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Zimbabwe and Malawi using South African UAVs to combat poaching

Written by Guy Martin/Ian Nyathi, Monday, 12 September 2016



South Africa's UAV and Drone Solutions (UDS) is providing unmanned aerial vehicles to national parks in Zimbabwe and Malawi to combat wildlife poaching.

Otto Wermuller Von Elgg, director of UDS, told defenceWeb that operations started in the two countries on 1 September and that UDS is supplying unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) solutions as part of year long contracts. These are being managed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) with funding from Google.

UDS is mainly using its battery powered Bat Hawk UAV, which can stay aloft for 2.5 hours and uses a thermal imaging camera to spot poachers, but the company also provides multirotor UAVs for animal monitoring, mapping

etc. Von Elgg said that as many UAVs as needed are supplied, but typically between two and five are deployed.

In Zimbabwe, the UAVs have been deployed to Hwange National Park, to combat elephant as well as other wildlife poaching. Von Elgg said Hwange is very dry, so animals congregate around water holes, making them vulnerable to poachers, especially those that poison the water holes with cyanide. As a result, UDS is also supplying cyanide testing kits to the Park.

UDS is also supplying its services to Liwonde National Park in Malawi and is conducting anti-poaching operations as well as monitoring the interaction between elements and the human population in the region.

Prince Mupazviriho, the permanent secretary in Zimbabwe's Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate said recently that the UAVs were part of "the direction we are taking to make sure that our surveillance and response to poaching improves."

"They will significantly transform our anti-poaching activities that have always relied on foot patrols. With drones we will be able to conduct real-time surveillance and you will not know who we are monitoring and where.

This will deter poachers because they will not know where we are and who we are monitoring."

Zimbabwe has, in recent years, battled poachers who mainly target high-value game including elephants, lions and rhino.

Illegal commercial hunters often use guns but since 2013, they appear to have turned to more silent but mass killing poaching methods - they are poisoning salt licks and water points in game parks with cyanide, which kills animals within hours of their drinking poisoned water. They are also using chemical tranquillisers, guns equipped with silencers, night vision equipment and small aircraft.

In Hwange National Park, the country's biggest, poachers killed 62 elephants from September to November last year through cyanide poisoning, according to statistics from the Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate.

Between 2013 and 2015, 235 elephants died of cyanide poisoning in and outside the parks estates countrywide. A total of 9,487 locals were arrested for poaching and other wildlife offences from 2011 to 2015, the official statistics say.

The Lowveld Rhino Trust reported recently that at least 50 rhinos were poached last year, up from 20 in 2014.

Mupazviriho said: "Our response time is going to be much shorter now with the new equipment. In terms of capacity building, we started training key staff a long time ago and they are almost ready for the rollout. However, the effectiveness of the drones will depend on other supporting responses. We have been doing a lot of arrests which, we feel have helped in accounting for criminals and deterring those considering committing the same. Now we want to

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UAV

build capacity to prevent poaching. With the new surveillance tools and mechanisms already in place, we can be able to do that better."

Cephas Mudenda, a board member of the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) recently told a committee of parliament the agency had bought UAVs as well as sniffer dogs from South Africa. The organisation is working to increase the number of its game wardens from about 2,000 employees, to 3,200.

Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri, the Minister of Environment, Water and Climate told a local Zimbabwean daily, The Chronicle that some of the poaching was being done by wardens who had, until August 31, gone for between six months and five years unpaid.

"We are running battles with poachers on a daily basis and it's beyond doubt that in some cases, it is our very own hungry employees in the poaching escapades," she was quoted in the paper on August 29. "Therefore, we saw it fit to immediately make means of paying up what is owed. While our rangers were deployed into the bushes, their families were struggling to sustain a living with many of them having their children being scattered all over communities."

Other measures being planned to improve staff morale include building clinics, schools and roads in parks. Provision of electricity, service vehicles and piped water would be prioritised as well, she said.

But Mupazviriho said the fact that Zimbabwe has an overpopulation of elephants - about 82 000 individuals against the ideal 45 000 - shows that existing anti-poaching activities are working.

"We have the second largest population in range countries. You can't have this overpopulation if poaching was as rampant as some want to portray. This shows that the systems that are there are effective," he said.

UDS has previously flown its UAVs to combat poaching in the Kruger National Park, and is flying them in KwaZulu-Natal. The six week long Kruger deployment was in conjunction with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. SANParks spent a year evaluating UAVs in the Kruger and has drafted a report detailing their use, which will be released soon. Depending on the findings, it may recommend the permanent deployment of UAVs there.

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