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SUNDAY TIMES NEWS BY MATTHEW SAVIDES, 2016-03-27

Anti-poaching efforts looking up with drones



Bernet Bouwer gets ready to launch one of the drones at KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe/Imfolozi Park.
Image: JACKIE CLAUSEN

Sitting in a 4x4 panel van somewhere in the Kruger National Park, two security experts are glued to their screens, watching for any movement, object or person that might be out of place.

A R180,000 drone glides stealthily 120m above them, beaming crystal-clear images and video in real time.

As the fight against rhino poaching goes hi-tech, drones have been deployed in Kruger and in KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe/Imfolozi Park as part of a pilot project. About R16-million has been pumped into the project, which will run until the end of the year.

SANParks spokesman William Mabaso said a decision on whether the drones would become part of the park's full-time anti-poaching armoury would be made once testing had been completed.



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The drones, which use military technology, can be fitted with infrared or thermal imaging cameras for night flying. They would typically fly between 100m and 120m above the ground and are so silent that, according to UAV and Drone Solutions technical director Robert Hannaford, "we're virtually on top of you by the time you hear it".

The company's co-founder, Georges Sayegh, said there had already been some success.

"We've been placed in areas where there have been high incidents of poaching. I don't want to name the area, but after two days of us arriving there, the number of poaching incidents went from out of control to, literally, zero.

"Nobody was caught, but the bush telegraph and dissemination of information that this aircraft was in the area and operational got around very quickly.

"It quashed the problem," he said.

From the height at which the drones fly, "you can tell that there's a person on the ground. You would be able to tell that there is a firearm in somebody's hands. You can do species identification when it comes to wildlife,

and you can spot cars," said Hannaford.

When somebody is spotted, it becomes of the job of the two-man ground team to guide rangers in.

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