

ANTI-POACHING BATHAWK TAKES TO THE SKIES

July 2013 - In response to the wildlife poaching crisis in South Africa, a joint initiative between the Southern African Wildlife College and the Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) gave rise to the Wildlife Guardianship Programme. This programme is designed primarily around the training of field rangers given that they are the custodians of our protected areas and are more often than not the first line of defence when it comes to protecting our wildlife.

With the assistance of the Liberty Wildlife Fund (LWF), who was approached by the SAWC and the GRAA to fund the Wildlife Guardian Programme, more than 450 rangers across various national and provincial parks, reserves and community areas have been trained through this initiative. The impact that these men and women are having on the ground is gradually being felt.

The callous exploitation of Africa's wildlife is however increasing as is the need to fight the poaching scourge. In 2012 Limpopo Parks approached the SAWC as a partner to help them address the training and anti-poaching needs of the province. In helping to address these needs, the College once again approached the Liberty Wildlife Fund to assist with the training of 100 rangers and to assist with aerial surveillance in the fight against rhino poaching.

Thanks to the generosity of the Liberty Wildlife Fund, the newly acquired bathawk, based in Hoedspruit, has proved to be a remarkable little aircraft which is having a tremendous impact on the monitoring capability of Limpopo Parks and other Reserves who do not have an aircraft at their disposal. The use of the bathawk and the 200 hours aerial surveillance also sponsored by the Liberty Wildlife Fund will be co-ordinated by the SAWC and conducted by qualified pilots working in association with the SAWC, under Airborne African Adventures (AAA) who conduct the anti-poaching aerial patrols.

According to Bruce McDonald from AAA, the six hour fuel endurance of the Bathawk is essential for surveillance and hot operation pursuits in conservation. "Visibility from the aircraft compares to that of a helicopter but with the added benefit of running at the fraction of the cost. The quiet noise operation of the Bantam makes it attractive to reserves and National Parks. The aircraft can land and get airborne in less than 100m and its manoeuvrability is phenomenal" he said.

The cost of flights is based on a pilot, fuel and maintenance basis and, as a result of the aircraft already having been purchased for the Wildlife Guardianship Programme, is available for use at rates well below the commercial rate.

"Our sincere thanks is extended to the Liberty Wildlife Fund for their valued support of the Wildlife Guardian Programme. The College is very excited to also now have an aerial surveillance capability which is particularly relevant when one considers the extent of the reserves and the need to closely monitor what is happening on the ground," said SAWC CEO and bathawk pilot, Theresa Sowry.

