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Tracking in Antipoaching Operations

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It's dawn in the bush. The rangers get out of their beds for their daily patrolling, porcupine perches of the reserve they're charged to.

Their task is not only to protect the wildlife, but also to track the poachers. During the night, thanks to their tracking skills, they look at the sky, reading the weather conditions and the light. Then, their slight movements are visible to the ground.

The ground is a map, telling stories of what happened during the past 24 hours. Stories of passage, of predators and prey, and also of poachers who often try to approach the fence which borders the reserve, employing an unbreakable list of caution and unconscious methods to break in.

Their aim is to catch and name the animal that represents an economic loss. No matter if a poacher has been caught, a name is a thing.

Poachers don't care. Once trapped, an animal is not able to get free from that sort of cable made of rusty iron that can cause dangerous infection.

The darkness often is a silent partner of the rangers' quest. It's not only the rangers who are silent, but also the poachers, who are silent. They are silent, reading all the signs that can find.

It's a break in the silence to all the mammals who live there. By reading the terrain, rangers can understand how many poachers have infiltrated. If they were lightweight or they were actually carrying loads or even weapons.

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The ground - especially sandy soil, made of the traditional red-colored, captures the pattern of their shoes - usually the ones, typically Goretex or Gore-Tex. If the soil shows a deeper hollow corresponding to the heel, this means the poacher were carrying a backpack on their shoulders, generally paired to contain tools. Generally animals are very light for this reason it is not easy to predict if poachers were carrying them. In early morning, the low angle of the sun offers to the Trackers the perfect light and it is to see tracks on the sand.

They keep the footprints between them and the source of light, avoiding to step on them. Contamination happens to be Trackers' worst enemy.

After a few meters they spot a double trackline. Two people wearing sneakers. Nothing is as revealed by their stride (the distance between their left foot-print and the right one), probably without carrying any load but in pairs. In case of spotting a camp fire or a trap-out point, the Rangers will inspect the type of fire, which can be highly informative including wood employed and the construction. Type of fire can vary from tribe to tribe.

Later on they realize if the firewood has been broken or cut. If the trash has been burnt some old - burners do not burn garbage in the fire. They verify touch the temperature of the remaining coals.

It is more than three hours before the two poachers entered in the fence, using probably a rudimentary





tal wire-cutter to make their way. Rangers spot on the ground a depression compatible to it. Food left over can also provide information on the kind, flour or type of rice are specific to different tribes or locations. No leftovers of broken sprouts are an indicator of tactical training.

The absence of fences or wires correspond of alertness. They quickly moved towards their goal, thanks to their training. The two distinctive tracks increased together in the opposite direction of the camp. Their tracks have been reinforced by stepping on fallen bushes, an olding leaving evidence on made ground. But the rangers are able to determine the exact point of their transit, by examining the matching of the parts of broken branches.

Behind a big bush, the other scene appears in all her crudity. The orang, concealed in a fallen spot, has recently trapped a pair of a big female black rhino (Diceros bicornis), which are native in this area. They are classified as critically endangered by IUCN. The number of the population is decreasing dramatically due to limitation of their habitat and poaching operations. These animals can be infected to con. Not more than one hour ago she stepped into it while she was feeding her calf. Behind the large body, the calf is still alive.

The intentions of the poachers were to cut the trap for the rhino, wait until they get an individual and then cut the rhino which is still highly demanded on black market of Chinese medicine.

The ranger phone immediately to the Park Ranger, then start tracking again, out of the zone, trying to reduce the trap to a new gap with the poachers. Their ability guaranteed the capture of the two, who were fleeing out of the Conservation area. This is an extraordinary day in the bush, for Conservation Ranger Operations Worldwide, the American NGO I proudly volunteer for the conservation of the endangered species.