Wildlife ACT and Vodacom partner to advance conservation efforts

Wildlife ACT is Ready to protect endangered wildlife.

Vodacom
Power to you
Wildlife ACT is literally ahead of the game with tracking endangered wildlife. By partnering with Vodacom, Wildlife ACT harnesses the power of technology to help protect vulnerable species.

This partnership enables Wildlife ACT to be Ready to tackle conservation challenges.

Introduction

South Africa is blessed with an abundance of game and its game reserves are some of the most well-stocked on the planet.

Game reserves are not only crucial to protecting our planet’s species but are also vital to providing much needed jobs, especially in rural areas. The challenge to sustainably maintain these reserves is to effectively monitor threatened and endangered species.

Summary

Wildlife ACT actively advances conservation by initiating, implementing, managing and funding equipment for monitoring projects on wildlife reserves in Africa which do not have the means to do so themselves – and they do so FREE of charge.

Wildlife tracking and monitoring of endangered animals and wildlife species is a critical step in their conservation. It is very difficult to conserve something which you don’t know you have and/or whether conservation efforts are effective in growing populations. Unfortunately, many African game reserves do not have the capacity to run effective wildlife monitoring programmes and require assistance to ensure this vital component of conservation is carried-out.

Vodacom’s Machine-to-Machine technology tracks wildlife so people can help protect them.

Workflow description

One of the most intensive day-to-day monitoring needs was the wetlands area around St Lucia in KwaZulu-Natal. There are several private game reserves in this area and they can be regarded as a whole with regards to some species, as there are species which are not stopped by fences and roam freely between reserves. This area has an unprecedented amount of wire snare poaching which results in a tremendous amount of ‘by-catch’ – specifically the endangered African Painted Dog (Wild Dog) and threatened cheetah are at harm.

These two species are very susceptible to wire poaching and as a result the current Painted Dog pack already has two females with 3 legs and a number of pack members missing. Following this, the unprecedented increase in rhino poaching in South Africa over the last few years has caused alarm in the conservation community, and the tracking of these animals is now more important than ever before.

UTrackIT were faced with a number of challenges:

• Battery life and weight on the collars
• Alerts as to failing batteries
• Ensuring the collars could not be removed by the animal itself
• Remote areas where GSM coverage was sparse
• The SIM cards in the collars had to withstand ‘rough’ treatment and conditions
• A complete solution for tracking and monitoring had to be designed to provide specific information for Wildlife ACT

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“This partnership enables us to be Ready to tackle conservation challenges.”
Benefits

The SMS system, implemented by Vodacom, was robust and durable enough to deliver several key benefits.

Wildlife ACT Fund is a not for profit trust that focuses on the following key conservation elements:

- Finding and funding the right equipment needed to effectively monitor endangered and threatened species
- Delivering time and expertise to provide adequate management, capture, transport and reintroduction of these animals to new areas
- Implementing anti-poaching measures and technology in the field
- Helping rural communities who live alongside protected wildlife areas to develop a love and respect for nature, provide them with reasons to protect it, and advance economic empowerment

They are currently focused in Zululand, an area that resounds with the heartbeat of Africa and one of the most diverse and productive wild lands on the planet.

In 2011, Vodacom Partner UTrackIT became involved with Wildlife ACT in designing a tracking and monitoring system using GSM technology in wildlife tracking, specifically in the St Lucia Wetlands area, in Zululand, where there are some of the last remaining packs of Wild Dog.

UTrackIT is a South African privately-owned technology company that provides their customers with affordable tracking and monitoring systems — these include vehicle tracking for individuals and fleets, and long term asset monitoring.

UTrackIT Managing Director Robert Austin says the journey with Wildlife ACT to adapt their technology to protect and monitor these endangered animals has been both a learning process and passion.

The Solution

Says Austin, “Through a number of expensive field trials we have identified that GSM technology can provide valuable movement data on these vulnerable animals. Initial trials showed us how our perception of what would work was far off the mark of life in the wild. Product revisions, operational changes, and also extensive work on the collars has now put us in a position where we believe we have a wholly South African solution that is viable for tracking of Wild Dog and other endangered or vulnerable animals.”

Vodacom played an important role in the project. “Firstly,” says Austin, “we needed robust SIM chips that could be soldered onto the electronic board in the collar, be reliable and withstand life in the wild — moisture, dirt, etc. Then, because there are no volumes of people in any game reserve, there was almost zero GSM coverage. Vodacom resolved both these issues for us as part of their Corporate Social and Environment programmes.”

“We initially tried tracking via GPRS only for transfer of tracking data, and it was a total failure. Once we made the switch to SMS, the whole project turned around in a major way. SMS is much more reliable and provides the data transmission we require. It is likely this will be the first product in the market that is totally South African made (collars) and designed (tracking electronics). And all at an affordable price using GSM as the data carrier. Other suppliers offer on-device storage for later retrieval, short-range data pull (Bluetooth, WIFI), or satellite transmission.”

“It is our hope that we can provide a good solution for our endangered species, and we have treated the three year project as our small way of ensuring the system may be used for good,” he says.

Morgan concludes, “To fund our projects, Wildlife ACT uses a number of fund generating models, including grant applications, donor funding, sponsorship programmes and we run a unique, focused wildlife volunteer programme. Volunteers who join in important conservation work get both a wildlife experience and make a contribution through their time, efforts and funds at the same time. Wildlife volunteers assist our monitors in their daily tracking and monitoring of endangered wildlife species such as the African Wild Dog, cheetah, as well as priority species like the elephant, lion, leopard and many more. Wildlife volunteers get far more than the typical safari experience, playing an active role in conservation. Many are lucky enough to experience anything from trapping and radio collaring or tagging animals for their relocation or re-introduction.”

“Thanks to UTrackIT and Vodacom, we are ahead of the game, so to speak, with our tracking and monitoring of endangered species. Technology and wildlife are working together in a unique project.”
For more information about these solutions and to start developing applications that meet your unique needs to help you become Ready for anything, simply contact us at:
vodacombusiness.co.za

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