently graduated a second class of detection dogs and handlers. Twelve handlers from Uganda Wildlife Authority graduated alongside their highly trained canines and have been deployed to Uganda's Entebbe International Airport Kampala.

The Program

Working in tandem with wildlife authorities, the Canines for Conservation Program trains and deploys detection dogs (also referred to as "sniffer dogs") to sites across Africa. These canines are specifically trained to detect illicit wildlife products—including ivory, rhino horn and pangolin scales—hidden in cargo or luggage.

AWF's program works in the following manner:

- Dogs are purchased from respected breeders in Europe and flown to AWF's canine training facility in Tanzania, where they are trained to detect hidden wildlife contraband.
- Program personnel work closely with wildlife authorities to identify handlers, who then spend several weeks at AWF's





canine training facility learning how to handle, motivate, command and care for their assigned dogs.

- After graduation, dog-and-handler teams are sent to areas jointly identified by AWF and its wildlife authority partners as export or transit hubs for smuggled wildlife products. A technical expert from Canines for Conservation is deployed alongside these teams to provide ongoing support as the detection dogs and their handlers adapt to the rigors of the job.

The Canines for Conservation Program is headed by longtime canine training expert Will Powell. Powell has worked with dogs for more than 20 years, first training canines to detect explosives and landmines before turning his attention to the conservation arena.

I Training Regimen

On arrival at our training facility and after a period of acclimatization, dogs begin training with small pieces of a dog toy called a Kong, which serves as a “neutral” odor. Once comfortable identifying the Kong odor, dogs are then introduced to small pieces of ivory. Positive reinforcement remains at the core of the program’s philosophy, with all training and handling done with the dogs’ physical and mental health in mind.

Once handlers are selected and each is paired with their partner canine, the teams undergo further training. These trainings incorporate vehicle and building searches and more environment-specific instruction at a real airport. Teams are eventually deployed to seaports and airports, together with AWF supervisors who ensure handlers and canines continue to work effectively and the welfare of the dogs is maintained.

I Continentwide Program

AWF is in discussions with other wildlife authorities to potentially supply conservation canines to Cameroon, Mozambique and Botswana.

The Canines for Conservation Program will be developed into a continent-wide program, with a Canine Center of Excellence where organizations can learn best practices on establishing their own canine detection program.



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