

Maintaining and training canine units to protect rhinos at Ol Jogi Conservancy and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Kenya



Figure 1: Rhino dog squads have become crucial in strengthening anti-poaching efforts. Credit: Save the Rhino International.

Kenya is one of Africa's 'Big Four' rhino range countries, home to important populations of black and white rhinos. During the first rhino poaching crisis in the 1970s and 80s, Kenya, like much of Africa, experienced a disastrous decline in its black rhino population. By 1993, only 2,475 black rhinos were left in the world. Tireless conservation efforts have thankfully built the global population up to more than 5,000, although this is still a fraction of the 70,000 that existed before the crisis took hold. Kenya now aims to build its own population back up to 2,000 animals.

Today, the task of protecting rhinos remains a formidable challenge; poaching and wildlife trafficking are lucrative forms of transnational organised crime, decimating populations of rhinos and other wildlife across Africa. To counter these threats, we need to deploy a range of strategies to make sure rhinos are well-protected and their populations continue increasing.

Canine units have proven to be a highly effective tool in supporting anti-poaching efforts, owing to their excellent sense of smell, being able to track down poachers and detect illegally trafficked rhino horn, giving teams the ability to stop poachers and eventually charge those involved. Happily, working dogs are not corruptible: if they find an illegal substance, they will indicate so, regardless of who the suspect is.

How can dogs bring benefits to rhino conservation?

Our canine friends have an excellent sense of smell. With this terrific talent, dogs can track a scent after a poaching incident, leading rangers and enforcement authorities to poachers, or at least understand the routes used.

Dogs can also detect wildlife products, and many are stationed to 'sniff out' rhino horn at key locations, such as transport hubs, at park gates, or even in organised searches, finding and stopping wildlife traffickers.

In 2019, to celebrate the arrival of your two new white rhinos, Bioparco di Roma launched a fundraising campaign to support two rhino conservation programmes through Save the Rhino International. Thanks to the generosity of your visitors and supporters, a fantastic €5,000 was raised to support canine units working hard to protect black and white rhinos in Kenya's Laikipia region. Please see below an outline of activities that were supported by Save the Rhino International and our partners and donors during the calendar year of 2019. Please note: your generous donations will support the work of these canine units in 2020.

Upgrading canine unit facilities at Ol Jogi Conservancy

Ol Jogi Conservancy is one of the oldest wildlife conservancies in the Laikipia region of Kenya. Home to many endangered species, it is a stronghold for the Critically Endangered Eastern black rhino subspecies, and also supports a population of Southern white rhinos. Ol Jogi is a leading example of rhino conservation in Kenya, its successful breeding programme contributing many rhinos to the national population and helping to restock other populations.



Figure 2: In 2018, Ol Jogi's kennels were upgraded thanks to the support of our partners and donors. Credit: Save the Rhino International.

During 2019, Ol Jogi Conservancy's formidable tracker dog team has continued to grow and carry out its important work. The team has welcomed a new addition, a bloodhound puppy named Tui. Tui has completed his training and is already deploying on official cases. Another bloodhound in Ol Jogi's team, Biza, was diagnosed with diabetes. Her blood glucose levels are now measured daily and she receives insulin injections and a special diabetic diet. Thanks to the excellent care she is receiving, Biza's condition has been stabilised and she can continue working. We don't know for sure, but she might be the first diabetic working dog in Kenya!



Figure 4: Ol Jogi's canine team received official Police certification in 2019. Credit: Save the Rhino International.

Jogi keeps can act as valuable supporting evidence, backed-up by good chain-of-custody records for any other bits of DNA evidence captured from any items left at the crime-scene. This will help to improve Ol Jogi's prosecution rate for criminal activities in and around the Conservancy and also confirms the canine team as a highly professional unit.

Ol Jogi also established Kenya's first anti-poaching canine unit in 1989, whose successes inspired neighbouring rhino sanctuaries, and programmes across Africa, to follow suit.

In 2018, we ensured that Ol Jogi's kennels were renovated, installing new fencing and improving drainage around the facility. The refurbished kennels now provide a more hygienic and efficient base for the canine unit, and as a result of the upgrades, the dogs are healthier and less veterinary trips are needed!



Figure 3: Bloodhound puppy Tui, the latest recruit for Ol Jogi Conservancy's canine unit. Credit: Ol Jogi Conservancy.

Last year, Ol Jogi hosted three officers from the Kenya Police canine unit to audit the Conservancy's entire working dog facility and capacity. Ol Jogi's canine unit was awarded certification from the Kenya Police, meaning their work is officially recognised by the law and can be used as admissible evidence in court cases.

Although the dogs themselves can't give evidence, official Police certification helps ensure that any evidence collected can be admitted as part of the investigation. In addition, the detailed training records that Ol



Thanks to these investments in Ol Jogi's canine unit and other ongoing monitoring and anti-poaching patrols, collaboration with partners, and technological advancements, we are thrilled to confirm Ol Jogi maintained a zero poaching record in 2019 for a fourth consecutive year. There have been no poaching incidents at the Conservancy since March 2015, a testament to the dedication of the rangers, canine unit and wider team at Ol Jogi, who continue to perform their roles to the highest ability, despite the persistent pressure.



Figures 5 and 6: Ol Jogi's canine team comprises both tracker and attack dogs. Credit: Save the Rhino International.

Despite the incredible successes of the team at Ol Jogi, the threat of poaching remains high and rangers must stay vigilant. Thanks to the hard work of the entire team, and the support of Save the Rhino International and our partners and donors like Bioparco di Roma, Ol Jogi Conservancy is well placed to continue providing the excellent level of protection and care to its black and white rhinos, and maintain its role as a leading rhino conservancy in Kenya.

Expanding canine team at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy is one of the most established rhino conservancies in Kenya. From its very beginning, rhino protection has been at the core of Lewa's work. The



Figure 7: Lewa's canine team is comprised of three dogs and six handlers. Credit: Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.

Conservancy not only provides space for thriving populations of black and white rhinos but also translocates animals to repopulate new areas across Kenya.

Lewa's canine team is a crucial part of the Conservancy's rhino monitoring and anti-poaching work, often being deployed to respond to security incidents within and beyond the Conservancy's boundaries. The unit is headed by Joseph Piroris, and is comprised of a team of six dog handlers and three dogs – Ruby, Sasha and Nasuju, all purchased from South Africa. Two of the dogs, Ruby and Sasha, are both two

years old and fully operational, effectively trained, and have now fully adjusted to the climate in northern Kenya after being brought over from South Africa. Sasha and Ruby enabled the

successful tracking and arrest of two cases in 2018, with one of these cases leading to conviction. Lewa's new addition to the canine team, Nasuju, is one year old and is still adjusting to the climate in northern Kenya; Nasuju is undergoing training to understand the terrain and to acclimatise, while continuing to show a positive response to the ongoing training efforts.



Figures 8 and 9: Nasuju has been a great addition to Lewa's canine team and is showing a positive response to ongoing training! Credit: Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.

"Since we introduced the dogs, we've achieved tremendous successes during follow-ups to poaching attempts and other criminal activities in the surrounding communities."

Edward Ndiritu, Head of Anti-Poaching Unit at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.



Figure 10: All dogs train regularly with their handlers to be best prepared for deployment on operations. Credit: Save the Rhino International.

All dogs work as trackers, and are trained to follow human scent only. Dogs receive regular training six days a week, when their handlers lay a scent trail – recreate a crime scene, run away and hide – and their handlers work with the dogs to cast about to find the scent and track the "suspects". So that the dogs don't become bored, the handlers mix up the times of day for these training exercises, as well as taking them for frequent walks to keep the dogs fit and happy. For ordinary walks, the dogs simply wear a collar and leash, but when they are on a training exercise or live deployment they are put into harnesses; the dogs then immediately

know that they are at work. When on a trail, the dogs are taught to remain silent, so as not to alert the fugitives; the handlers can tell when they are getting close to the quarry as the dogs often wag their tails vigorously or strain at the harness even more than usual.

The kennels at Lewa are cleaned every day, and once a week they undergo a deep clean, when the mattresses are scrubbed, everything is sprayed down and the dogs are given a bath, a full grooming session, checked over for ticks, their claws trimmed if necessary, and receive occasional doses of Frontline flea spray. Lewa's vet, Matthew Mutinda, is called in to assess any injuries or sore spots, and any dog needing more sophisticated veterinary care is sent to a centre in a nearby town for treatment. They are fed once a day: a large bowl of dry Pedigree Chum biscuits that contain all the right supplements to keep them fit and healthy.

In 2019, Lewa's K9 team obtained a vehicle designated to support and advance the unit's operations. It is specially designed to safely transport both the dogs and handlers, enabling the team to respond more rapidly to any incidents or in planned training sessions.



Figures 11 and 12: In 2019, Lewa's canine team obtained a dedicated vehicle to transport both dogs and handlers safely and quickly to where they are needed. Credit: Lewa Wildlife Conservancy.

“The Lewa Canine Unit has achieved great impact over the years. The dogs not only support anti-poaching work on the Conservancy, they are also often called upon to support in follow-up to criminal activities in the neighbouring communities. Every year, they have helped our rangers and local law enforcement authorities recover hundreds of stolen livestock, saving the affected farmers from financial ruin. The dogs have also helped track road bandits, robbers, illegal fire-arm holders and more.

“At the moment, the unit consists of three dogs and their handlers. We take good care of them, and the handlers are people who love dogs. We feed them well, ensure that they live in clean kennels, and that they are taken out for walks and training daily. Our vet constantly checks on them to make sure they are healthy.”

Joseph Piroris, in charge of Lewa's canine unit

During 2019, both Lewa and Ol Jogi's canine teams attended a number of training sessions and international exchanges to continue learning new skills and techniques they can apply to their operations. Save the Rhino International organised a successful Working Dog Workshop in Kenya (building on the successes of the first Working Dog Workshop held in South Africa in 2018), helping to bring together more than 30 canine teams from across Africa. Both Ol Jogi and Lewa Wildlife Conservancies sent their handlers to attend these workshops, helping to build their knowledge and exchange skills with colleagues from programmes across the continent.

Thank you, Bioparco di Roma!

On behalf of the canine teams at Ol Jogi Conservancy and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and everyone at Save the Rhino International, we would like to say a massive thank you to Bioparco di Roma and all your supporters and visitors for their amazing support through your fundraising campaign. Your generous donations will help to make a difference for Ol Jogi and Lewa's canine units, and the black and white rhinos they are working hard to protect. Thank you!

To find out more about Save the Rhino International (UK registered charity 1035072) and our programme partners, please visit www.savetherhino.org