

Poachers Who Killed Helicopter Pilot In Tanzania Arrested

After a weeklong manhunt and house-to-house searches in villages surrounding the Maswa Game Reserve near the Serengeti in Northern Tanzania, nine people were arrested in connection with the death of helicopter pilot Roger Gower. The country's National and Transnational Serious Crimes Investigation Unit teamed up with police and local authorities to find the killers.

"We took this very seriously," said Maj. Gen. Gaudence Milanzi, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism.

The nine arrested poachers included a former police officer who apparently used his position as an intelligence officer with a regional conservation authority to help the poachers. One of the arrested led the police to the rifle and to the elephant tusks. In the meantime four men have pleaded guilty to the unlawful possession of firearms and ammunition in a court in Dar es Salaam. They received prison sentences ranging between 15 and 20 years. The murder trial will be held separately in a higher court.

The pilot, Roger Gower, 37, was shot on January 29 while conducting anti-poaching surveillance over Maswa Game Reserve. He and a South African colleague, Nick Bester, who works in the neighboring Mwiba Wildlife Reserve had received a report from a guide that six shots had been heard. During their reconnaissance flight at low altitude they came across three fresh elephant carcasses. Gower circled back to take a closer look, when their helicopter was shot at by poachers. A bullet pierced the floor of the helicopter and mortally wounding Mr. Gower.

Although fatally hit, Gower, assisted by Bester, managed a hard landing. Nick Bester hid in a thicket together with the wounded pilot. Bester radioed rangers of the National Park Authority TANAPA for help. They were soon on the spot, but the pilot had died by then. Bester suffered a fractured vertebra and two broken ribs in the crash landing. The morning after being rescued Nick was airlifted to Nairobi and flown to Johannesburg.

Roger Gower, a former accountant from Birmingham, had come to Tanzania as a pilot eight years ago. He worked for the Friedkin Conservation Fund (FCF), an American charity that was created by the American hunter and philanthropist Dan Friedkin. Friedkin is a major shareholder of several tourism lodges as well as Tanzania Game Tracker Safaris, one of the largest safari hunting outfitters in Tanzania. FCF finances and conducts effective and successful anti-poaching operations in the company's hunting blocks and tourist concessions in collaboration with Tanzanian wildlife authorities. "This tragic incident highlights once more the risks and costs of the wildlife protection in Tanzania", Dan Friedkin said after Gower's murder.

Media in Europe and North America apparently overlook the facts that most Tanzanian safari hunting operators raise significant internal and external resources to combat poaching. Consequently none of

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the reports on the downing of the helicopter and Roger Gower's murder mentions that these anti-poaching surveillance flights are funded mainly by the hunting sector. Undeservedly animal welfare organizations - some of them unashamedly anti-hunting - get the credit for the continuous fight against poaching.

Commercial poaching has more than halved Tanzania elephant populations. Only about 51,000 elephants remain according to the results of the ongoing Great African Elephant Census (some local sources suggest that there are around 60,000 animals). The Tanzanian government undertook considerable efforts to get the poaching under control in the past two years. In the Selous Game Reserve, the elephant population has stabilized again and for Rungwa-Ruaha Ecosystem counts were revised upward significantly.

To scale up the war against poaching and the plundering of natural resources, Tanzania's new Minister of Natural Resources and Tourism, Prof. Jumanne Maghembe announced recently that experts from Tanzania Wildlife Authority (TAWA), Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA), Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA) and Tanzania Forest Services (TFS) will cooperate in the Wildlife Crime Unit with the security sector from Tanzania Ports Authority (TPA), the Tanzania Airport Authority (TAA), the Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA) as well as local and international conservation institutions and stakeholders.

"As a government, we are determined to eliminate the entire syndicate of poaching in this country. The latest incident shows us that poachers are well-prepared and we're also telling them that the war against them has just started," Prof Jumanne Maghembe stressed.

Legal elephant hunting in Tanzania is strictly regulated, and rules set minimum dimensions for weight and length of the tusks. In the year 2014 seven elephant bulls and in 2015 only three were collected by visiting hunters. Hunters pay considerable amounts of money for an elephant hunting safari. Those hunters who hunted elephant unsuccessfully, because they don't encounter elephant bulls with legal tusks also contribute significant parts of their safari expenses towards game management and community development. The USF&WS ban on imports of legally hunted elephant tusks from Tanzania is therefore highly counterproductive for Tanzania's wildlife says Benson Kibonde, the longtime chief of the Selous Game Reserve, who has recently retired. And he adds in a pessimistic mood: "Without hunting the Selous is doomed!"