



The illegal trafficking of wildlife and dead-animal products is the third largest criminal industry in the world.

But, according to two Aussies intimately involved, for every one organisation dedicated to animal protection across the World, there are 738 organisations, set up for the benefit or advancement of the human species.

Where is our focus, they ask?

**Raw for
Africa**

**Military skills
applied in new fight**

Numerous wildlife species become extinct every year with hundreds more joining the endangered list. Yet, illegal animal-exploitation industries, largely driven by international organised crime syndicates, continue to flourish. And human encroachment into wildlife areas also puts increasing pressure on natural habitats.

Volatile economies, relaxed laws, a lack of international awareness and self-absorbed indifference are also major assisting factors in the slaughter and extermination of countless animals every year.

While some political and celebrity-driven popular pressure is applied from the top, a real war rages on the ground. Heavily armed poachers dominate large areas with complete disregard for anything – or anybody – in their path. And any breakdown or weakness in anti-poaching coverage usually sees a rapid depletion in vulnerable species.

Unfortunately, another compounding factor is that many targeted species live in politically unstable or impoverished regions of the World where there are little or no resources available or applied to counteract the threat.

There has never been a more desperate need for action.

At the forefront of the battle are two former Royal Australian Navy clearance divers and commandos – Damien Mander and Steve Dean.

Not content to sit by and watch – nor to just chuck a few dollars in a collection tin – these two Aussie heroes moved, lock, stock and two smoking barrels, to Africa, rolled up their sleeves and got stuck in to the problem the best way they knew how.

Applying their considerable training, experience and talents as military men, they have set about challenging the bad guys head on, recruiting their own small army of locals, armed and trained to fight for animal rights.

Damien Mander, who spent three years training Iraqi police after a career as an Australian Navy clearance diver and a commando says that at the current rate of poaching, particularly that of rhino horn and elephant ivory, the existence of these magnificent species cannot be sustained for any more than about 10 years.

"I had heard about the issue of rhino poaching in South Africa, but I didn't realise that the situation was statistically worse in Zimbabwe," he says.

"Areas once heavily populated with animals are now barren land, void of the wildlife and vegetation that once flourished there.

Senseless slaughter

IAPF has now branched into South Africa, the continents capital for rhino-poaching syndicates.

Last year alone, more than 330 slaughtered rhino carcasses were found, with many more believed to be undiscovered.

The poaching of rhino is driven by a handful of crime syndicates out of Asia where horns are used in thousands of medicinal potions – most notably as an aphrodisiac – despite scientific proof that it has no medicinal qualities.

With an average rhino horn fetching in the range of \$100,000 on the black market (and there is no other market for it, since it is completely illegal), the incentive for the poachers is huge.

Damien Mander's philosophy and effort is aimed at tipping the balance of the risk-versus-reward equation to make it more risky for the poacher.

At least in this he is on the ground doing something positive and effective, instead of pontificating from the luxury and safety of a capital-city office chair.



Damien Mander 'at home' in Zimbabwe



Thanks for the memories

Damien Mander served as a clearance diver with the Royal Australian Navy before transferring to a special-operations unit in the Australian Army where he served as a maritime-qualified sniper.

Following completion of his military service, he was employed by a private military organisation tasked with retraining future Iraqi police.

Damien eventually advanced to project manager, overseeing daily operations of the Iraq Special Police Training Academy in Baghdad.

He returned home to Australia in 2008 after three years in Iraq but soon had itchy feet again.

Arriving in Africa at the beginning of 2009, his intention was always to apply his background skills to wildlife protection and conservation.

After travelling the southern half of the continent, he eventually came to rest in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

Incensed by the lack of resources made available to combat the senseless decimation of wildlife through poaching, Damien founded the International Anti Poaching Foundation, designed to counteract the bloodshed through assertive action and specialist training.

But even for this hard-ass warrior with combat experience, Africa can throw up an experience or two that, while soul-searching at the time, are now embarrassing [entertaining] in the telling.

"My most memorable – actually, let's reword that – the incident I'd most like to forget since I got here was one day after we had arrested a rhino poacher at gunpoint.

"This guy had been attacked by elephants and separated from his patrol the night before we found him, so he was actually happy to see us. Anyway, we took him back to base and held him for questioning for the day, and he gave us some quite useful intel.

"That night, we had the poaching team's ingress point heavily covered with four guns forward.

"There was a full moon and we were all pumped and looking over our foresights, ready to get on with the job.

"It would be safe to say we developed tunnel vision in anticipation and our 360 awareness had gone out the window.

"After a few hours we all heard a deep, deep groan right behind us and turned around to see four lions just a few metres away.

"Naturally, growing up in the Aussie bush with nothing bigger than koolas and possums to worry about, I shat myself – properly.

"I flicked the safety off and put a round over their heads at close range – while almost simultaneously trying to scamper up a tree.

"It will take a while for the local boys on my patrol that night to forget the speed at which I climbed that tree – and a while for them to stop laughing about it!

"Needless to say our cover was blown, but we eventually did a raid on a house in town at 0300 and arrested the remainder of the crew."

I saw there was a desperate need to establish and maintain a presence on the ground in regions susceptible to poaching. Only through maintaining an assertive authority can we hope to protect what is left until the required resources are made available and alternate methods of protecting these beautiful animals is established.

"In the past, anti poaching methods have proven to be highly successful, but only when maintained through sufficient funding, the correct application of available resources and commitment on the ground."

And that – through one man's passion – is how and why the International Anti Poaching Foundation was born.

IAPF is a non-profit organisation set up when Damien liquidated all his assets in Australia and made the all-or-nothing commitment to Africa.

Damien's and IAPF's mission is to protect and preserve wildlife in volatile regions – starting in, but not limited to Africa.

Set up in early 2009 and registered in Zimbabwe, Australia and South Africa, IAPF is focused on training anti-poaching units to combat the unacceptable and unsustainable slaughter of wildlife.

Of course, someone with Damien's background can't just arrive in Africa with a fist full of dollars and a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"We are supported by the local authorities in Africa. We can't do anything in any country without these initial relationships," he says.

"And, while there is an official 'shoot-on-sight' policy for armed poachers in most of sub-Saharan Africa, we are not blood-thirsty mercenaries. We teach correct use of force on our courses so the guys are much more disciplined when it comes to the crunch.

"That said, though, commercial poachers are armed poachers. They are in it for the money – and there is very big money to be made. But they are armed and prepared to shoot anything or anyone that gets in their way.

"So, they hunt rhino for their horns, elephant for their tusks – and rangers because they are an obstacle to a big pay day.

"So our guys have to be well trained, disciplined and fully committed to the cause.

"Commitment and motivation is hardly an issue, though. The poachers are widely hated in the community.

"When we arrested five rhino poachers in June last year it was front-page news in the national paper."