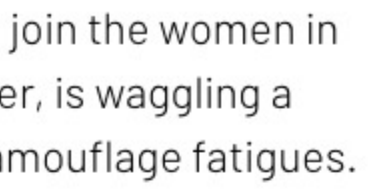
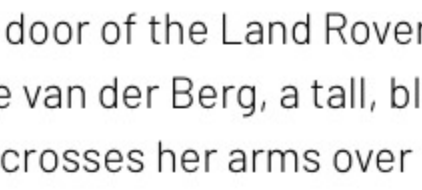




MEET THE BLACK MAMBAS: SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST MAJORITY-FEMALE ANTI-POACHING UNIT



*South Africa is in the middle of a poaching crisis. But the **Black Mambas**, the country's first majority-female anti-poaching unit, is making inroads at a local level. Georgia Stephens travels to meet them in Balule Nature Reserve.*

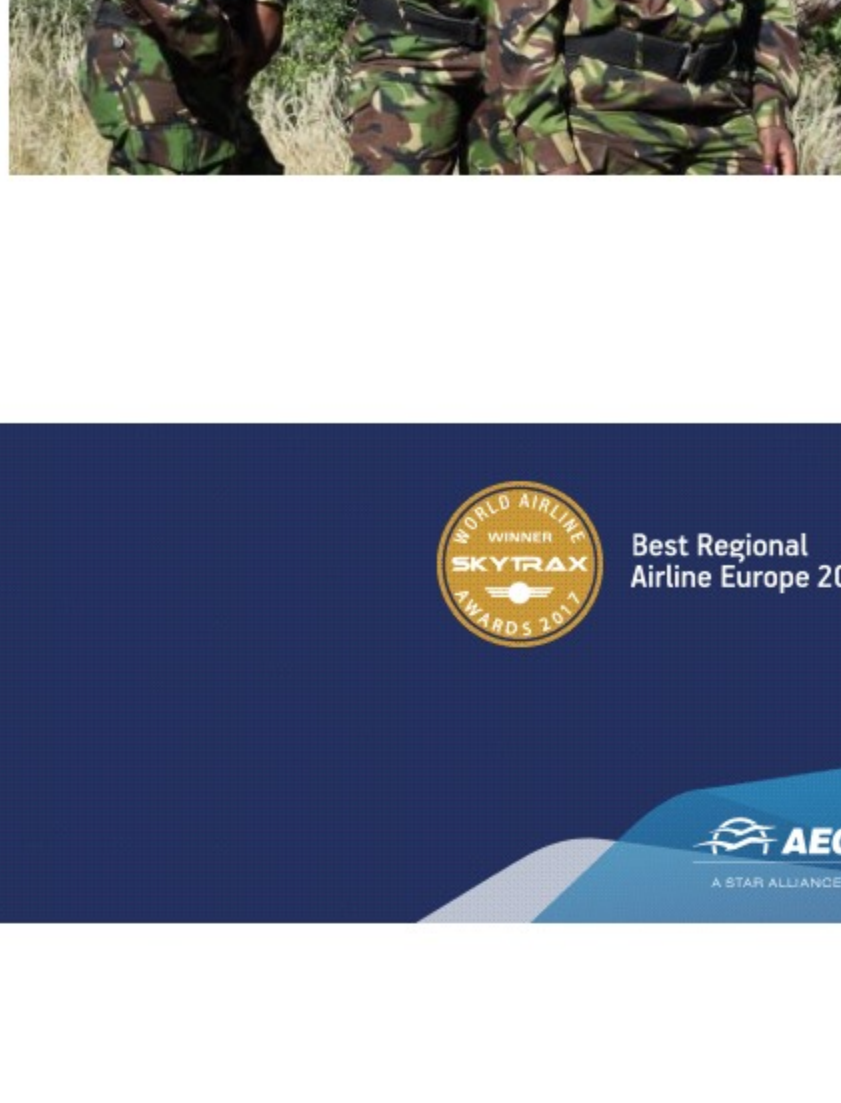
"Don't pop in the bush!" I slam the door of the Land Rover and hurry to join the women in front of me. Field Manager Charlie van der Berg, a tall, blonde Afrikaner, is wagging a forefinger at Cute, who grins and crosses her arms over her baggy, camouflage fatigues.

"She was supposed to go on maternity leave," Charlie explains as Cute disappears into the darkened doorway of her home. "But she's like: 'nope - who's going to take care of my rhinos? I'm going to wait until I pop thank you very much!'"

Inside I can hear a local soap playing on TV. I take a seat at a table outside, plastic legs scraping noisily against concrete, and listen to wafts of overly dramatic music.

A short distance away, the Land Rover is parked in the shade of a marula tree, and beyond that the sunbaked landscape vanishes beneath irregular clumps of thorns and a wave of tall, yellowing grass.

There is nothing separating us from the bush.



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"Cute?" Charlie calls as she turns towards the car, on her way to deliver uniforms. "Please don't feed this one to anything, hey? No lions, or anything like that." "This one? That's me.

I'm spending the afternoon with the Black Mambas, South Africa's first majority-female anti-poaching unit. Cute and thirty other local women guard the endangered rhinos living in Balule Nature Reserve, which sits on the western edge of the **Kruger National Park** near the tourist town of Hoedspruit.

Few barriers separate the two, partly to promote natural migration patterns, so the team's work is critical - South Africa as a whole is home to around eighty percent of the world's rhino population.

“Between 2007 and 2014, South Africa experienced an unbelievable 9246 percent increase in rhino poaching”

Cute sits down opposite me, all polished leather and camo gear, her hair braided in tight cornrows. I can't help but feel a little intimidated. But I compliment her on her fluorescent orange nail varnish, and it tickles a laugh out of her - the ice is broken, and I discover she lives up to her name.

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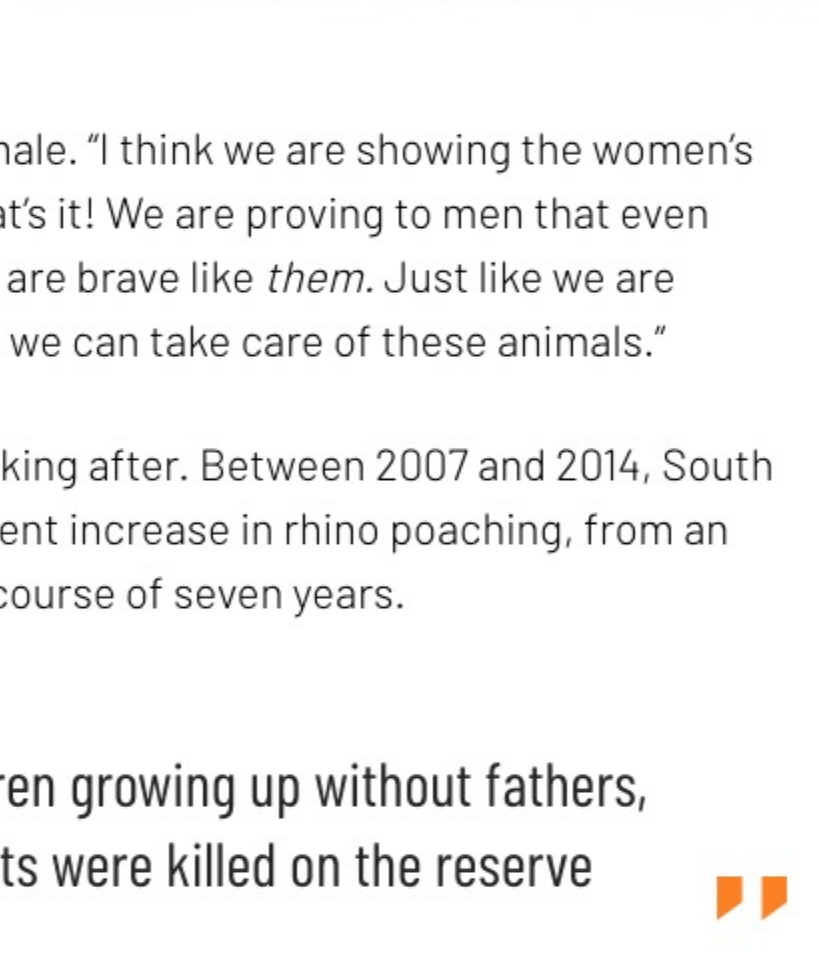
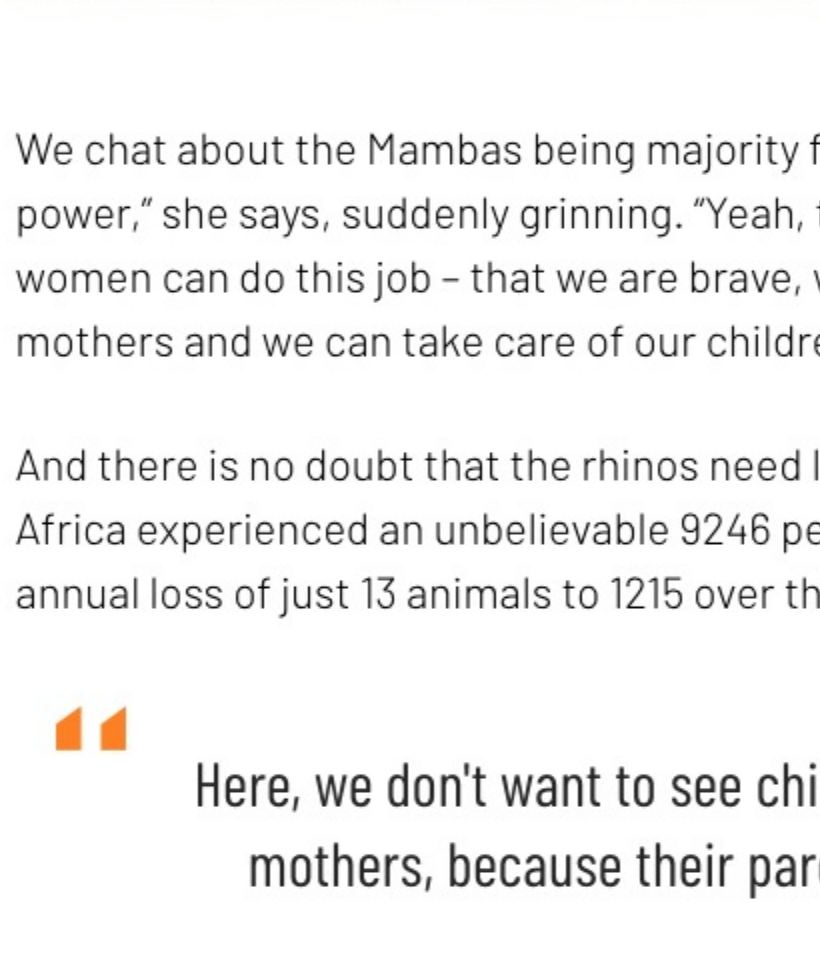
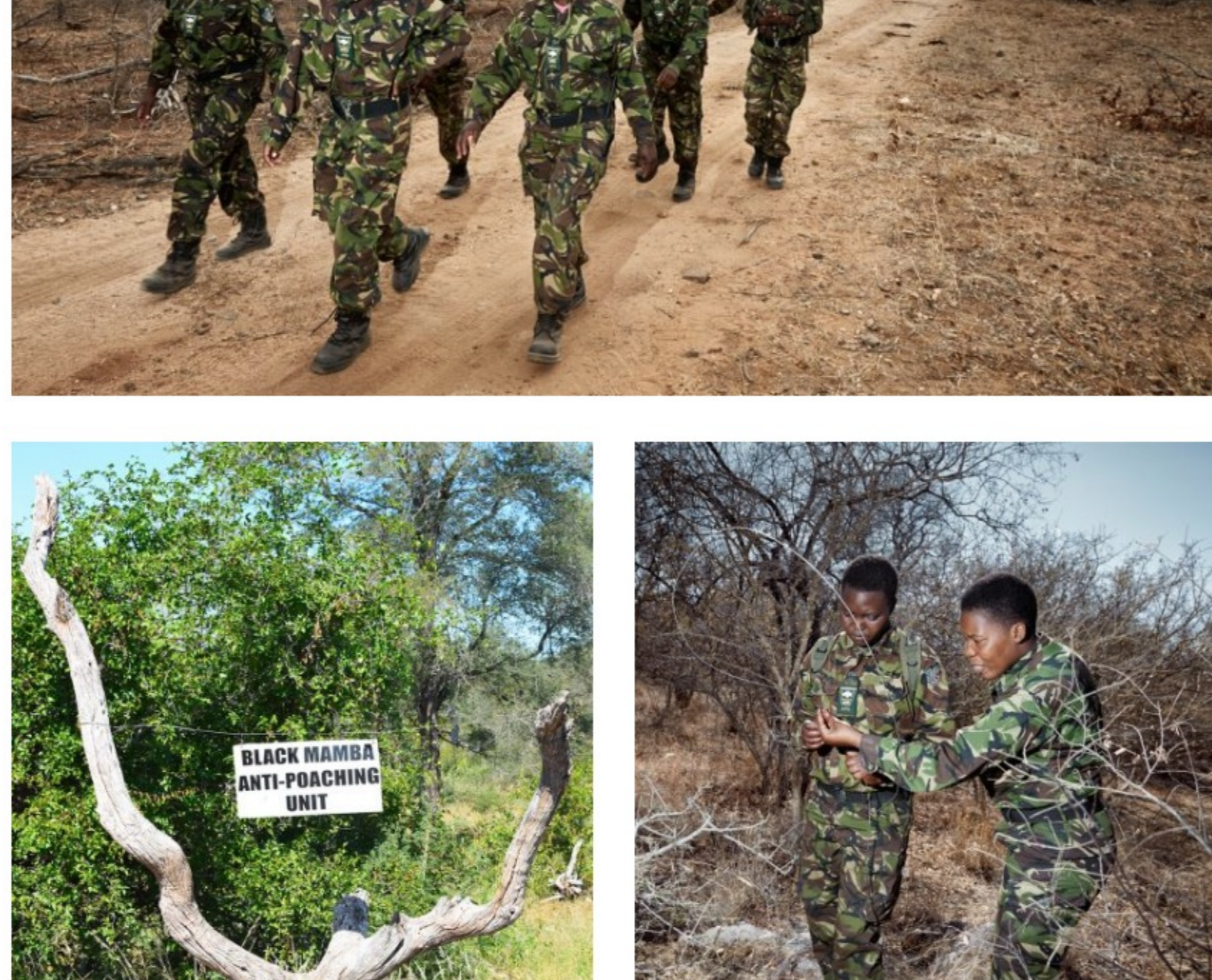
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We chat about the Mambas being majority female. "I think we are showing the women's power," she says, suddenly grinning. "Yeah, that's it! We are proving to men that even women can do this job - that we are brave, we are brave like *them*. Just like we are mothers and we can take care of our children, we can take care of these animals."

And there is no doubt that the rhinos need looking after. Between 2007 and 2014, South Africa experienced an unbelievable 9246 percent increase in rhino poaching, from an annual loss of just 13 animals to 1215 over the course of seven years.

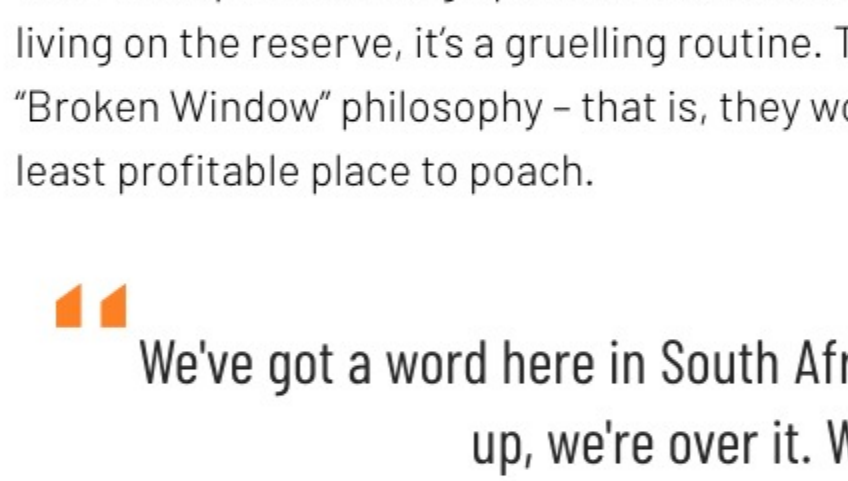
“Here, we don't want to see children growing up without fathers, mothers, because their parents were killed on the reserve”

Since then there have been promising dips, with 1028 in 2017, but these figures are far from cause to pop any celebratory corks - they still work out to around three rhinos killed every day. Meanwhile, domestic trade in rhino horn, seen by some as an avenue for illicit foreign dealings, **has become legal again**.

We watch as a second Land Rover rattles noisily around the bend and shudders to a halt beneath the marula tree, enveloping us in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes.

"Sorry!" Cute laughs, noticeably embarrassed, as two more camo-gear Mambas hop out of the cab.

"Nkateko and Winie were out patrolling that side," she points in front of her, "and we don't think there are any rhinos there, so tonight we will patrol that side," she gestures behind her.



Patrolling, as it turns out, is a Black Mamba's bread and butter. At first light each unit heads out on foot to sweep their area of the reserve for bushmeat poachers' snares - brutal, lasso-like traps that cause a slow death or, in the case of larger animals, nasty infections and amputations.

Since 2014 and the Mambas' deployment, snaring in Balule has dropped by 99 percent.

Every night, the Mambas hop into Land Rovers and use spotlights to check the reserve's fences and search for signs of poachers. In critical areas, such as known entry points or popular rhino watering holes, they keep observation posts - known as OPs - where they watch and listen for gun shots.

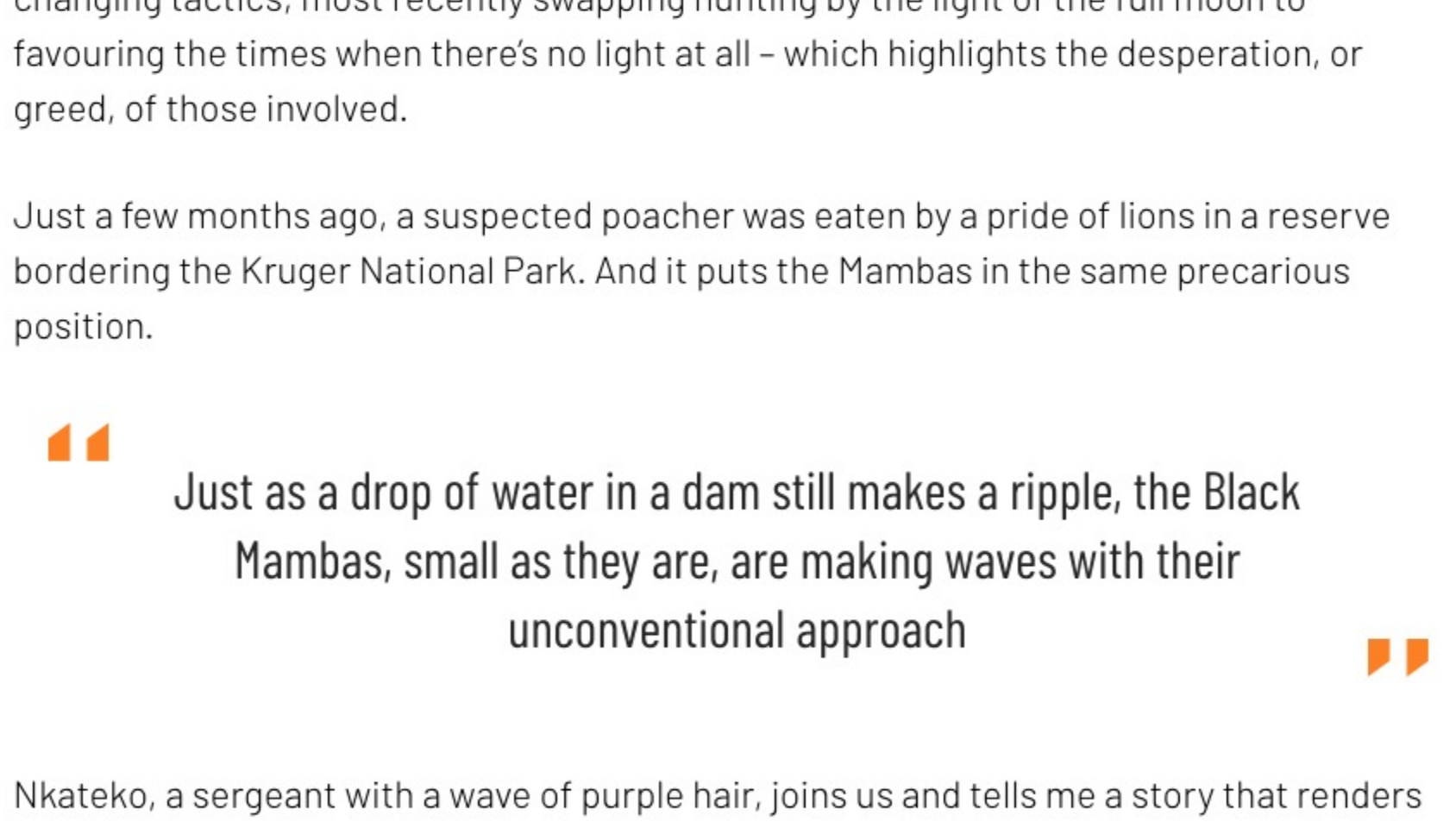
With each patrol lasting up to five hours, and a typical shift comprising 21 straight days of living on the reserve, it's a gruelling routine. They operate according to what they call the "Broken Window" philosophy - that is, they work to make Balule the most undesirable and least profitable place to poach.

“We've got a word here in South Africa - it's gatvol. It means we're fed up, we're over it. We're fighting a war”

The Mambas themselves are the eyes and ears of the team, so disruptive rather than combative; once poachers are sighted, they call it in for the armed unit. They patrol unarmed, carrying just handcuffs and pepper spray - a fact I find difficult to process.

"If a poacher sees me in the bush with a gun, they will shoot, and they can shoot me before I can shoot them," Cute explains, leaning back in her chair. "If poachers know that we don't carry guns, then we are protected - they know that we're not a threat."

I can understand the reasoning, considering the Mambas often come from the same communities as the poachers.



"Here, we don't want to see children growing up without fathers, mothers, because their parents were killed on the reserve. That's why we are protecting them - we are chasing them away from the reserve, because if they're found they will be killed."

But it's becoming increasingly difficult to chase them away. The poachers are constantly changing tactics, most recently swapping hunting by the light of the full moon to favouring the times when there's no light at all - which highlights the desperation, or greed, of those involved.

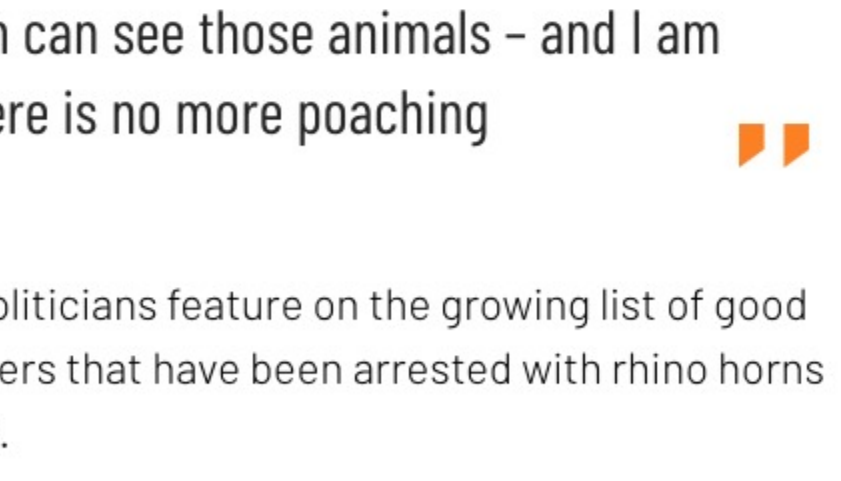
Just a few months ago, a suspected poacher was eaten by a pride of lions in the reserve bordering the Kruger National Park. And it puts the Mambas in the same precarious position.

“Just as a drop of water in a dam still makes a ripple, the Black Mambas, small as they are, are making waves with their unconventional approach”

Nkateko, a sergeant with a wave of purple hair, joins us and tells me a story that renders me open mouthed. It starts with a giraffe distracting them when they're out on patrol: "We keep moving, the giraffe is still with us. When we stop, the giraffe stops."

She explains that as they reach a river bend, the giraffe sprints away. "Bye bye! I kept moving, two steps, three steps - eee! I saw the lion roaring." Nkateko imitates a lion's roar.

"I grabbed Cute and I ran - the lion followed me. I got to the fence line, and we saw an elephant - eee! I said: 'where are we going to pass? Because at the back there's a lion, and in front there is an elephant.'" She shakes her head: "That day, I said nuh uh... I'm resigning this job."



I give her a pat on the back that I'm certain doesn't go far enough. Even with weeks of paramilitary training, as well as access to counsellors and animal behaviour experts, it's clear that nothing can fully prepare anyone for the unpredictability of the African bush. So why do they keep going?

"We've got a word here in South Africa - it's *gatvol*," Charlie told me on the drive up here. "It means we're fed up, we're over it. We're fighting a war."

“I'm doing it so the next generation can see those animals - and I am willing to do it until there is no more poaching”

In South Africa, corruption is rife and even politicians feature on the growing list of good guys gone bad. "There have been police officers that have been arrested with rhino horns under the bonnets of their cars," Charlie said.



"So then you have to sit back and think: who are we actually fighting?"

But just as a drop of water in a dam still makes a ripple, the Black Mambas, small as they are, are making waves with their unconventional approach, working on a local level as role models, bread winners and educators in the local communities.

On top of their daily patrols they visit ten schools weekly, and teach 870 children the importance of conservation - that nature is not a source of quick cash.

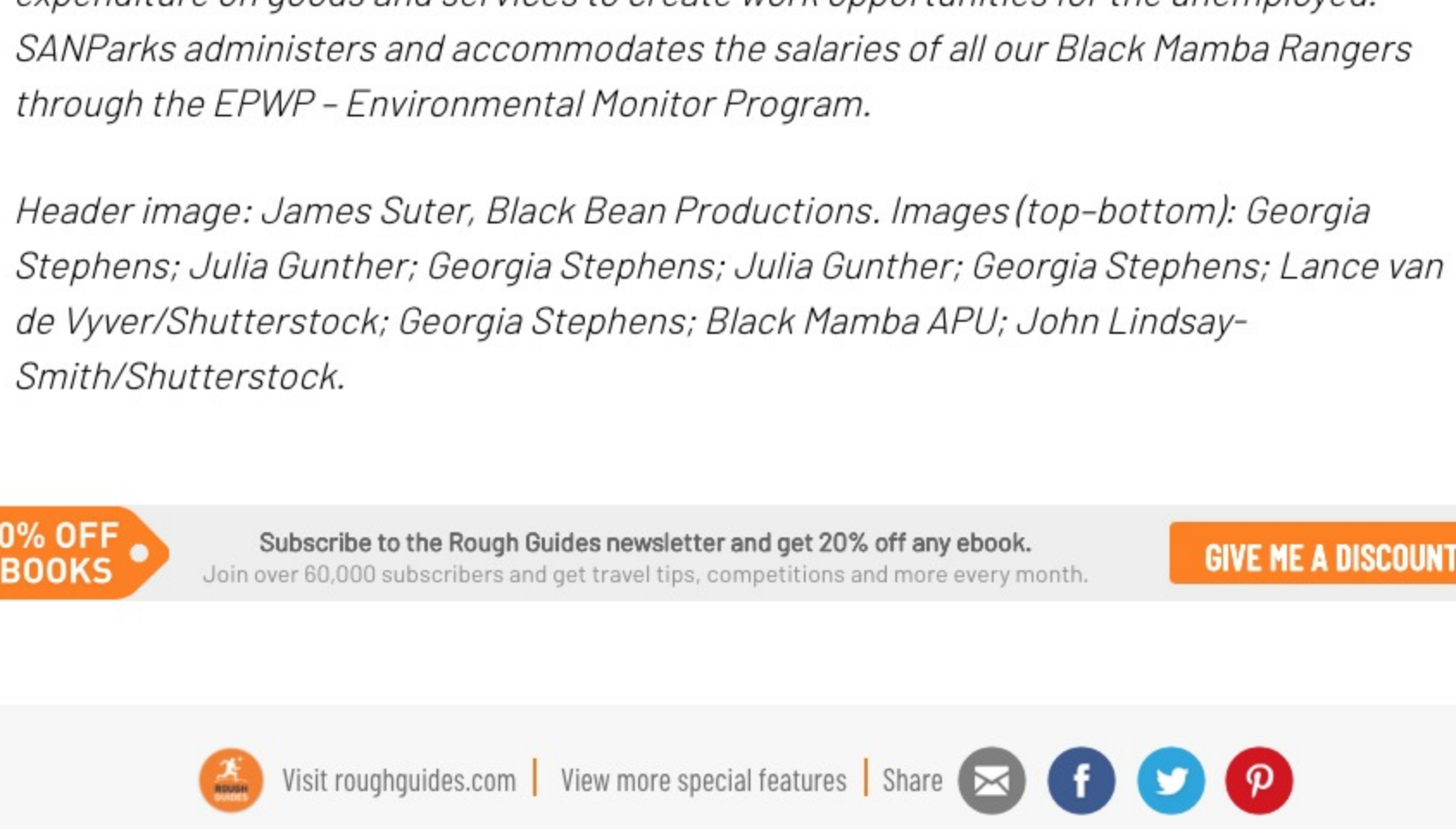
And their work is being recognised: in 2015, the Mambas won the United Nations' Champion of the Earth Award, the UN's highest environmental accolade.

"I'm doing it so the next generation can see those animals," says Cute, "and I am willing to do it until there is no more poaching - that's when I can say that I have done enough."

It's time for me to leave. Charlie has returned, minus the uniforms, but now with a flat tyre poking up from the back seat of her car. I turn to pull open the passenger side door.

"Hey, Charlie," Cute calls out as I'm about to hop inside. "You forgot the towels!"

Charlie whips round, her face incredulous. She never forgets anything. "Because I'm going to give birth in the bush!"



You can hear more of Georgia's story in Episode 17 of *The Rough Guide to Everywhere* podcast from June 18 ([iTunes](#); [Soundcloud](#)).

Georgia flew to South Africa with South African Airways, which introduced the new Airbus A330-300 on its daily London-Johannesburg service in 2018. Return flights start from £957.01. For more information, visit www.flysaa.com.

Transfrontier Africa acts in its capacity as a host agent on behalf of the Extended Public Works Program (EPWP). The EPWP is a nationwide program that was launched in 2004. The program provides an important avenue for labour absorption and income transfers to poor households. It is also a deliberate attempt by the public-sector bodies to use expenditure on goods and services to create work opportunities for the unemployed. SANParks administers and accommodates the salaries of all our Black Mamba Rangers through the EPWP - Environmental Monitor Program.

Header image: James Suter, Black Bean Productions. Images (top-bottom): Georgia Stephens; Julia Gunther; Georgia Stephens; Julia Gunther; Georgia Stephens; Lance van de Vyver/Shutterstock; Georgia Stephens; Black Mamba APU; John Lindsay-Smith/Shutterstock.

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