By some estimates, an average of 96 African elephants are slaughtered each day for the ivory trade. At the current rate of poaching an ancient species will be gone within a decade, two at most. Dogs are helping to catch the bad guys.

By Erika Mansourian
Amboseli National Park in Kenya, a pristine and treasured location for his books. Amboseli is a crucial ecosystem, with the most spectacular remaining population of elephants, but for rhinos, lions, giraffes, zebras, gazelles—with virtually no effective protection for them or their habitat, he knew anger and passivity wouldn’t change anything. He got angry and active. With his friend Richard Bonham, a renowned Kenyan conservationist, Brandt created Big Life Foundation. It became obvious that a trans-border anti-poaching operation was needed, with teams of rangers in Kenya and Tanzania working in close collaboration, to track and apprehend poachers crossing the border. The few existing rangers worked mostly on foot, with no vehicles to patrol and give chase, and without basic equipment such as cameras, GPS, or even radios. Mobility. Communication. Support. Little would be accomplished without them.

Twelve anti-poaching outposts, nine pa-
trol vessels, 85 rangers, and a Microlight plane later, Big Life was up and running. Within three months they had their first major coup, splintering the worst of the three main poaching gangs operating along the Kenya-Tanzania border. And then came Rocky and Jerry.

Shooting Photos, Finding Shooters

In July 2010, photographer Nick Brandt returned to Amboseli National Park in Kenya, a pristine and treasured location for his books. Amboseli is a crucial ecosystem, with the most spectacular remaining population of elephants to be seen in East Africa. Over the previous eight years, Brandt had spent months at a time photographing the iconic animals there, and had come to know them and their habits intimately.

But what he witnessed on that trip was a chilling and new experience. In the past, Brandt could approach the relaxed elephants as they quietly made their daily rounds. This time they ran in terrified panic when his vehicle came within half a mile.

It was also on this trip that Brandt discovered that a 40-year-old bull elephant, Igor, had been killed. So had Marrianna, the matriarch upon whose knowledge and authority her herd relied. As Brandt saw devastation unfolding—not just for elephants, but for rhinos, lions, giraffes, zebras, gazelles—with virtually no effective protection for them or their habitat, he knew anger and passivity wouldn’t change anything. He got angry and active. With his friend Richard Bonham, a renowned Kenyan conservationist, Brandt created Big Life Foundation.

Interspecies Assistance

The catalogue of ways dogs serve people is as varied as it is long. But it’s not often that dogs come to the aid of the matriarch upon whose knowledge and authority her herd relied. As Brandt saw devastation unfolding—not just for elephants, but for rhinos, lions, giraffes, zebras, gazelles—with virtually no effective protection for them or their habitat, he knew anger and passivity wouldn’t change anything. He got angry and active. With his friend Richard Bonham, a renowned Kenyan conservationist, Brandt created Big Life Foundation.

Mutinda:

From poacher to ace ranger and dog handler

He left a trail of butchered animal carcasses in his wake. Sometimes he left a note, taunting his pursuers. When Big Life received information that Mutinda was trying to sell a rhino horn, two elephant tusks, and six leopard skins, they worked with the Kenya Wildlife Service to set up a sting, and quickly had all the evidence needed to lock him up. But Mutinda again slipped from justice. When he was brought to court, the contraband had been “misplaced” at the police station. Mutinda returned to his small village on the edge of the Chyulu Hills.

“We thought, if we can’t beat him, let’s get him to join us,” says Richard Bonham, Big Life co-founder and Director of Operations in Africa. Bonham wrote to Mutinda, with money enclosed, suggesting they meet at a bar on the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. After waiting for over an hour, Bonham was getting up to leave, when a man with an open, smiling face held out his hand. “I am Mutinda.” After a few tongue-loosening beers, Mutinda boasted about his trophies, but also admitted that with little formal education he didn’t know how else to support his family. Bonham spoke to him passionately about Big Life’s mission, and how Mutinda’s cultural heritage was at stake. The lure of a steady paycheck and the status of a game ranger’s uniform also didn’t hurt, convincing Mutinda to change sides. He has become one of the most reliable and trustworthy game scouts Big Life has, bringing with him a trove of bush knowledge that has led to successful ambushes. Mutinda is no longer killing his way through his homeland, and he has become directly responsible for stopping others. The real long-term benefit, however, may be the example he sets to his old poaching fraternity that there is a better way to prosper.
As with her purebred co-workers, when Didi’s harness goes on she knows it’s time to get busy. She goes out twice a day, tracking a scent laid by a “poacher” who has hidden in the bush. The team varies the length of time between laying and tracking the scent; she needs challenges to stay sharp. Says Leyian: “When we are on the track we can switch off our minds; Didi is our eyes and we trust her. She will take us where we want to go.”

Didi has already brought in six wildlife poachers, as well as finding two lost community members, one of them a small child. “She has to work harder than the so-called professional dogs, but once she learns something she never forgets it,” says Big Life intern Jeremy Goss.

Nose On the Prize
After hearing about Big Life’s dogs, the Chief Park Warden of Tarengire National Park called for their support: An elephant had been shot and the park terrain made it difficult to follow the tracks. The dog team was coming from West Kilimanjaro, so they didn’t arrive until late afternoon. They set off on the trail, which wound in and out of the park, through the village and back again. The scent was lost when a large herd of cattle crossed the path of the poachers’ tracks. It was getting dark and rest was needed.

The next morning the dogs set off again, but with a new strategy: They would pass by every village and, through a process of elimination, reduce the possible options.

In each village, young men were lined up and Rocky and Jerry gently “interrogated” them via scenting, one by one. When they began their sweep of the town of Makuyuni, they were able to pick up the scent again, then the tracks disappeared once more. They were still able to determine that the poachers had boarded a car at a certain spot, so the pursuit heated up. Within half an hour, a vehicle was intercepted with three men not from the area. The dogs were called in for another line-up. Rocky picked out both men, then wouldn’t leave them—he knew they meant he’d get his reward.

Failure is Not an Option
With an increase of missions to game reserves and conservation areas, Big Life plans to expand its use of tracker dogs, and a new dog post will be developed in the Manyara area, allowing the dog unit to cover community conservation areas and national parks within this area. Tanzania’s Director of Wildlife visited the dog unit in March 2013 and indicated that the Serengeti National Park and other areas also needed the support of the dogs. Big Life now has more than 300 rangers and 31 outposts. The organization plans to move the dogs to a centralized location in the Tarengire-Manyara ecosystem, where they can more easily access remote areas where poaching is running amok.

World leaders have begun to recognize the crisis. President Obama earmarked $10 million dollars to investigate solutions, Princess Charles and William hosted the London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade in February, and the Clinton Global Initiative is lending support. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world.”

Sobering Facts
In 1980, roughly 1.2 million elephants roamed Africa. Today, fewer than 400,000 remain, and their numbers continue to plummet. Illegal wildlife trafficking is the fourth largest transnational crime, and poachers are sophisticated and heavily armed. Ivory—sometimes called “the white gold of jihad”—helps fund the operations of notorious terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab and the Lord’s Resistance Army. The explosive economic growth of the Chinese middle class has brought with it an insatiable appetite for the coveted status symbol, which can sell for $2,000 a pound on the black market. Perhaps saddest of all is that ivory ends up as trinkets and decorative objects. The U.S. also bears a heavy burden: We are the second largest consumer. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Wildlife trafficking has serious implications for the security and prosperity of people around the world.”

“The Dog Unit shows how a small, well-disciplined team can have a big impact on poaching,” says Tanzania Project Manager Damian Bell. “New technology is critical, but sometimes it pales in comparison to the amazing tools provided by nature. It is needed now more than ever in Tanzania.”

We know our smart, soulful dogs are emotionally complex and sensitive, with a remarkable capacity for empathy. These qualities are amplified in the noble—and quite literally—women, particularly of high-value species like elephant and rhino, who are becoming more and more skillful at evading capture. Intercepting them is the ultimate objective, but often it comes down to the chase.

For more about the work of Big Life, visit biglife.org.