



Above: Anti-Poaching Unit (APU) tactical vest

NIGHT TIME TRACKING OF POACHERS

THE AFRICAN CONSERVATION TRUST'S SHEELAGH ANTROBUS AND MICAH VAN SCHALKWYK SPENT FIVE DAYS WITH ANTI-POACHING UNITS. THEY SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE ON THE FRONT LINE, INCLUDING BEING PRESENT AS A RHINO WAS HUNTED BY POACHERS. FOR SECURITY REASONS, RESERVES VISITED ARE NOT IDENTIFIED.

CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT, WE WALKED UP A DARK HILL DEEP IN A NORTHERN KWAZULU-NATAL GAME RESERVE, WITH THE RESERVE'S ANTI-POACHING UNIT (APU) MANAGER. Eyes adjusting, the moon shining pale yellow in a star-filled sky, we tried to walk silently, our untrained feet stumbling on uneven ground as we skirted bushes. Our ears strained for sounds, hoping not to hear a startled grunt from a black rhino.

Reaching the top, we followed the APU manager into the deeper shadow of a tree, overlooking a valley that swept up to a line of hills on the other side of the reserve's boundary fence. This was an

observation post and in the soft light of the moon, the African bush came alive and we began to really see.

We were here to learn more about the anti-poaching work we supported during 2011, and will be doing again in 2012 through an even bigger Skydive for Rhinos campaign. Our midnight excursion was to understand what it's like to be an APU member on duty at night, alone and surrounded by wildlife, observing the after-dark activities.

The APU manager pointed out faint patches of paler light on the hillside opposite us, a good 3 km away. These were the painted walls of kraals and we were amazed at how much could be seen in darkness. We now understood how far the light of a cell phone screen could carry at night. He showed us how spotters on hilltops could watch the movements of the APU teams, and use cell phones to warn poachers when they were being tracked.

As the night breathed around us, our ears picked out the sounds of dogs

barking and faint human voices drifting on the wind. We were also on guard for sounds closer to us – ears alert for the faintest rustle or grunt that could signal danger from rhino, snake, scorpion or leopard.

A Bush War Unfolding

Two hours we spent up there, listening and seeing game reserves and anti-poaching in a new light. Their work is eerily similar to a bush war. Poachers have many faces: from 'bush meat' poachers who use snares and dogs against warthog and buck, to trained poachers who, with high calibre rifles and killer instincts, invade reserves after the most lucrative of prizes – the rhino.

Some reserves are targeted by poachers from Mozambique who infiltrate a community for a few days, before beating a fast retreat back across the border. Other reserves are under constant threat from paramilitary-trained cadres living in nearby communities with criminal