

Soldiers join rhino war

In another life Lynn was a sniper in Afghanistan, Damien trained paramilitary forces in Iraq and John worked undercover infiltrating drug cartels in central America.



Soldiers join war against poachers in Southern Africa.

Image by: [Esa Alexander](#)

Now all three are back in action, this time fighting what they describe as a 'war' against poachers in Southern Africa as the killing of rhinos escalates into a crisis that threatens the survival of the species.

In 2008 fewer than 100 rhinos were poached in South Africa but in recent years numbers have rocketed with nearly 1,200 killed in 2015 alone.

Faced with such slaughter conservationists and government authorities have been desperately searching for ways to protect the animals - drones, tracking dogs, satellite imagery, DNA analysis, hidden cameras and even cutting horns off live animals before poachers can get to them. But the killing has continued.

Now military veterans from the US, Australia and elsewhere have been drafted to help.

"You have animals who are targeted by people using automatic weapons," said Damien Mander, a former Australian Navy special forces officer. "You cannot go to the communities and ask them nicely to stop. This is a war. We are fighting a war

out there."

Mander, who spent three years serving in Iraq, is the founder of the International Anti-Poaching Foundation, which supports anti-poaching rangers through training and promotes "direct action" to protect rhino.

"The only thing that is going to buy time for [conservation] initiatives is well-trained, well-equipped rangers who are willing to go every day and risk their lives," he said.

"I was programmed to destroy. I am now programmed to protect." Lynn Westover is putting his military background to good use by running a two-day training course on a reserve in northern Limpopo. Attended by a dozen rangers and local ranch owners, the course offers a wide range of instruction from how to disarm poachers to analysing footprints and even communicating with helicopter pilots.

Westover works for Vetpaw [Veterans Empowered to Protect African Wildlife], a New York-based group that helps former servicemen to develop new careers using their military skills.

But the so-called "green militarisation" of anti-poaching work - a term for the involvement of ex-military in conservation work - has aroused strong criticism.

Libby Lunstrum, a professor at Canada's York University who specialises in poaching, said "a lot" of young men had been shot and buried in the border area with a "devastating impact on communities who are less likely to support conservation because they see park rangers as people who are killing their loved ones".

Source: AFP

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