

Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



Episode III: K9 Patrol Puts Poachers on Notice by Tricia Berry



This was the morning to experience why we'd come to Zambia—meeting the CLZ K9 team. After breakfast, we walked with Frances, Donovan, and Peter, leader of the CLZ K9 contingent, to the kennels to meet the anti-poaching ranger team and their trained dogs. This was very personal to me as I have supported the K9 team and the building of their kennels with my donations for multiple years.

Two of the dogs were European-bred Belgian Malinois, all-black Kalo and tan and black Hammer. The other two dogs were smaller African “village dogs”, named Smoke and Skye, a brother and sister adopted some 18 months earlier from a local litter. These two young mixed-breed dogs were the focus of a pilot project I was funding to determine if village dogs could be trained for anti-poaching work.



Smoke and Dafao, members of the CLZ K9 team. Photo by Luke Katemba.

I had met a former CLZ staffer at IEF's 2019 International Elephant Conservation and Research Symposium in South Africa who mentioned that they had been training a young African village dog who wandered into camp one day to track and discriminate between scents. The training was going very well when still under a year old, it succumbed to a deadly parasite. Although I had helped sponsor Hammer, this story intrigued me. I wanted to be part of a pilot project that would

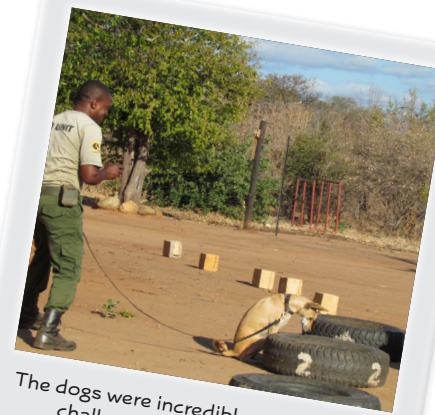
determine if village dogs could do the work of imported dogs specifically bred for security work.

If they could, the advantages would be many. First, the dogs would cost much less and were easily sourced. Also, local dogs should have a better ability to withstand the high temperatures of the region, allowing them to work longer as well as require less water and fewer rest periods. They possibly even have a higher tolerance, and perhaps a level of immunity, to trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness) if bitten by tsetse flies. Lastly, smaller village dogs are less intimidating to the canine ranger team handlers who are from the local area and are often wary of the large working dogs from Europe.

Debbie asked CLZ management if they would be interested in my funding a pilot project testing the efficacy of village dogs as members of the CLZ K9 team. They were thrilled to try. Now, 18 months later, I would get to see Smoke and Skye in action.

When we arrived at the kennels, we were welcomed by four dogs leaping at the kennel doors ready to get to work. Smoke, the male village dog, was first up demonstrating his tracking skills. One of the six K9 rangers working that day, which included one female member, had set a track earlier in the morning. This track simulated how a dog would follow the scent of poachers if the unit came across a poached animal or a vacant poachers camp while on patrol.

To set the track, one of the handlers simply walked in a random fashion from one location to the next for about a mile. The track was left untouched for a couple of hours until we arrived to watch and follow Smoke at work. Debbie is a dog tracking hobbyist working with her dogs in Texas so



The dogs were incredible at solving any challenge we threw their way!

she was eager to see these conservation dogs at work. Smoke did not disappoint. He quickly picked up the scent and worked the extremely difficult trail so fast that the gallery of people following had a hard time keeping up.

The second demo was to see each of the dog's scent detection skills. Though all the dogs are trained to track, their primary job is working security checkpoints. The dogs search for contraband transported hidden in vehicles, carried by people or in the containers of other products the vehicles are transporting. To simulate vehicle searches, I was given typical illegal items such as elephant ivory, pangolin scales, bullets, etcetera, to hide in the training area's secret spots such as tires and a block wall.

Both Hammer and Skye performed superbly finding the hidden items within seconds of being told to search. They'd sit and stare where the item was hidden to indicate to the handler that they were successful. I'm sure they were also thinking "now give me my toy as a reward" and, sure enough, each was delighted with a simple rubber Kong toy tossed to them for a job well done.

As another test example, Joe had been directed to hide a rifle maybe a quarter of a mile away from us, covering it with leaves, dirt, and smelly elephant dung. Not having watched the process, Kalo was commanded to find the rifle and quickly led the way straight to the buried gun. We could barely keep up with this determined canine. The three of us were incredibly impressed with the detection skills we had just witnessed. Debbie told the team that she was proud that IEF could sponsor this fine anti-poaching unit. The K9 ranger team seemed very pleased. They were understandably proud of their four-legged partners fighting wildlife crime.

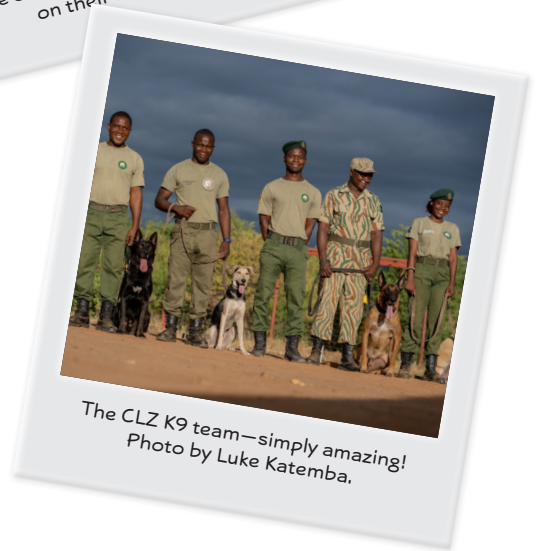
After spending the morning with them, we reluctantly said good-bye. We'd worn ourselves out trying to keep up with the dogs and their handlers and were ready for a rest. First, though, we switched our lodgings to the beautiful eight-tented Chongwe River Camp just five minutes away. As its name implies, it was perfectly situated on the banks of the Chongwe

River, a tributary that merges with the Zambezi.

As with the CLZ accommodations, you zipped yourself in the tented sleeping quarters, but enjoyed an open-air attached bathroom. We loved that, but learned that you never leave toothpaste or other interesting items out where curious baboons, birds, or even probing elephant trunks, could reach over the wall and possibly abscond with your stuff.



We struggled to keep up with the dogs on their tracking exercises.



The CLZ K9 team—simply amazing!
Photo by Luke Katemba.

Next Episode:

Searching for the Lion King

As we drove out of camp, coming straight at us was a bull elephant who clearly had decided the road was his and his alone.

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