



The Black Mamba Anti Poaching Unit

JANUARY, 2023





Introduction

What does it mean to be a ranger? Rangers are often in the front line of conservation. They are the eyes and ears of the bush. The voice of the animals. Rangers patrol protected areas, monitor wildlife, prevent poaching, engage local communities in conservation, help communities resolve human-wildlife conflicts and much more. The work of rangers is critical for the survival of flora and fauna. This is a job that requires a lot of responsibility and passion to ensure that the work is done at the highest standard.

As of current, an estimated 11% of the ranger force consists of women. The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit aims to involve women from local communities in to the ranger force and give them an opportunity to participate in protecting their natural heritage. As including women on large scale into the ranger force is currently not the norm in African countries, the process of recruitment and deployment can differ from ranger organisations which are predominately male. The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit has been instrumental in opening opportunities for women to join the rangers force and opening up discussion on the benefits of women in the ranger force as well as obstacles encountered to integrate local women into conservation and wildlife security.

Background

In 2012, South Africa faced a significant surge in rhino poaching incidents. To combat this crisis, conservation efforts took on a militarized approach. However, this militarization raised concerns due to its potential for violence and its impact on the mental well-being of those involved. It also risked creating division between local communities and conservation officers, as the use of force to protect wildlife from community members could breed resentment towards both the animals and the reserve. While the militarization of conservation is an essential reaction to the threat, it cannot be the sole solution. Long-term planning and fostering an empathetic community connection are critical components of effective conservation.

The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit, established in 2013 by Transfrontier Africa NPC at the western boundary of the Greater Kruger, was a direct response to the escalating rhino poaching problem in the region. Traditional anti-poaching methods had proven inadequate, prompting the recruitment of 36 women from local communities. These women received paramilitary training, anti-poaching techniques, and instruction on working safely around dangerous wildlife. Their primary role was visual policing and early detection.

The Black Mamba project aimed to gather valuable data on rhino poacher behaviour, enabling the development of effective counter-poaching strategies. The objective was to render the area an unattractive target for poachers, making the risks outweigh the rewards.



This strategy involved forcing poachers into less favourable timeframes and higher-risk areas, increasing their chances of detection. It became evident over time that apprehending poachers within the protected area was challenging, exacerbated by weak South African poaching laws and low conviction rates. Therefore, the focus shifted to disrupting poaching activities across the landscape.

The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit achieved this disruption through continuous presence in the region. Their daily patrols along fence lines, entry gates, servitude roads, and high-risk areas discouraged poachers from entering the area and narrowed their window of opportunity due to the fear of being caught. Addressing rhino poaching required a multi-faceted approach, including on-ground intervention, technological development, academic research for a better understanding, and community education and empowerment.

Another pressing issue was bush meat poaching, a global problem. Although distinct from complex wildlife crimes like rhino poaching, the approach remained similar: make the area unprofitable for poachers. The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit tackles bush meat poaching by removing snares and dismantling bush meat kitchens. Regular data collection helped identify hot spot areas, prompting frequent visits and further discouraging poaching.



Successful intervention caused bush meat poachers to relocate as it became unviable within the protected area's boundaries. To prevent the resurgence of wildlife crime at the borders and protect transient animals, the Black Mambas also targeted so-called "buffer zones" that borders the protected area.

Women in the Ranger Force

The Black Mamba APU took a groundbreaking step by exclusively recruiting women for its program. In partnership with the local tribal council, women from nearby communities were actively encouraged to apply for these positions.

The involvement of the tribal council and the chief's endorsement sends a powerful message within the community, forging a deeper connection between the nature reserve and the local communities.

The decision to employ women as rangers was motivated by various compelling factors. Women shoulder the dual responsibility of being primary caregivers while also contributing to their household's financial stability. Offering well-compensated jobs in protected areas bordering their communities enhances financial security at home, directly impacting the overall health and education of their families. Moreover, women wield considerable influence in driving social change. As primary caregivers, they impart values and nurture their families and community members. Cultivating a robust conservation ethic among rural women can significantly alter values, particularly among children. Consequently, the role of the Black Mambas extends beyond the protected area, exerting a substantial impact on the transformation of societal values.

Having women within the ranger force brings distinctive qualities to the table. Women tend to exhibit keen observational skills, enabling them to detect subtle changes—an invaluable asset in detecting potential poacher incursions. Their approachability fosters effective communication with other stakeholders in the field, such as reserve management, landowners, and tourists, who play a pivotal role in protecting natural areas. Effective communication is indispensable for gathering critical information. Furthermore, women often excel at conflict resolution through dialogue, de-escalating tense situations. They introduce diverse perspectives, contributing to an equitable environment of skills, ideas, and collaborative efforts alongside their male colleagues.

In summary, the involvement of local rural women in Africa in nature and wildlife conservation is vital for the success of conservation endeavors and the well-being of nearby communities. Their participation not only enriches our understanding of ecosystems but also strengthens community engagement, fosters economic empowerment, advances gender equality, supports sustainable development, preserves cultural heritage, and ultimately safeguards Africa's diverse biodiversity.

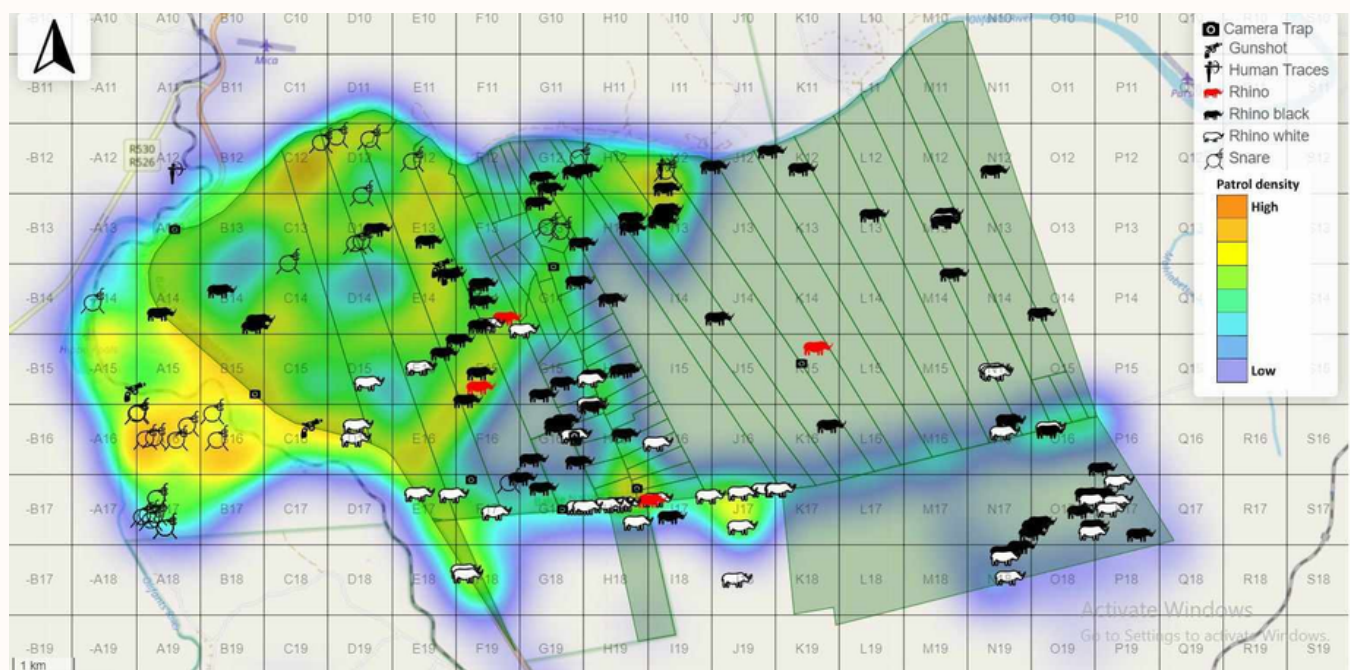


The inclusion of women in the ranger force, particularly in the African context, remains limited. The Black Mamba APU's decision to establish a female-only APU aims to provide a platform for women to excel, create a supportive community of women with shared life experiences, and establish a work environment that fully addresses women's needs and hone training towards women. This approach also enhances workplace safety, mitigating issues such as sexual harassment and gender-based violence within the work environment. From having access to uniforms to the training and work environment, the ranger profession is currently very male-orientated. The Black Mamba APU hopes to pave the way to be inclusive to women who dream of becoming rangers. We have seen much positive change throughout Africa since the start of the Black Mambas and we hope this trend will continue until women in the ranger force has become normalized.

The Black Mambas' Playbook: Winning Tactics for Conservation

The Black Mambas are active within a specific region of the Greater Kruger, which shares its border with Kruger National Park. Notably, there are no boundary fences between the Greater Kruger from Kruger National Park. These interconnected areas offer a vast expanse for the free movement of iconic wildlife species such as rhinos, elephants, African wild dogs, and various endangered species. The Black Mambas extend their operations beyond the protected zone into what is known as buffer zones, where they diligently work to prevent any wildlife-related or other criminal activities that could potentially pose a threat to the protected area.

The Black Mambas operate within a region characterized by a high density of rhinos. In accordance with the standards set by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), there is a prescribed ratio of rangers per hectare of protected area. The operational zone of the Black Mambas meets this standard due to their dedicated presence within it, ensuring the continued safeguarding of this precious ecosystem.



The Black Mamba program was conceived with the primary objective of becoming the vigilant guardians of the wilderness. They fulfil this role by serving as the first line of defence and early detection.

Their duties encompass patrolling the boundary fences to serve as a visible deterrent against poaching, identifying and reporting any breaches into the protected zone, conducting observation posts, search incoming and outgoing vehicles, conducting searches of compounds and building sites, sweeping for snares, and dismantling illicit bush meat operations. In the event that an incursion is identified by the Black Mambas, an armed response team is promptly dispatched for follow-up action.

The formulation of anti-poaching strategies for both the Black Mambas and the armed response team is underpinned by scientific research, aiming to establish best practices. Understanding the modus operandi of poachers, comprehensive data collection, and real-time tracking of ranger activities are of extreme importance in shaping effective interventions.



High-risk areas are pinpointed based on various factors, including historical poacher movements, rhino concentration hotspots, infrastructure layout, waterhole distribution, and ranger deployment. Utilizing models and maps of this nature, anti-poaching strategies are thoughtfully devised. Information is continually updated to ensure access to the most current data. Spatial and temporal data analysis aids in monitoring shifts in poacher tactics and strategies as they are pressured into less favourable time frames and areas for their illegal activities.

It has been recognized that the traditional approach of directly apprehending poachers has yielded limited success historically. Therefore, the preferred approach is to disrupt their activities within the landscape, forcing them into less ideal situations where the risk of detection is significantly higher. Rhino poachers are known for their efforts to remain concealed, so pushing them towards areas and times where detection is more likely serves as a potent deterrent. By displacing poachers to environments less conducive to their activities, a more favourable situation is created for the protection of these iconic species.

The battle against rhino poaching is a relentless and ever-evolving struggle. The Black Mamba APU is committed to continually refining its strategies in response to the enduring challenges it faces. Collaborating closely with scientists and experts from around the globe, we strive to pioneer innovative technologies and tactics in the fight against rhino poaching. We take great pride in our partnerships with professionals from diverse corners of the world.



Pangolins in Peril

Pangolin poaching has become a pressing concern in recent years, with a marked increase in illegal activities targeting these unique and elusive creatures. Despite international efforts to protect pangolins, they continue to face severe threats from poachers seeking their valuable scales and meat.

The Black Mambas are committed to remaining informed about the evolving landscape of illegal wildlife trafficking. As the recent issue of pangolin poaching has intensified, the Black Mambas recognized the need to develop a comprehensive strategy for intervention. The challenges surrounding pangolin poaching, rescue, and rehabilitation are intricate and multifaceted, with many aspects of this crime still shrouded in mystery. This complexity underscores the importance of their dedicated efforts in addressing and combatting this issue.

Collaborating with specialists in the field, the Black Mamba APU actively participates in sting operations aimed at recovering pangolins and apprehending suspects involved in illegal activities. Transfrontier Africa NPC, the parent organization of the Black Mambas, has taken the initiative to establish a dedicated pangolin sanctuary in close proximity to Black Mamba team facilities. This strategic location enables swift and attentive care for rescued pangolins, both during their stay at the sanctuary and after their release. The sanctuary serves as a crucial component of our efforts to combat the ever-evolving landscape of illegal wildlife trafficking. We remain steadfast in our hope that these initiatives will contribute to the containment and reduction of pangolin trafficking.



Photo: Sergeant Cute monitoring the weight of a rescued pangolin.

Rural Resilience, Wildlife Wellness: The Black Mambas Way

While the Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit has undoubtedly achieved success in the field, it's essential to recognize that one of our most important roles lies within the community. To bring about lasting change in behaviour, the project places great emphasis on creating financial stability, fostering role models, and demonstrating the benefits of supporting the reserve rather than engaging in illegal wildlife activities.

Within the communities, women play a crucial role as the caretakers of families. Hence, the women of the Black Mambas extend their knowledge, experiences, and passion for wildlife conservation to their households. Many Black Mambas have also become the primary breadwinners, shouldering the financial responsibilities of their families and ensuring their children receive an education and the care they need. Engaging the entire community in the significance of wildlife conservation and preserving our natural heritage is critical for the enduring protection of flora and fauna.



While the traditional, militarized anti-poaching units play an important role, more intervention is necessary to effect positive behavioural change. Some community members may view poachers as modern-day Robin Hoods, bringing money into the community. However, this creates false economies and makes communities susceptible to infiltration by criminal syndicates. Positive role models like the Black Mambas are instrumental in maintaining community stability and educating the next generation.

Over a 1000 food packages delivered

Thanks to funding, the Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit is able to provide assistance to 90 families on a regular basis. This aid includes food parcels for the most vulnerable community members, fuel-efficient wood stoves, and various other forms of support.

As part of the efforts to include the community the Bushbabies Environmental Education Program was created as a sister project of the Black Mamba project. In collaboration with the Black Mambas, our Bushbabies Environmental Educators focus on 11 primary schools in our local communities. Here, the Environmental Educators educate students on the importance of wildlife and nature conservation while integrating other subjects like English, math, and art.



11 Schools involved from local communities

Through the Bushbabies program, children tend to their own vegetable gardens, providing them with at least one healthy meal a day. We also upgrade school facilities to create better learning environments. Our Black Mambas frequently visit schools to teach children about their work and the significance of wildlife and nature.

Beyond the classroom, the Bushbabies Environmental Program extends its support to the community in various ways. This includes healthcare for pets and burden animals, assisting the elderly with chores such as garden maintenance, organizing clean-up campaigns to combat pollution, and offering a Scouts project for children to join after school.

Furthermore, our Bushbabies students have the unique opportunity to visit the reserve and experience the wildlife that thrives on the borders of their communities. These experiences are transformative, providing children with a profound understanding of nature conservation and the wildlife that surrounds them, despite the fact that many have never seen it up close, despite living on the edges of protected areas.



Achievements

Throughout their existence, the Black Mambas have achieved numerous notable successes. Their mission extends beyond the borders of the protected area, striving to create a substantial impact both within and outside its confines. Over the past several years, we have observed a steady decline in various forms of poaching within their deployment area. Our unwavering commitment is to persistently intensify our efforts, year by year, with the goal of continuously increasing our successes in the ongoing battle for wildlife conservation. Below are some of our notable successes over the years:



1471

snares removed in 6 year period



16

assisted arrests



62%

reduction of rhino poaching in
area of deployment



96%

reduction of bush meat poaching in
area of deployment

Crimes like rhino poaching are multifaceted and necessitate collaboration among various stakeholders within and around the realm of conservation. The Black Mamba Project strives to play a pivotal role in reducing the incidence of rhino poaching. Regrettably, rhino poaching represents a complex wildlife crime that spans multiple dimensions, demanding the unified efforts of national and international participants to fortify cooperation, reinforce law enforcement, and enhance penalties. The Black Mamba project serves as an essential tool in a broader arsenal, working toward sustainable, long-term change. We do not operate in isolation in the battle against rhino poaching; instead, we take pride in being a significant force within this critical fight.

But it must not be forgotten that also other wildlife is at risk, especially through the means of bushmeat poaching. The Black Mamba project has made a significant impact against bush meat poaching. Within the last 6 years, 1471 snares have been removed (Figure 1). At the beginning of the project a large number of snares were found within the boundary of the protected area. After intensive snare sweeps, the number of snares within the protected area have become very limited. Therefore, the Black Mambas focus their efforts on the bufferzone areas surrounding the protected area to decrease the potential influx of bush meat poaching and reduce the risk of transient wildlife being snared outside of the protected area. New areas are continuously monitored for bush meat poaching and areas are regularly cleared to make these areas undesirable and unprofitable to poach through snaring.

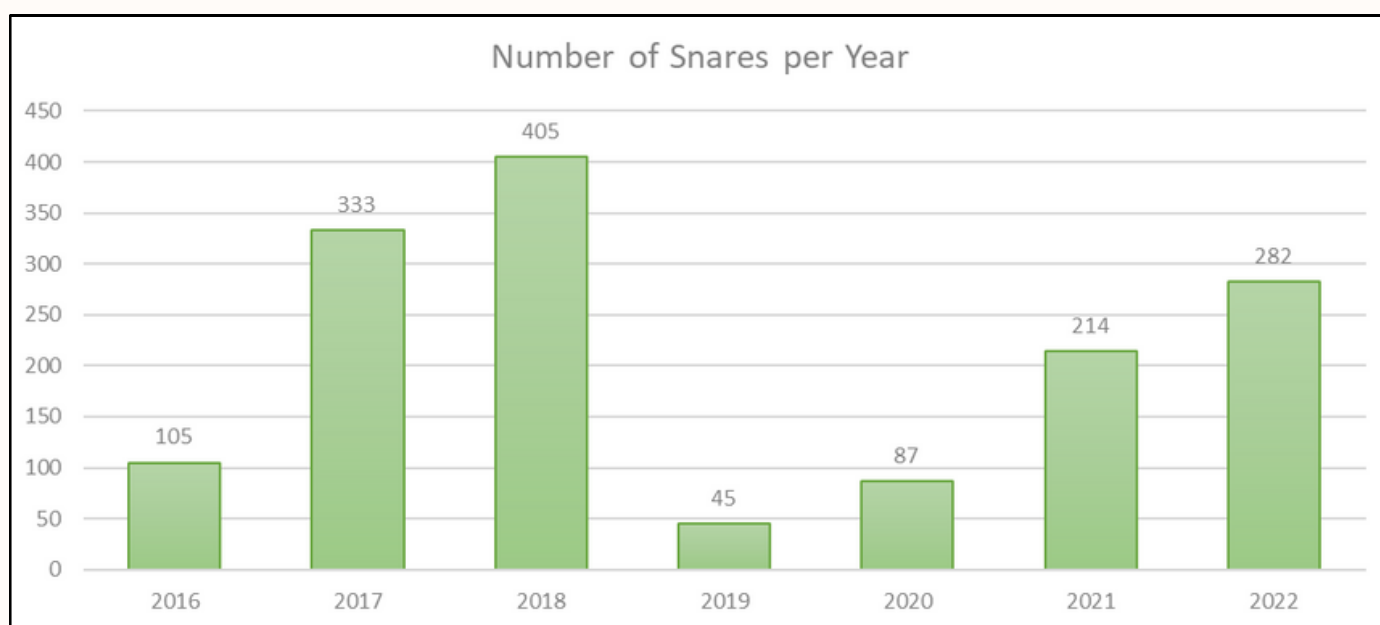


Figure 1. Snares removed 2016- 2022

Whilst on patrol the Black Mambas monitor and report any illegal activity taking place. This is directly recorded by the Black Mamba Operations Room. Over a period of 6 years, a large majority of reports by the rangers consisted of tracks of suspects as well as damage to perimeter fences (Figure 2). Working together with other ranger teams as well as armed guards, the Black Mambas were able to assist in the arrests of rhino poachers, bush meat poachers, copper thieves and wood poachers.

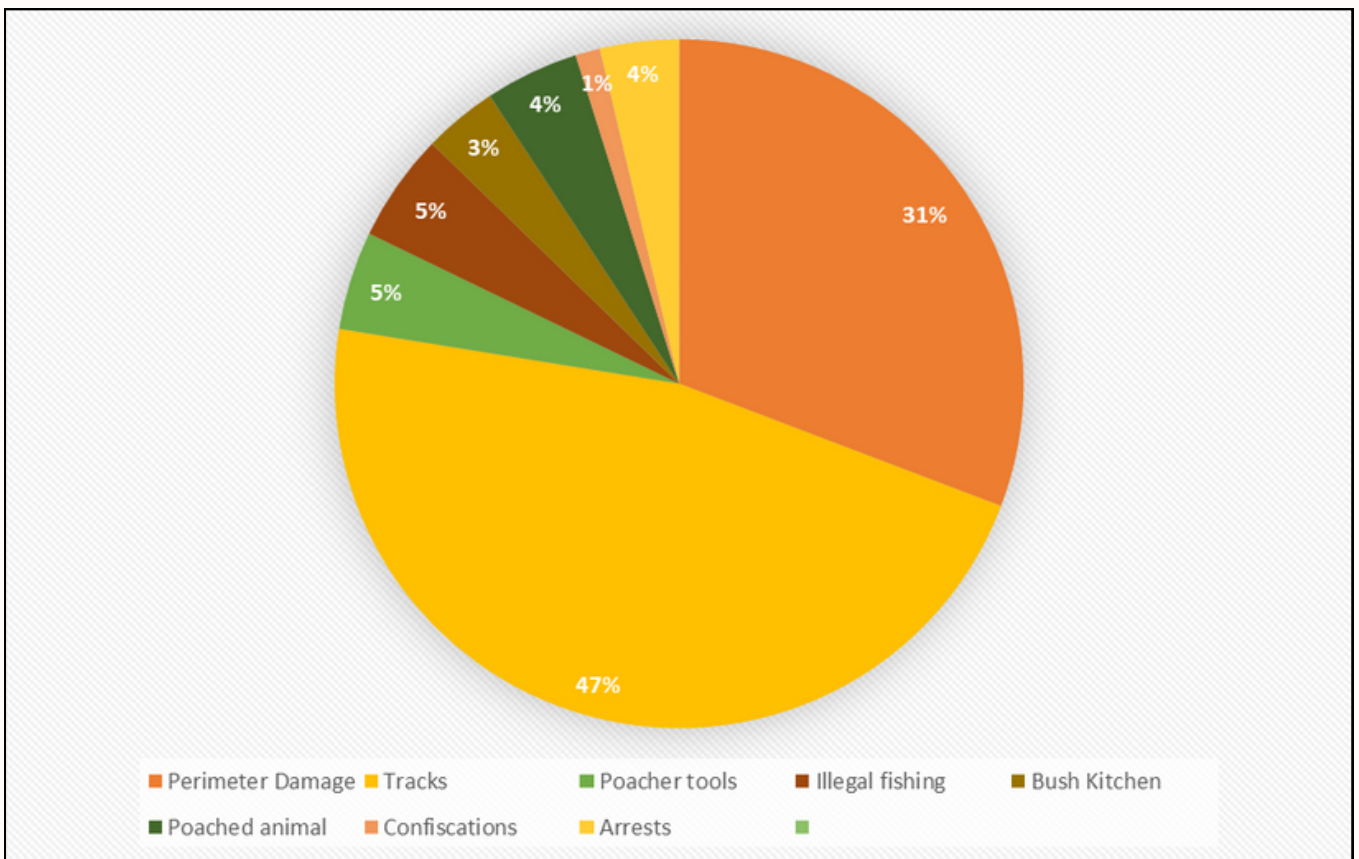


Figure 2. Reports on illegal activity 2016- 2022



Photo: A bush meat poacher getting arrested by the Black Mambas. The Bush kitchen was dismantled subsequently

During their patrols, the Black Mambas sometimes encounter wildlife facing distress or in need of assistance. Responding to these situations is not just a duty but a moral responsibility that the Black Mambas uphold.

When the Black Mambas come across wildlife in distress, their first step is to assess the situation and promptly report it to the Operations Room. Subsequently, the Operations Room engages in discussions with management to determine the most appropriate course of action.

Over the years, the Black Mambas have been involved in numerous wildlife interventions. From responding to injured wildlife to wildlife that escaped out of the boundaries of the protected area and needs to be herded back to safety.

In cases where a veterinarian is called to the site, the Black Mambas play a crucial role in assisting with tracking wounded or sick animals, ensuring that they receive the necessary care. Additionally, during their patrols, the Black Mambas frequently encounter smaller animals, often trapped in fences or other precarious situations. In these instances, they take immediate action to free these creatures and ensure their well-being. Interventions where veterinary care was needed consisted of a wide range of species including iconic species such as elephants, rhinos and the very endangered African wild dogs (Figure 3).

What makes these efforts even more commendable is that the Black Mambas do not discriminate based on species. Whether it's a majestic elephant or a smaller, lesser-known species, any wildlife in distress receives their immediate attention and care. This approach is especially critical for vulnerable or endangered species, such as elephants, which require special protection and conservation efforts.

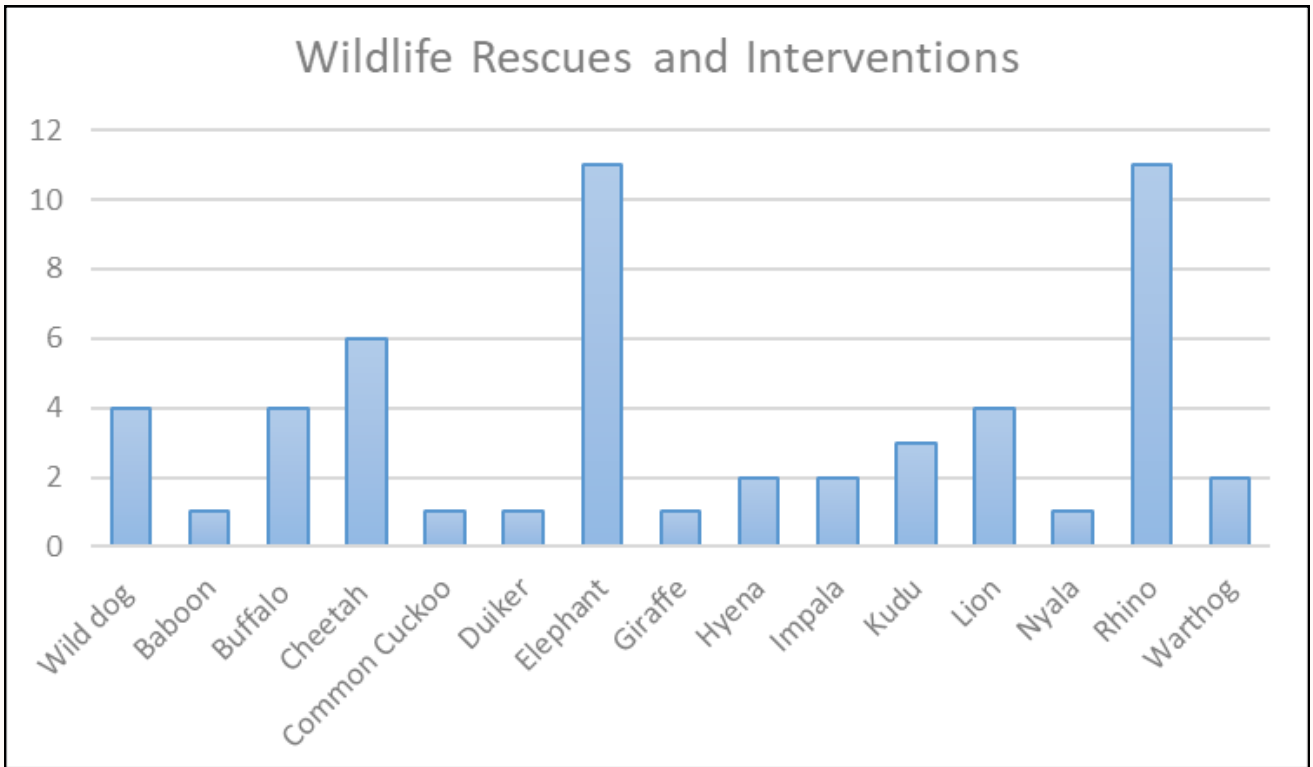


Figure 3. Wildlife rescues and interventions involving veterinary care 2019 - 2022



International Recognition

The Black Mambas serve as powerful role models for women and girls who aspire to work in conservation and ranger roles. Its success serves as a compelling example of how gender diversity can enhance conservation efforts and law enforcement while also promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in traditionally male-dominated fields. In recent years there has been a clear increase of women in the ranger force as well as more all-female anti-poaching groups.

The Black Mambas aim to inspire both women and girls that traditional roles can be broken and that they can lead to success. Many Black Mamba rangers have had the opportunity to travel internationally to speak about their work as well as their heritage and home life. They have been able to be a voice for wildlife internationally, pushing for change and more protection for South Africa's vulnerable wildlife.













Together women can make a real change to nature conservation whilst conserving traditional cultural traditions.

We are grateful for the opportunity and the voice we were able to We deeply appreciate the chance and the platform that the Black Mamba project has provided our rangers. Our gratitude knows no bounds for the honours and acknowledgements bestowed upon our dedicated rangers throughout the years. Our commitment remains unwavering as we strive to combat wildlife crimes in all its manifestations, preserving South Africa's precious natural heritage, and inspiring young women globally to follow their dreams in making a real change.



The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit is thankful for the following prestigious awards:

-  2022 Pioneers with Purpose - Scientific Exploration Society, UK
-  2022 Highly Commended Ranger Team (North Team) - IUCN
-  2021 Highly Commended Ranger (Nkateko Mzimba) - IUCN
-  2020 Earth Care Award - Sierra Club, USA
-  2020 Ranger of the Year Award (Leitah Mkhabela) - The Paradise Foundation, China
-  2019 Global Travel and Tourism Resilience Council: “Resilience effort through cultural diversity and environmental activity”
-  2019 Global Travel and Tourism Resilience Council: “Changemaker in tourism” (Craig Spencer)
-  2017 Eco Warrior - Silver Award
-  2015 Champions of the Earth - United Nations
-  2015 Rhino Conservation Award - Best Conservation Practitioner of the year



The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit would like to thank all our funders, supporters, friends and colleagues for all your support over the years. Also, a special thank you to the Olifants West Region for your continued support to the Black Mambas. We would not be able to carry out our work without your continued dedication to the cause. We are forever grateful for those who have been supportive of our work and we are looking forward to many more years of protecting our beautiful nature and wildlife.

