

*“We Were
Lucky
To Get Out
Alive”*

With wildlife poaching rife across Africa, we meet the man who’s risking life and limb to defeat the criminals

BY CRISPIN ANDREWS

“The authorities in a country have to want to deal with poaching,” says trainer Rory Young:



"ONE OF OUR GUYS GOT GLASS IN THE EYE and ended up in hospital for five days. Our vehicle was smashed to bits. But, to be honest, we were lucky to get out alive."

So recalls Rory Young, a man who trains officers working for African authorities—rangers, wardens, policemen, even soldiers—to find and catch wildlife poachers. He usually takes his charges into areas where they operate, such as the bush, the plains, forests and mountainous areas. This is dangerous enough, but sometimes his teams have to go into the towns and villages where the criminals actually live.

In March last year, Rory and a group of seven rangers went to a village in Malawi to arrest two suspected poachers. "I can't say which village because there are ongoing operations we don't want to jeopardise," says Rory. "But it was in a populated area, bordering one of the national parks."

A few days earlier, five police officers had been to the same area to arrest a murder suspect. All of them ended up in hospital, two in intensive care. The police had subsequently declared the place a no-go zone—but nobody had bothered to tell Rory and his team.

Rory's arrests passed off without incident. But as the suspects were led to the rangers' vehicle, a cry went out. Within seconds, scores of people were mobilising to deal with the perceived threat to their home. "The cry was relayed by mobile phone and shouting, and everyone who heard did the same."

The mob couldn't be persuaded to back down and there were too

many to fight off. "Most of them didn't know why they were attacking us; they were just following the guy next door," says Rory. "It's their defence mechanism, probably thousands of years old—you're an outsider on their territory and the group will protect itself if it feels under attack."

Rory and his team made it to the vehicle, but that was just the start of it. One of the suspected poachers had got away during the chaos, but the rangers still had the other. There was a six-mile drive out of the village, along an uneven road illuminated only by moonlight. Plenty of time for the locals to get their man back.

"Hundreds of them lined the roadside, on and off, for what seemed like miles," recalls Rory. "We were later told that more than a thousand people were out that night."

Trenches were dug across the road. When the vehicle slowed down, locals attacked with rocks, spears and machetes. "It was so dark you couldn't see much. It was only when



we saw that the maize stalks had been flattened up ahead that we knew trouble was imminent."

Rory and the rangers took it in turns to sit on the vehicle's roof, with others running alongside or behind, to ward attackers off.

"When the attacks were too bad on one side, we'd run around the other side of the vehicle or jump in. A large rock hit the car near the door, next to my head. If that had hit me, it would have been fatal."

BORN IN ZAMBIA, Rory, 44, has been training anti-poaching forces for five years. In the 1990s, he qualified as a tracker in Zimbabwe, where he grew up. He subsequently ran a game

Rory and his team in The Omay, Zimbabwe, a wildlife area belonging to the rural community

sanctuary, then managed forests and sustainable forestry operations in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Then, about ten years

ago, a new poaching crisis hit Africa.

Wild-animal parts have always been coveted, particularly in China and the Far East. It's believed that rhino horn can cure everything from impotence to cancer. Rory has even heard of people snorting the stuff at parties. Traditional Eastern medicine also values pangolins, mountain gorillas and lions, the latter a substitute for the dwindling tiger population. Ivory, meanwhile, is associated with opulence all over the world.

Recent economic growth in east Asia has meant more disposable



Teaching local safari guides at Bumi Hills Safari Lodge, Zimbabwe; (below) Rory on patrol in the Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, Malawi



income and an increase in the black-market price. Criminal syndicates have capitalised. Many impoverished Africans have joined or set up their own gangs. Others, poor and starving, kill animals illegally for food.

The conservation group Tusk estimates that 30,000 elephants are killed by poachers every year—one every 15 minutes. Ivory goes for £700 a pound on the black market, while rhino horn can fetch up to £20,000 a pound, according to the African Wildlife Foundation. To the criminals, it's more valuable than gold. In South Africa, where 80 per cent of the rhino population live, a rhino is killed by poachers every three days.

In 2011, as the crisis escalated, Rory started training Zimbabwean rangers in his spare time. He quickly realised

that these people didn't have the tracking or bush skills needed to stop the poachers.

"If they'd been trained at all, it was by local and foreign military people, and then just in military tactics," says Rory. "But applying such a doctrine doesn't work in the bush—you don't have the communications, the structure and the logistical support."

He adds: "These guys were walking around the bush in patrols, trying

to bump into poachers. But the areas they cover are so vast, you just can't do that."

RORY REALISED that something more was needed. Rangers, he felt, needed to learn how to live and survive in the bush, to use it to their advantage. With Yakov Alekseyev, a former federal agent in the United States Office of Special Investigations, Rory devised what he calls a holistic anti-poaching doctrine. He's since used it to train anti-poaching forces in 12 African countries.

Rory runs the training, helps devise and implement local plans, and is sometimes involved in helping to catch the criminals. In 2014, he set up a non-profit organisation, Chengeta Wildlife, to help fund training and support other conservation ventures

across Africa. Rory claims that all donations go towards supporting work in the field.

"When we go into an area, we try to initiate and then manage a behaviour change," he says. "You can't stop poaching by arrests, drones in the air, advertising or educating the youth. It's a combination of all these factors that creates a change in attitude."

In the Malawi village where Rory

and his team were attacked, there was elephant and rhino poaching—going on, alongside meat poaching—both commercial and subsistence. To deal with the organised crime, Rory taught park rangers how to use undercover officers, informants and reconnaissance teams.

"You build up a picture of how the gang is operating: when and where, who they're working with, where they're getting their ammunition and weapons," he points out. "Then you



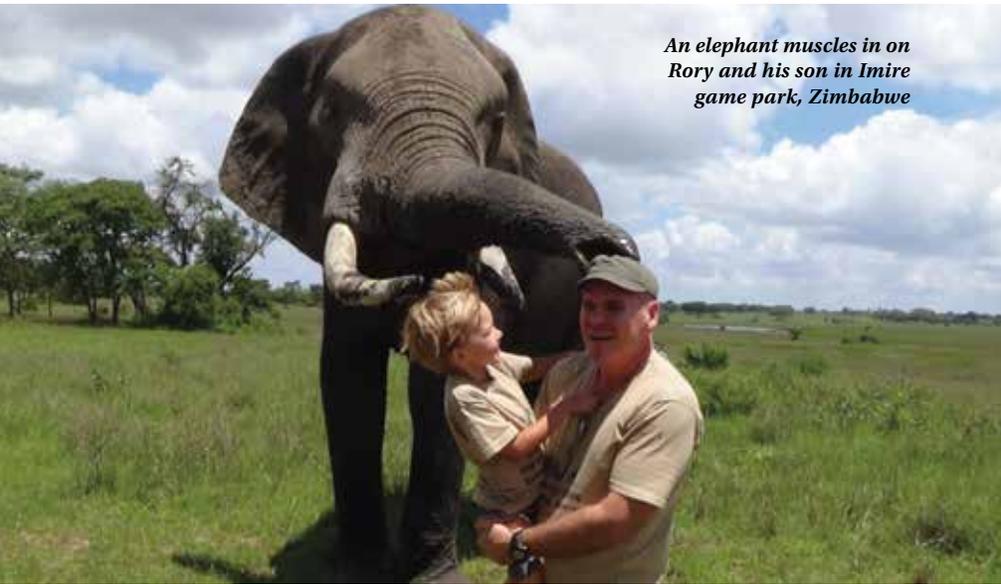
TUSK
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start making arrests, which generates further information. Then you start rounding up the network."

He adds, however, that none of this works with someone who's desperately hungry—a man running into the park, laying out a snare, catching an animal and running out again: "Throwing him in jail

is probably going to make his day, as he'll get a hot meal." Also, shooting poachers on sight, a common practice in parts of Africa, is futile. ("A dead poacher can't provide information.")

In Malawi, Rory's team convinced local leaders to help. Religious leaders preached that slaughtering wild animals for food wasn't halal and went against the teachings of Islam. Tribal chiefs started ordering their own arrests, afraid that state



An elephant muscles in on Rory and his son in Imire game park, Zimbabwe

authorities would stop bringing food relief, books and other resources into these villages if the attacks on rangers and police continued.

"The authorities in a country have to want to deal with poaching," says Rory. "Not necessarily from the goodness of their hearts—a country might just be reliant on foreign exchange or tourism and need to maintain their global image."

IN SOME COUNTRIES, however, the authorities are part of the problem. In 2014, Young was invited back to Zimbabwe by a local authority to train some of their police officers. But before he could start, he was ordered to report to the President's Office.

There, he was told by the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) bosses that he wouldn't be permitted to carry out the training.

"First they accused me of coming to Zimbabwe to train rebels. When I told them I was training their own police officers, they said I didn't have the necessary permissions."

But when Rory showed them the proofs, they got really angry. "They said, if you train anyone, or if you go into any area and are seen training anyone, we'll find a reason to arrest you and throw away the key."

Soon after this, five elephants were shot in the area, and there have been almost daily reports of elephants being killed ever since. This January,

a CIO officer was jailed for being part of a poaching gang.

"They're involved, and everybody knows it," concludes Rory. "Poachers need corrupt officials to move their goods. Corrupt officials need cash to maintain their position."

Rory soon realised that he'd have to leave Zimbabwe for good. "The CIO were visiting anyone who knew me, asking where I was, telling them they were going to arrest me because I was training rebels. You have to take a threat like that seriously."

He moved with his family to the Netherlands, where his wife Marjet has relations. He's since trained anti-poaching forces in Guinea and Malawi, but he hasn't been back to Zimbabwe. Not even when his father died last year did he feel it was safe.

ALTHOUGH HIS WORK is important, Rory believes everyone should do their bit to stop poaching, "whether it's putting some coins in a tin, writing

an article, training someone or just spreading the word". He'd also like to see all governments do more. "China has given Zimbabwe £1.4m to stop poaching, but it won't do anything about the illegal trade in its own country. The US is the second-largest importer of illegal ivory in the world. Europe does nothing much."

He's particularly angry that richer countries expect less-developed ones to handle the problem. "Poaching is a result of so many other evils—poverty, corruption, bad government, conflict, religious hatred. To fight it, African authorities need equipment, weapons and training. Sometimes the people I train don't even have boots."

But none of this has deterred Rory. "Yes, my work carries some risks and I get a lot of headaches," he admits. "But at least I can sleep at night." ■

To learn more about the work of Chengeta Wildlife, and to make a donation, go to chengetawildlife.org

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WHAT'S IN A TITLE?

"Real-life" magazines love an attention-grabbing headline, but they can sometimes go a bit too far:

"Meal Deal! I SWAPPED a bowl of pasta for a BABY"

"My DEAD boyfriend phoned me from beyond the grave"

"HORROR PRANK. Whoopee cushion killed grandma"

"My best mate's a POTATO"

"TRAPPED in a fridge—but ketchup kept me sane"

SOURCE: BUZZFEED.COM