

# in the line of fire

Many people talk about protecting wildlife. A good number are directly involved, implementing vital programmes from the safety of an office. And then there are the men on the ground, the ones who go out each day to confront poachers and often risk their lives in doing so. **Stephen Cunliffe** speaks to Tizola Moyo, a man whose commitment to the wildlife in his care is exemplary.



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE (2)

**I** will always remember 25 October 1995. It was the worst day of my life. That day I lost my best friend,' begins Tizola Moyo. A wildlife officer stationed at Phwadzi Camp in Malawi's Majete Wildlife Reserve, Moyo soberly continues his story. 'I was on patrol with two of my colleagues when we came across a poachers' camp. We crept closer to investigate and discovered about

10 poachers drying bushmeat. They were heavily armed with AK-47s. We had two old bolt-action .303 rifles with just 10 rounds of ammunition between us. Still, these people were breaking the law and it was our responsibility to arrest them.

'As soon as we engaged them, they began firing at us. Our ammunition didn't last long and we had to split up and run. My friend Lennox Mabocas was shot in

the crossfire.' Later, when the two surviving officers returned to the scene of the skirmish, they found the bullet-riddled body of their colleague nearby. From the tracks surrounding it they worked out that the poachers had captured the wounded Mabocas and, angered by their losses, executed him. They had dumped his body, taken his rifle and escaped.

Majete Wildlife Reserve, just a stone's throw from the Mozambique border in south-western Malawi, was the undisputed domain of poachers during the late 1980s and early '90s. Illegal hunters almost outnumbered the animals in a park that saw more than 300 elephants blasted into local extinction in less than five years. Phwadzi Camp lies in the hard-hit western section of the reserve and during this poaching pandemic Moyo was ▶



**ABOVE** Tizola Moyo, a friendly character with a good sense of humour, has dedicated his life to the protection and rehabilitation of Majete Wildlife Reserve.

**LEFT** Wildlife officers do far more than apprehend poachers, sometimes lending muscle power to elephant relocations.



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

**Harvey Mtete, the former head of Majete's law enforcement division, surveys some of the hundreds of weapons confiscated from poachers.**

one of the wildlife officers tasked with trying to stem the slaughter.

Surrounded by refugee camps overflowing with destitute Mozambicans who needed to eat, the reserve was an island in a sea of hunger. The civil war raging across the border provided not only a steady stream of refugees, but also a glut of cheap automatic weapons that emboldened the poachers. The wildlife officers lacked the training, equipment and funding necessary to tackle the poaching gangs effectively and they risked their lives each time they went out on patrol. Many were unwilling to do this, but Tizola Moyo and Lennox Mabocas were exceptions.

In response to a particularly bloody period in 1995, when three Malawian wildlife officers were killed in the course of their anti-poaching duties, the US government stepped in and provided the demoralised scouts with much-needed firepower and weapons training. The M16 automatic rifles it donated were an enormous boost to morale and they contributed to an undeniable feeling among the officers that the tide was finally turning in their favour.

Moyo's story doesn't end with the death of his friend. During a routine scout patrol in 1997, some of his colleagues found a man who had just killed a grysbok. He fled, abandoning his belongings and a rifle, which turned out to be the same weapon that had been taken off Mabocas's body two years previously. A panga with a name carved into the handle was found among the poacher's effects, providing

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the clue needed to track down the scout's killer. 'After follow-up investigations,' resumes Moyo, 'we mounted a full-scale night operation on the village where the poacher lived, but he had already crossed the border into Mozambique. I cried that night. I've been waiting 13 years to arrest that man, but he hasn't returned to Malawi.'

Tizola Moyo grew up wanting to be a soldier – the idea of carrying a gun appealed to him – but when his father refused to let him join the army, he decided to become a scout instead. After two years of training in Mwabvi Wildlife Reserve and Kasungu National Park, he was transferred to Majete

in 1993. 'I like to go out and catch poachers,' he says. 'My favourite animal is the elephant. Although it's very dangerous and can kill people, it is a good animal. You can read an elephant.'

After eight years of patrols and anti-poaching operations, Moyo's superiors acknowledged his dedication by sending him for leadership training and promoting him to second-in-command of Majete's law enforcement division. His former boss, the amiable Harvey Mtete, is effusive with praise: 'Moyo and I worked in tandem to develop systems that could contain the scourge of poaching in Majete. In all honesty, I learned everything about my job from him.' To illustrate his colleague's loyalty and enthusiasm, he adds, 'One year we were fighting a bush fire and Moyo was burned quite badly on his legs. Most guys would have taken a month's sick leave, but he kept on working and didn't even mention it. I only knew about it some time later, when I noticed the scarring on his legs and asked him about it. That about sums up Moyo: he's hard-working, never tires, and is the best guy for Majete.'

When African Parks Network (APN) arrived on the scene to manage Majete in 2003, the situation improved exponentially. Staff morale was boosted to an all-time high as new equipment, expertise and training were brought in. Law enforcement officers declared a six-month amnesty period during which people from the 146 villages on Majete's borders could surrender their weapons and poaching implements without fear of punishment. More than 450 home-made muzzle-loaders, shotguns and rifles, along with innumerable snares, gin traps and spears, were collected.

A dedicated individual who professes that he will stay at Majete until he retires, Tizola Moyo summarises the feelings of the reserve's wildlife officers: 'Since African Parks came it's been all good. Our safety and the animals' security have improved dramatically, and we have eradicated 95 per cent of the poaching. The only poachers arrested this year were some illegal fishermen netting in the Shire River. Majete has come a long way since the day that Lennox died.' ■

*For more information about Majete Wildlife Reserve and the work of APN, go to [www.african-parks.org/majete](http://www.african-parks.org/majete)*