



16 November 2016

Start

### Unlikely heroes – rats to the rescue?

African Giant Pouched Rats (*Cricetomys ansorgei*) are well-known to be able to successfully detect landmines and tuberculosis, but can that success be extended to helping in the fight against wildlife crime? The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is about to find out!

The EWT is embarking on an exciting new trial, in partnership with Tanzanian based APOPO, and funded by US Fish and Wildlife Services, to determine whether these special rodents can help detect illegal shipments of pangolin skin and scales, with pangolins being the most widely trafficked mammals in the world; and hardwood timber in shipping containers. Kirsty Brebner of the EWT's Wildlife in Trade Programme, who is heading up the project, explains: "The African Giant Pouched Rats' keen sense of smell will, during this 'proof of concept' phase, first be assessed in a laboratory environment to see whether they are able to discriminate between the target substances and a wide variety of other control substances. During this initial phase, an appropriate indication mechanism will also be developed and the best operational option for the rats to detect hardwoods and pangolins in containers will be assessed."



Currently, contraband, particularly when smuggled in large volumes, is often transported from Africa in shipping containers. This presents a particularly challenging environment for law enforcement officials at ports. The sheer volume of cargo going through ports makes scanning every container using X-ray scanners virtually impossible, and X-ray techniques are unable to differentiate between different types of organic material. Dogs have been successfully used to detect wildlife contraband, and have been used for shipping containers. However, the fact that shipping containers are sealed, and only provide limited scent to the dogs, creates a challenging environment for detection. The use of a remote air sampling system, where air from a container is sucked onto a filter which is then presented to a dog to determine if contraband is present, has been used successfully. This exciting new trial by the EWT builds on the use of scent detection by dogs, but will take advantage of the rats' added agility



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and ability to access the container vents, which would provide the most air from the container, and potentially the most scent. Alternatively, the rats will detect scents sampled onto a filter through the vents. The testing of these two options forms part of the initial trial.

Should this 'proof of concept' prove successful, it would have a major impact on illegal wildlife trafficking. These unlikely heroes could then be further trained to potentially search for other widely trafficked species such as elephant ivory and rhino horn.

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