



BLACK MAMBA PROJECT ETHOS

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1. Abstract

The Black Mamba APU was a concept designed to address an emerging problem in 2013, when rhino poachers targeted the Balule landscape. Balule is a protected area of 56 000ha, and is open to the Kruger National Park, with 136km of the park's western boundary under its direct management.

A unique approach to dealing with this problem was sought, as poaching is not a new threat to wildlife, and it certainly will not be won with guns and bullets alone. What is needed, is a relationship with the local communities, where values can be exchanged and fostered.

The 136km of boundary fence does not separate people from the park. Anyone is welcome to pay a very small fee (for locals) and enter at any of the numerous gates. However, the fence separates value-systems.

The local people do not value the wildlife in the same non-consumptive, altruistic way as an overseas tourist on safari at a game lodge, or a land owner within the boundaries of the protected area.

So, how to build a patriotic local community, that will develop a sense of pride and patriotism towards the wildlife and its landscape, and at the same time, value the park for more than just easy money and bush-meat? If we can achieve this, then we have built socio-political resilience for Balule.

The poaching threat is at three basic levels: firstly, the bush-meat poachers, who set snares, use dogs, etc. Then the rhino poachers who use guns. Lastly the people indirectly involved and benefiting from poaching; those working inside the park that sell information to the poachers, members of the communities that lease out vehicles, weapons and traditional healers, corruptible officials, etc. All levels run the same risks if captured or exposed. All are beneficiaries of illegal hunting / poaching.

So, in essence, we were looking for a solution that would address two broad issues: Firstly, the poaching of wildlife; and secondly, the social and moral decay in the communities, resulting from a false-economy (poaching wildlife products) and leading to a collapse in values (or patriotism towards the Park).

These women are young mothers with families to care for. They live in the same communities that harbor the poachers. Their kids go to the same schools. For them, the solution does not lie with guns and bullets.

It would be counter-productive to reduce a community to a society of orphans and widows. Where the men have been shot or jailed by Park officials. This cannot bode well for the future survival of the park, or the moral and social decay which will inevitably follow, giving the upper-hand to poacher syndicates and gangsterism.

It would be further fruitless to develop a ranger-corps of damaged souls, who have had to place the life of an animal over the life of a fellow tribesmen. Without the luxury of trauma counseling and support groups, these rangers will potentially displace this stress onto their families.

Women are the primary care-givers in their communities and therefore their roles are defined both inside the protected area, as well as at home.

We would rather nurture the ideal that mothers tucking their children into bed at night, tell them wondrous stories of the elephants and antelope that they saw at work, and the beauty of the African wilderness. Rather than about death and guns and PTSD.

Women hold a traditionally crucial role in the raising of children and caring for the sick and elderly. By employing young women, we target three generations. Understanding the lag-period required for the ethos to permeate to the children of the Mambas, and later to the grandchildren, this must be seen as long-term investment and not a silver-bullet or magic wand.

2. How it all began

By 2013, 24 rhinos had been poached on a small section of the Balule landscape. The rate of poacher effort had increased exponentially, and the anti-poaching resource had not!

The potential of the local villages becoming safe-havens for poachers and no-go zones for law-enforcement agencies, was high.

Anti-poaching effort was limited and very traditional in its approach. There was no data-capture to demonstrate the scale of the problem, and allow for analysis of the risks, threats and efficiency of effort.

The police and National Prosecutions Authority was, and largely still is, poorly equipped to deal with level 1 poaching cases, particularly within the context of our Roman-Dutch legal parameters.

There was a very poor understanding of the problem and therefore it was difficult to offer a solution.

We would at least need temporal, spacial and *modus-operandi* data, before we could design a counter-poaching solution.

The Balule landscape is compromised by five public access gates, the Olifants River corridor that cannot be fenced out, active mines, railway lines and power cables accessed day and night by contractors. Furthermore, the almost 500 historical subsistence farms still had families living on them, with little or no income. Not an easy landscape to manage for wildlife security.

Corruption is also a big risk, with the plethora of role-players in the Balule area. The poaching industry is intelligence-driven, on both sides. This is a crucial component to dealing with the issues.

Firstly, to break the Robin Hood attitude that the community had towards poachers, we needed to create a new role-model. A young woman that was “cooler” and had more social standing.

Secondly, we needed data! How and where and when to deploy, to get best results.

3. Solution

Our mission was to create the most unproductive landscape for poachers, by causing disruptions through visual policing and early detection of incursions.

The philosophy was that inquest dockets registered on level 2,3, and 4 poachers would have a five year turn-around period. If we could create the most undesirable landscape, the most unprofitable landscape, for poachers – they might be displaced and forced to recover their losses during sub-optimal times (for poachers) and in areas where they are more vulnerable.

A poacher who goes home empty-handed is in debt to the syndicate / middle-man. Therefore he is under pressure to come up with the goods or pay back the money. Perhaps his team will attempt a hijacking or armed robbery – this is something the courts

and police are familiar with, and perhaps poachers will be apprehended and be prosecuted for these unrelated, but displaced crimes.

In order for the project to realise both of the objectives (community engagement and wildlife security), we would need to ensure that the process was inclusive from the very beginning. Therefore, the recruitment process, all the way up to the training, was co-managed with the local tribal authorities. This created buy-in from at the highest level in the communities.

N.E.R.D.S (Not Enough Raw Data): A small team of six young women were recruited first. Trained and deployed with one single purpose.....gather information. Temporal and spacial information on poacher activities.

Questions they had to answer: Where, When, Why, Who, What and How. Data was entered onto Cybertracker units, in a sequence designed for the purpose. Later replaced with a more robust system called CMORE.

This included visitations to people living inside the park, walking the sections of the boundary fence every day, holding observations and documenting everything in a standard format.

From this data, we could design a predictive model of where the assets (targeted wildlife) were most vulnerable, when they were most vulnerable, and how they would be poached. This allowed us to deploy our armed APU teams more effectively.

Expanding: Following the initial success of this team, an additional recruitment drive was initiated, eventually resulting in a team of 36 young women, with a full suite of training and skills.

Their role is to gather information and disrupt the landscape. They become the "Bobbies on the Beat". IE. Cover big areas, look smart and speak well. Use their eyes and ears and develop institutional knowledge of their landscape (who drives which vehicle, who goes to which school, etc.).

Women should be proud and dignified. This is crucial to building a new role-model for the communities. A brand was developed (Black Mamba) and every patrol is a competition to look your best (as a woman) in the prescribed branded uniform.

These women are young mothers with families to care for. They live in the same communities that harbor the poachers. Their kids go to the same schools. This needs to be recognized and the Mambas are given equal time to fulfil their roles in the communities.

Protecting women on patrol: To ensure that the women do not develop PTSD or become targets for poacher gangs, they are NOT armed with guns. Only pepper-spray, handcuffs and radios. They are not deployed in ambushes and other tactical situations that could result in human casualties. They are on the public interface with their communities and if they carried weapons, the poachers would have to consider defending themselves against the Mambas, when they plan an incursion.

To further protect the Mambas, they are tracked in real-time. And they operate their own Command and Control Center. This serves three purposes: firstly, speculation of corruption is alleviated; secondly, rapid response to a crisis is possible; and lastly, the data captured on their patrols is in real-time and assists with strategic planning and assessment of the patrol regime.

In order to make the working environment pleasant and attractive, the Mambas live in comfortable pickets with all the modern conveniences. They patrol at night by vehicle and are not expected to go on foot after sunset.

Reaching out to young children at their schools: The Black Mambas have adopted 13 primary schools where they conduct lessons and parades with the children. A total of 1300 children are engaged every week with the Mambas. Each school has a Mamba classroom that has been decorated and improved to create a happy learning environment.

Incentives are an important tool for managers to boost performance or work ethic. Mambas have a rank structure, and a division of labour in each picket station. IE. Dog handler, 1st Aid officer, driver, media liaison / public relations officer and Sergeant. Each title is rewarded with a monthly bonus, in addition to their basic salaries.

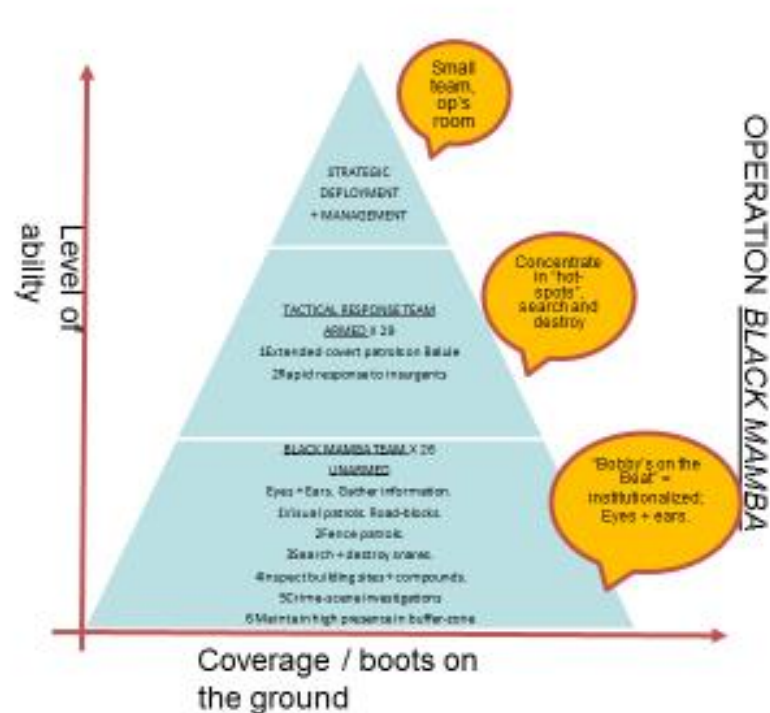


Figure 1. The structure of the Balule Wildlife Security silo and where the Black Mambas fit in.

4. Basic day in the life of a Black Mamba

Mambas have a varied life on Balule. In order to fulfil their role as information gatherers and visual deterrent agents they typically engage in the following activities:

- 4.1 Boundary patrols: seek any evidence of poacher activities or animals escaping;
- 4.2 Routine road-blocks to search people (particularly contractors) and vehicles entering and leaving the landscape;
- 4.3 Covering the landscape in sections: Search and destroy snares;
- 4.4 Visiting homes of people living on the old farms, and building sites, to inspect the premises and question locals. Updating the data-base;
- 4.5 Conduct listening posts at night, in areas where poachers often traverse;
- 4.6 Vehicle patrols on boundaries at night;
- 4.7 Visit schools every day;

- 4.8 Attend tribal functions in their official capacity. Stage parades and give speeches.
- 4.9 Interact with media, public events or talks, if and when required.

5. **Notable Successes**

- 5.1 Closed the poachers window of opportunity: From what the data showed, poachers had the landscape available to them 14hrs every day. There were very low risks to the poachers. After deployment of the Mambas, poacher behavior changed both temporally and spatially. Now poachers have a few hours of the darkest nights to operate and must use large landmarks to navigate with. They can only cross the Olifants River in a small area and must get in and out fast.
- 5.2 Displaced problem: As Balule became a less desirable landscape to poach on, the poachers moved to neighbouring reserves. Snaring was displaced to game-farms with absentee landowners, and our neighbours in the area suffered heavy rhino losses.
- 5.3 Deter and disrupt: Poachers efforts, if detected early, would allow the Mambas and our armed response, to disrupt the poachers. Therefore, the catch-per-unit-effort model shows more and more poacher effort (incursions) required to poach a rhino.
- 5.4 Bush meat and Snaring stopped: Where bush-meat poaching was at industrial levels on our landscape, the Mambas systematically took control of the whole protected area (Balule). Creating an undesirable and unprofitable place to poach. Snaring is a distant memory now, on Balule.
- 5.5 Tribal buy-in: In a recent survey conducted by Prof Tony Paquin, it is clear that the tribal communities respect the Balule Nature Reserve, and the Black Mambas much higher than the communities that do not enjoy the Mamba model. Of critical importance here, was the integration with the schools. The Mamba project success is directly correlated with their interface with the children. Furthermore, the Mambas are frequently requested to perform their parade for tribal functions and traditional ceremonies. The chiefdom makes special visitations and personal requests for mambas to open ceremonies with a parade.
- 5.6 Reduced crime in all other aspects: Prior to the deployment of Black Mambas, the protected areas were plagued by petty crimes, such as burglaries at lodges and theft. Since deployment, there has been no recorded petty crime within the borders of the reserve.

5.7 Public persona: The Black Mambas have performed remarkably well in the public arena. Receiving several note-worthy awards, including the Champions of the Earth award in 2015, and several others. They have been solicited for a multitude of popular media shows and articles and have become an icon for women in South Africa, as well as abroad. They have a massive social-media following and the demographic of their followers is primarily women from every corner of the earth. This helps to reinforce the ideal of creating a role-model for young women in Africa and elsewhere.

6. Conclusion:

Although the Black Mamba concept cannot replace the traditional militarized APU approach, it is an essential component of any protected area, that has a traditional community living within its midst. Their successes should be measured on parameters designed to evaluate their objectives and not those of a militarized unit.

Without the combination of Black Mambas and the schools' projects, the objectives with creating patriotic communities would be difficult to demonstrate.

It must also be said, that the model works well for Balule, under this set of socio-political pressures, and would have to be tailored for any protected area, to meet similar objectives.