

# Dogs On The Front Line Of Conservation – A Guide

## Felix Patton



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Certain breeds of dog have 250 million scent receptors compared to the five million of humans due to anatomical differences within the nose and brain. Capturing this unique capacity has led to dogs playing a variety of roles in conservation.

Conservation dogs have been mainly used for tracking the spoor of poachers in the bush. Dogs can track a trail from where poachers have killed up to one day past the event, and lead the team to the door of the poacher's house.



PHOTOS BY: JEREMY GOSS/BIG LIFE FOUNDATION

**Top Right: Bloodhound given the poachers smell.**

**Top Left: Bloodhound follows the poachers track.**

**Below: Bloodhound leads to poachers capture.**

**Bottom: Enabling poachers to be caught at night.**



PHOTO BY: LINDA PORTER/CANINE TRAINING ACADEMY

This is a significant deterrent as the poacher knows that nothing he can do will be able to change this. The Maasai in particular are terrified of tracker dogs, regarding them as somehow supernatural in their ability to track them down. Of special value is the dogs' ability to track at night, when poaching is most prevalent.

The incredible sense of smell of the dog can be trained to pick out weapons and ammunition, rhino horn and elephant ivory hidden in the bush or concealed in vehicles or cargo. Using dogs can save time and money as a dog can search in a matter of minutes what several people would take a day to do. Even if the smuggler has concealed or disguised the illegal product, the dog cannot be fooled.

Making it as difficult as possible to move illegal wildlife products across

## SPOTLIGHT

PHOTO COURTESY OF EDUCATION FOR NATURE-VIETNAM, WIKICOMMONS



PHOTO COURTESY OF HARLAND QUARRINGTON, WIKICOMMONS



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES TOURTELLOTTE, US CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION, WIKICOMMONS

borders increases the level of risk to those individuals involved in the smuggling chain, and thus helps to impede illegal trade. Smugglers may well have contacts with the 'kingpins' who are organising the poaching so their detection is especially valuable.

There is a project to train dogs to sniff out snares. Poachers' snares are indiscriminate in their targets causing

many unnecessary wildlife deaths and mutilations plus expensive veterinary interventions. Often they are well hidden from human eyes. Using dogs to find snares would be a major advantage in saving wildlife and deterring poachers.

Dogs can also protect and defend their handler and other rangers. They can act as an early warning to the

**Top Left: Narcotics searching**  
**Top Right: Vehicle searching**  
**Below Right: Airport bag search**  
**Bottom: Bomb Searching**



PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKICOMMONS



PHOTO BY: JEREMY GOSS/BIG LIFE FOUNDATION



**Main photo: Poacher tracking**  
**Insert: Poacher patrol**

presence of poachers who may be lying in wait for the team. The dog may give signs of impending danger – it may lift its tail when it has a strong scent or lift an ear if an animal is nearby or raises the hair on its back if people are close by. In the right circumstances the dog may be released to chase and attack the poacher.

When a female rhino is poached it will often have a calf too young to fend for itself and which will die or get killed by lions if not found quickly. A project has been started to train dogs to detect and track rhino calves.

Just by having aggressive looking dogs on a reserve could act as a deterrent to poachers. With a top speed of 30km/hour and a biting pressure of up to 40 pounds per square inch, poachers would think twice before entering a dog-protected reserve.

Working dogs have some limitations such as extreme temperatures, fatigue, distraction, disease and loss of

concentration. South African security company Mechem have developed MEDDS (Mechem Explosives and Drug Detection System). The MEDDS approach mitigates all the above limiting factors by "taking the odour to the dog rather than taking the dog to the odour". By drawing the air (and the smells and impurities present/suspended in the air) into a closed area through a filter medium and then presenting these "samples" to specially trained dogs, the dog can easily identify any odour present in the filter and indicate the presence of the odour that it was trained to detect. Odour samples can be collected from almost any vehicle, container, luggage and building.

Another limitation of the current use of dogs in anti-poaching is that an individual dog is normally trained in only one skill – be it patrolling, tracking or attacking. This reduces the reaction time to poaching incidents as more than one dog unit needs to be deployed one after the other, to respond to an incident. One leading anti-poaching dog trainer is developing the "multi-

role dog" combing all the skills for patrol work, apprehension, building searches, tracking, handler protection, area searches, article searches, carcass location and detection of either narcotics, ivory or arms/explosives. ●

Many dog breeds are needed for anti-poaching work depending on the task they have to perform. For example, sniffer dogs working in open spaces need to be non-aggressive looking (like the Cocker Spaniel or Labrador) and be comfortable being around people who are not used to working with dogs. Alternatively people are more respectful and even fearful of aggressive looking dogs (like the Belgian Malinois) and these may scare off potential poachers.

Dogs that have to work in the bush need to be very heat resistant, have low water requirements and have long legs to cover the ground.

## Conservation Dogs it's in the breeding

PHOTO BY: FLICKR, SUPERPASTASTIC



### Bloodhound

The Bloodhound has roots in ancient times with its earliest ancestor probably the black St. Hubert hound documented in Europe by the eighth century. In the 12th century, many church dignitaries were interested in hunting with these dogs, and most monasteries kept carefully bred packs. They have been bred to trail through any hardship and once on a trail cannot be called off. They have a life span of 7-10 years but are somewhat susceptible to illness. The Bloodhound has an unrivalled sense of smell to trail lost persons and criminals alike.

PHOTO BY: LINDA FROM JACKSONVILLE



### Weimaraner

The Weimaraner was produced in the 19th century by a concerted effort to create the ideal all-around gun dog that could hunt game of all sizes, including deer and bear. The Weimaraner is bold and rambunctious and loves to run and hunt. They have a life span of 10-13 years. This breed is generally used to track animals, detect animal remains and snares by scenting and to locate wounded animals. They can also be used for anti-poaching patrols and suspect restraint.



PHOTO BY: SPARHAM

### German Shepherd

The breed is the result of a conscious effort to produce the ideal Shepherd, capable of herding and guarding flocks. Breeders sought to develop not only a herding dog but one that could excel at jobs requiring courage, athleticism and intelligence, and it proved to be a more than capable police dog. Subsequent breeding strove to perfect its abilities as an intelligent and fearless companion and guardian. They have a life span of 10-12 years.

The breed has become one of the most versatile, serving as a police dog, war dog, guide dog, search-and-rescue dog, narcotics- or explosives-detecting dog and guard dog.



PHOTO BY: FLICKR, RON ARMSTRONG

### Belgian Malinois

Originally among the collective of Belgian sheep-herding breeds used for general-purpose shepherds and guard dogs.

The shorthaired variety was developed in the area around Malines, and so became known as the Belgian Malinois. In recent times, the Malinois has gained a reputation as one of the pre-eminent police dogs in the world, surpassing even the German Shepherd in demand. It is a high-energy breed that is alert, smart, serious and protective. The Malinois is highly versatile and can be used in narcotics and bomb detection, search and rescue, tracking, sled and cart pulling and as a guide dog for the blind and disabled. With few health problems the life span of the breed is 10-12 years.

Malinois are mostly used for tracking human suspects, detecting firearms and bullet casings and to perform the restraining function when detaining suspects requires force. They are also used at road blocks for vehicle searches.



PHOTO BY: PATO GARZA (FLICKR, HANNAH)

### Doberman Pinscher

Louis Dobermann of Thuringen, Germany was a door-to-door tax collector who needed a watchful guard dog to accompany him on his rounds. In the late 1800s he set about creating an alert streamlined guard dog, most likely by crossing the old German shepherd and German pinscher, with later crosses of the black and tan Manchester terrier, greyhound and Weimaraner. They have a life span of 10-12 years. The breed is seen as an intelligent police and guard dog and a war dog.



PHOTO BY: PLEPLEZ000, CORRECTED BY ROBEK

### English Cocker and Springer Spaniels

The spaniel family is one of the largest groups and one of the most specialized. The smaller dogs were the Cocker and were used to hunt woodcock while the larger dogs, the English Springers, were used to flush out and spring on the game. They have a life span of 10-12 years but are prone to ear diseases which may result in deafness.

Spaniels are especially used around people such as at country entry points for sniffing luggage and cargo.



PHOTO BY: MIGUEL ANGEL MARTINEZ GONZALEZ

### Labrador Retriever

The original Labradors were all-purpose water dogs originating in Newfoundland. These dogs not only retrieved game but also retrieved fish, pulled small fishing boats through icy water and helped the fisherman in any task involving swimming. The Labrador is eager to please, enjoys learning and excels in obedience. They have a life span of 10-12 years. The breed is a very versatile security and guide dog.