

VIEW FROM HERE

Leitha Mkhabela

This 26-year-old member of the all-female Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit (left on the picture) spends her days patrolling the borders of Balule

Nature Reserve: 52 000 hectares of land that forms part of the greater Kruger National Park. Her job is dangerous, but she and the women in her team are willing to put it all on the line to protect the rhinos of South Africa.



KATE THOMPSON-GORRY

Who are the Black Mambas? We're 16 mothers, sisters, aunties and future grannies who all come from the rural villages of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. We are women who want to speak and fight for the wild animals of our country; helping to conserve them for the benefit of all South Africans, now and in the future.

What is the significance of a female anti-poaching unit? In 2012 and 2013 we lost many rhinos to poaching in Balule. As there were only men guiding in the field at the time, Craig Spencer – project manager for the Balule Conservation Project – decided that he wanted to try something different. By putting women in the field, he gave us a voice to raise awareness in the communities surrounding the reserve.

Not so long ago, women couldn't work to sustain themselves and their families. Therefore, we didn't have much say in our own lives. Now we do what was traditionally considered a "man's job", and we do it well.

Why the name Black Mambas? As the most feared and venomous snake in South Africa, the name applies to us as strong and brave women who are passionate about conserving not only rhinos, but all animals. It says that we mean business and that we're strong enough to handle the challenges of the bush.

How did you come to be a Black Mamba? In high school I was involved with the Timbavati Foundation – they had an eco-club in my community. One of their programmes involved growing a garden in our school for the benefit of the community. During holidays we were taken to the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve to learn about the animals' behaviour, the plants and

how we could help to protect the environment. When I matriculated, my father couldn't afford tertiary education, so I decided to put my environmental background to use and applied to become a Black Mamba. I started service in 2013.

What was your training like? In some ways it was similar to boot camp; we're soldiers out there fighting a war. The first phase involved staying in the bush for two weeks where we were drilled by our sergeant and corporal from 6 am to 6 pm every day. They taught us about animal behaviour, how to approach poachers and what to do if we came across their tracks. We stayed in a shelter that we built ourselves. When morning came, all traces of our camp had to be erased, as if we'd never been there. It was challenging, but I learnt so much about teamwork and discipline.

What was the hardest part? The lack of sleep. One person always had to be awake to keep watch. We sleep in our uniforms because when someone signals an alarm, we need to be on our feet and ready to fight.

The training was necessary and worth it. Not one woman in our unit has been harmed by animals or poachers to date.

Have you encountered many poachers? Oh, yes. The other day we found human tracks in the bush and we were tipped off that bush meat poachers would be returning to that area later.

In preparation, we set up an ambush. When the time came (4 am the following morning), a team of eight of us set off chasing the poachers through the reserve on foot. We don't carry weapons, but we had reinforcements. I was so excited to arrest a poacher.

What keeps you going? We don't want poachers to go into the communities and say that they've won because we quit. We want to walk through our communities with our heads held high. We are unarmed [the Black Mambas carry pepper spray and handcuffs] because we worship life; we don't want to create widows and orphans because of rhino poaching.

We're trying to show our young people that we're not fighting this war with bullets; we don't want to see blood, we just want to change people's mentality about poaching and show them that there are better ways of providing for your family.

Through education and patrolling the boundaries, we are going to win. *We must win.*

The Black Mambas seem to inspire your community... Yes, we are role models in our communities and proud of it. I lost my son earlier this year; he was six years old. I used to take pictures home for him of me on patrol or of me with the animals – he loved them. When I took him to the zoo once, he told everyone that his mother was the best in the world because she was protecting our wild animals.

His loss was devastating but I still have my sister's kids and the kids in our community to care for. They admire what we do. I'm telling you now that if we advertised for 10 people to train as Black Mambas, by the end of the day we would have 500 CVs to choose from.

The Black Mambas won the Resilience Through Cultural Diversity award at the World Tourism Conference in Johannesburg earlier this year. Learn more about how you can support them and their cause at blackmambas.org

– Kyra Tarr