



22 September 2016

BREAKING NEW GROUND IN THE FIGHT AGAINST RHINO HORN AND IVORY SMUGGLERS

Start

This World Rhino Day, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is breaking new ground in the fight against rhino horn and ivory smugglers. The EWT's expert wildlife sniffer dogs, Belgian Malinois Renaldo and German Shepherd Condor, have honed their skills in detecting rhino horn and ivory in the cargo warehouses at OR Tambo International Airport over the past two years. However, for the past few months, they have upped their game as they have been trained to detect rhino horn and ivory using the MECHEM Explosive and Drug Detection System, or MEDDS (also known as the REST or RASCargO), which Kirsty Brebner, EWT Rhino Project Manager, describes as a whole new ball game.



Kirsty Brebner (EWT Rhino Project Manager), Nick van Loggerenberg (Afri Guard Training Manager) and Beny van Zyl (Afri Guard PEDD Handler) with Condor.

Conventional detection dogs physically sniff the target, be it inside suitcases, packages, vehicles or whatever other medium is being used to transport and hide the contraband. MEDDS technology, on the other hand, uses a remote detection system whereby air from the

container of interest is drawn *in situ* by a vacuum pump onto a special filter which is then presented to the dogs in a specially set up clean room.

This method was originally developed, and has been very successfully used, in the high volume cargo market, particularly where it is difficult for conventional detection dogs to work, such as shipping ports. However, it has mainly been used to detect relatively volatile substances such as explosives and drugs which are likely to emit a relatively large number of volatile organic compounds into the air compared to comparatively inert substances such as rhino horn and ivory.

The MEDDS method comes with considerable additional costs for items such as the filters, as well as trained personnel. It has never been rigorously tested on these more inert substances in real life situations. The trial that the EWT has been running, along with Afri Guard dog handlers and trainers, is designed to change that, and to provide answers for once and for all as to whether MEDDS technology is an option for detecting rhino horn and ivory in shipping ports, which present a challenging environment for law enforcement.

Nick van Loggerenberg, Afri Guard Training Manager says: “Training of the dogs has gone really smoothly, as they are already imprinted on the rhino horn and ivory. We trained them using the MEDDS system, and experimented on extraction times, the climatic variations, and different containers and boxes. We have extracted the samples and presented them to the dogs as much as two days later, and the dogs readily found the positive, proving that the method is working properly. We’re very excited by how well Renaldo and Condor, who are used to fast paced work, are searching!”



Renaldo eager to get started.



Renaldo and Condor easily find the positive during training.

These two heroic dogs will soon be sent to an undisclosed port location to put their training into practice as part of this critical trial that, if successful, will provide another vital tool to tackle the smuggling of wildlife contraband in previously inaccessible locations.

This work is made possible by the support of Afri Guard, TRAFFIC, Royal Canin, Hollard Pet Insurance, and Relate.

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