

US dogs deployed in SA to counter poaching

Earlier this week the first of 10 new counter-poaching dogs from Texas, USA landed at OR Tambo International Airport in Gauteng. The specially trained, free-running pack dogs are joining a K9 unit at the Southern African Wildlife College. Once settled and accustomed to their new handlers, they will be deployed in counter-poaching operations in the Greater Kruger area.



“We are incredibly excited to be working with these dogs. Our early successes with free-running pack dogs have shown us how effective they are in the field. These dogs are also trained in apprehension work and will actively help rangers stop poachers in their tracks,” said the college CEO Theresa Sowry.

Already proving their worth

While on-leash tracker dogs are commonly used by counter poaching teams, pack dogs that run off leash are relatively new to the scene, but already proving their worth. They can track at high speeds over even the most difficult terrain; recent exercises have seen them cover 30km in two hours. Their top speeds, measured regularly over short distances, are around 40km per hour. Using aerial support to follow the dogs allows the rangers to catch up valuable time in the field.

The new dogs are a cross between Black and Tan and Redbone breeds. They have been bred for nearly a century in the USA to track humans for law enforcement purposes. The college will begin working with these dogs to be able to deploy them to hold poachers at bay while waiting for rangers to arrive.



Potenital for success throughout Africa

As the demand for well trained dogs and handlers grows, there is potential for the college, as an SADC training institute, to play a major role in replicating the K9 unit's early successes in protected areas throughout Africa.

“When I found out what is really going on in southern Africa – how serious and destructive the poaching crisis is – I thought, if I can do something to help, I’m going to do it,” said Texas houndsman Joe Braman, who has 35 years of experience working with dogs to positively impact wildlife conservation efforts.

The Ivan Carter Wildlife Conservation Alliance, and its donors, including the Nelson Pruett Foundation, have provided valuable support for the transport and ongoing expenses of this valuable pack of hounds in the US. Other South African-based donors that have generously pledged their support include Global Paws, who assisted with the applications for the dogs’ import permit authorisations and customs pre-clearance. In addition, Global Paws paid the dogs handling fees and were present for their checks on arrival by the state veterinarian. South African Airways Cargo – introduced to the project via WWF South Africa – flew the dogs to South Africa.



Changing the game

Once all the dogs have arrived - a maximum of five can be transported per flight given their size - they will travel to the college's K9 unit, which was established in 2015 with funding from the WWF Nedbank Green Trust. Further assistance generously provided by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) helps support the unit's increasing running costs.

"Adding tracker dogs to the field ranger teams has really changed the game, but as their successes increase, so too do the risks they face. This is why the college needs ongoing support, most immediately for security upgrades for these valuable, hard working dogs," noted Sowry. "They're real conservation heroes that compliment the work being done by field rangers, through aerial support and within communities, as part of our four-tiered approach to counter poaching. We can't wait to see what these new additions from the USA bring to the team."

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