

Combatting Wildlife Crime



Environmental crime is the fourth largest crime globally after drugs, counterfeiting, and human trafficking. Criminal wildlife trafficking syndicates are proficient at avoiding detection by using various modes of transport across many different borders. Years can pass between the time an animal was poached and when the wildlife products are seized. It can be challenging to determine the species, geographic origin, etc., especially if the product has been tooled into jewelry or ornaments over that time, minimizing the probability of a successful prosecution.

To address this, VFWT concentrates on the following efforts: 1) our *Wildlife Disease and Forensic Laboratory*, 2) training wildlife investigators and police on *Wildlife Crime Scene Investigation* (WCSI), and 3) training *First Responding Rangers* on wildlife diseases and poisonings.

Our *Wildlife Disease and Forensic Laboratory* is the only one in all of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA)¹, is registered with the Zimbabwe Veterinary Council, and is part of the African Wildlife Forensics Network of labs using robust scientific analysis to improve apprehension and prosecution of wildlife traffickers. Our staff is renowned for our experience in dealing with wildlife crime scenes, and our wildlife veterinarian Dr. Chris Foggin is a distinguished pathologist.

Our Wildlife Disease and Forensics Lab elevates our abilities to combat wildlife crime by successfully prosecuting poachers and is also crucial in preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases. Our pathology and forensic work also help identify which toxins are involved in the malicious poisoning of wildlife. We investigate cases in and around Victoria Falls and receive samples from suspected poisonings throughout the KAZA TFCA. Toxin identification is also important when cleaning a crime scene; we must determine which toxin was used to neutralize it. It's also helpful for treating wildlife that's been poisoned.

Functions of the laboratory include serology, haematology, biochemistry, parasitology, molecular biology (with a state-of-the-art PCR machine), histology, and pathology. The laboratory is also developing toxicology testing. We're able to distinguish game meat from livestock, warthog tusks from elephant ivory, and the geographic origin of wildlife products for some species, all of which help provide robust evidence in addition to intelligence and morphology for successful prosecutions.

There is a need for well-trained wildlife staff and first responders within Zimbabwe's wildlife authorities, police, and NGO anti-poaching staff. Access to training, forensic supplies, evidence collection, and crime scene processing is limited throughout southern Africa.



¹ KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area includes Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Botswana and Angola and is the largest transfrontier conservation area in the world covering more than 520,000km²

Executive Director of VFWT Jessica Dawson and our Chief Wildlife Veterinarian, Dr. Chris Foggin, train wildlife investigations officers and police throughout Africa to distinguish between a crime and natural mortality. Together, they've trained more than 200 first responder wildlife rangers in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Angola, and Zambia.

We offer two courses to first responders. The first is a three-day *Diseases and Poisonings* course, which includes distinguishing a wildlife crime scene from a natural cause of death and then photographing and securing it. Each participant receives printed information on every disease, along with instructions and protocols for securing a wildlife crime scene. They're given an anthrax kit, and the senior ranger for each station has a cyanide field testing kit. Each attendee receives a course certification.

The second class is primarily for senior investigators and police. It is a six-day deeper dive into wildlife crime scene investigation taught by a team of trained people from the African Wildlife Forensics Network. It includes theory and practicals and culminates with participants handling a mock wildlife crime scene, collecting and processing the evidence.

They learn how to collect evidence, photograph and map a crime scene, lift fingerprints, document chain of custody. Participants are introduced to each country's capacity for testing various types of evidence. Each participant receives the standardized AWFN WCSI² manual as a future reference source, basic supplies for investigations, and course certification.

Conservation Education



Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust (VFWT) believes local and rural communities play a vital role in conservation. Without healthy and functioning societies, conservation achievements will not be sustainable. We're just putting a band-aid on the problem. Therefore, it is part of VFWT's mission to support and advance the education and empowerment of local people in the sustainable utilization of indigenous resources and wildlife conservation.

VFWT hosts 800-1,000 local and rural school children each year in our **weekly on-site Education Program**. The students visit our Education and Interpretative Centre, Wildlife High Care and Rehabilitation Centre, the Wildlife Disease and Forensics Laboratory and interact with our ambassador animals. Over a hot lunch, we discuss the tragic indiscriminate and cruel consequences of poaching, how to reduce human-wildlife conflict, and how wildlife trafficking is responsible for the decimation of many endangered and iconic species in Africa. We also talk about the role of tourism in wildlife conservation and its promising livelihood prospects to inspire interest in careers in eco-tourism and conservation. Every child takes home a booklet on conservation that reinforces the information they learned in their weekly activity. They're encouraged to share their learned knowledge and stories with other family members.



² African Wildlife Forensics Network's Wildlife Crime Scene Investigation

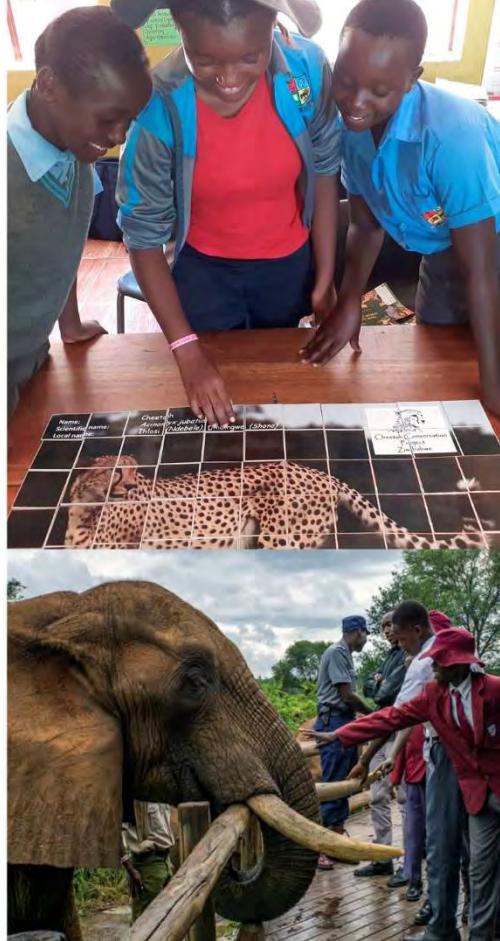
Remarkably, most rural children living alongside wildlife have only ever seen it in conflict situations - when an elephant is raiding their family's crops, or lions are killing their livestock. Explaining the ecological, emotional, and economic benefits of wildlife to children is an essential aspect of this activity. The use of ambassador animals is a powerful educational tool that provides various benefits when conveying cognitive and emotional messages about conservation and wildlife.

The Trust also provides *Eco-Clubs as an elective after-school program*. Before COVID, five schools participated in this program designed for children interested in environmental issues and our natural world. Our goal is to re-open Eco-clubs in 2022, continue to provide the vision and plans for the club and elevate its visibility within the region. Each club designates a teacher (or leader), and The Trust provides that person with a curriculum and materials that create fun, engaging experiments and activities that steward students' appreciation for wildlife and natural sciences, pointing them in the direction of a career in wildlife, botany, etc. Because it is no longer possible to look at food, livelihoods, and natural resource management separately from our natural world, we're trying to inspire a willingness for the students to apply ecological principles to agricultural production.

Activities or lessons include bird, mammal, and reptile identification and biology, ecological processes, sustainable agriculture and use of natural resources, and ways in which to coexist with wildlife. We use a variety of books, puzzles, field guides, handouts, art supplies, and technology when available.

VFWT employs a full-time *Conservation Officer* who augments the weekly program with a Whatsapp video check-in with each classroom and physically visits each school after interaction activities. This is to support the conservation information that the children received, answer any questions they may have as they digest the information, inventory and replace supplies, and help steward the overall success and sustainability of the program.

Our goal in 2022 is to increase the number of school children who can participate in our on-site Friday educational program to 1,500 to compensate for the two years lost due to COVID. Your support will inspire rural children to proudly embrace the benefits of their iconic natural heritage and recognize there are solutions to the challenges people face who live with wildlife. Your support will help cultivate eco-tourism and wildlife career interests, which will provide communities with a sustainable income in the long term while looking after our natural resources.



Rocket Stoves



Zimbabwe's Forestry Commission and EnviroWatch conservatively estimate that more than two tons of wood is being illegally collected per day from Victoria Falls' forests, primarily for cooking. This has been exacerbated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the large unemployment rate, people in the high-density areas are just not able to either afford electricity if they even have access to it.

Traditionally, women bear the burden of wood collection and cooking, which limits their ability to generate income for the family as they have to venture farther and farther to collect wood. Indoor cooking with wood charcoal, prominent throughout Africa, is a significant contributor to respiratory health problems, and women also bear the brunt of associated diseases.

Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust is partnering with Harare-based *My Trees* to supply Victoria Falls' high-density areas with 2100 rocket stoves that reduce solid fuels by more than 66% by efficiently using primarily twigs and brush while reducing the wood smoke produced. This is a significant reduction in timber extraction from our forests and each stove saves 5-6 tons carbon per year. The lifespan of each stove is approximately ten years and *My Trees* would train someone in Victoria Falls to maintain the stoves.

Each rocket stove has established carbon credits financed through investment portfolios tailored specifically to capitalize on the unique carbon sequestering opportunities in Zimbabwe. Income through these carbon credits will be distributed amongst VFWT, *My Trees*, and the carbon accrediting agency, which will help grow and fund this project in perpetuity.

Our priority is to supply the households within Victoria Falls that do not have electricity and support installation and training on how to operate. Since this is a new project, we will meet with participants to discuss challenges, suggestions, and feedback, and will monitor the fuel effectiveness and wood collection rates, and other resulting livelihood improvements. The program will also be auditing changes to CO₂ emissions throughout.



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