

Faculty's VGL partners with key international role-players to address wildlife crime at its Rhino DNA Index System Scientific workshop

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Organised by the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory (VGL) to take place from 18 to 24 June, the collaborative action planning workshop will host representatives of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network (TRAFFIC) and the Wildlife Forensics Network (TRACE).

With rhino poaching and universal wildlife crime increasingly prevalent on a global scale, one of the aims of the workshop would be to promote enhanced collaboration and cooperation between laboratories that provide forensic DNA testing of rhinoceros, and support wildlife crime investigation in their respective countries and regions. In this regard and fittingly so, other partners such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) will also be present at the workshop.

The workshop will provide the opportunity for scientists in these facilities to interact directly and experience the field conditions related to rhinoceros crime in South Africa, including the impact, sampling strategy and applied methodologies. They will be introduced to the RhODIS® program of the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory and how and why this could be translated and utilised on an international level. An opportunity will be provided for each participant to showcase their respective role and expertise in wildlife crime investigative techniques and unveil opportunities and challenges within their own environmental context.

On a scientific level this will allow the specific technical experts to network, communicate, draw upon each other's strengths and provide support where limitations are identified. It will furthermore provide the opportunity to share and discuss current methodologies in terms of tests, sampling methods and quality assurance requirements that apply to in-country and transnational wildlife crime.

Global standardisation of DNA sampling and testing methodology will strengthen legal acceptance of results and draw on the collective expertise of research scientists in the field. The workshop is intended as an initial exercise to establish this cooperation a purely scientific level. Under such efforts, the networks that will be built, standards set, and methodologies shared will allow more rapid exchange of information, data and sample flows between scientific institutions responsible for forensic support of rhinoceros crime investigations. This will also contribute meaningfully towards the implementation of CITES decisions around the use of forensics for rhinoceros horn.

The workshop, which will include a field trip into the Kruger National Park to give first hand exposure on scene of crime management where forensic evidence is concerned and a visit to the VGL at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, is expected to actively promote wider cooperation between specific experts in the field of wildlife DNA forensics, DNA data sharing between laboratories and support for international cooperation through a networking approach to wildlife forensics.

*** The VGL's RhODIS® program was recently announced as one of the prize winners of the Wildlife Crime Tech Challenge which identified innovative science and technology solutions that help combat wildlife trafficking, an initiative of USAID, in partnership with the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian Institution, and TRAFFIC. The aim of the RhODIS® challenge proposal specifically addressed the internationalisation of the program to extend cooperative forensic DNA investigation of rhinoceros crime beyond South Africa. The workshop is a significant first step in this process.*

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