

A photograph of a rural village scene. In the foreground, there are several traditional huts with steeply pitched, thatched roofs made of dried grass or reeds. The walls of the huts appear to be made of mud or woven reeds. A large, spreading tree with a thick trunk and many bare branches stands prominently on the right side of the frame. In the background, more huts and trees are visible under a clear sky. A few people are standing in the middle ground, and a wooden fence runs across the scene. A sign with the letters 'MEPS' is visible on a post near the fence. The overall atmosphere is that of a traditional, rural settlement.

LEARNING NARRATIVE

#WildEye training for investigative
journalism in Southern Africa

Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism

#WildEye: a wildlife crime tracking tool and training for investigative journalism in Southern Africa



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Wildlife Crime

Wildlife crime is a multi-billion-dollar illicit business that decimates Africa's iconic animal populations and undermines countries and communities' economic prosperity and sustainable development throughout Southern Africa. It threatens the region's natural capital and undermines opportunities for legal nature-based enterprises such as tourism. Wildlife crime also threatens social stability and cohesion as it robs and impoverishes citizens of their cultural and natural heritage, while its organised criminal networks threaten regional peace and security.

USAID's VukaNow Activity

In response to the threats posed by wildlife crime, USAID/Southern Africa embarked on a multi-faceted regional program. In March 2018, USAID launched the "USAID's VukaNow Activity" (VukaNow) a multi-faceted, five-year regional activity, operating in Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, with the goal of significantly reducing wildlife crime in southern Africa. It complements four USAID-funded combating wildlife crime (CWC) landscape projects in three Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) namely the Great Limpopo (GLTFCA), Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA), and Malawi-Zambia TFCAs, and collaborates with landscape partners and stakeholders, including the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Secretariat, governments, and the private sector.

VukaNow's role in achieving the goal of significantly reducing wildlife crime in southern Africa is to catalyze learning and sharing of information and best practices and to enhance collaborative efforts to combat wildlife crime in the region. In so doing, VukaNow – together with its partners – works to coordinate learning across USAID/Southern Africa's landscape-based CWC activities and to support strategic regional activities that are necessary to address the wildlife crime challenges that fall outside any discrete landscape. This includes working with international, regional, national, and local stakeholders to garner an integrated and collaborative approach to CWC in the region. VukaNow supports novel and innovative approaches to combating wildlife crime, particularly through the use of purpose-built technology and wildlife forensics. The Activity oversees a robust grant facility to accelerate specific, targeted interventions to address wildlife crime, including community engagement, and also works to leverage partnership opportunities with the private sector. In addition, VukaNow works with journalists and other media actors to facilitate improved transparency and reporting on wildlife crime.



Collaborating with journalists and data wranglers in the region is one of USAID VukaNow's activities because of the vital role journalists play in helping to combat wildlife crime.

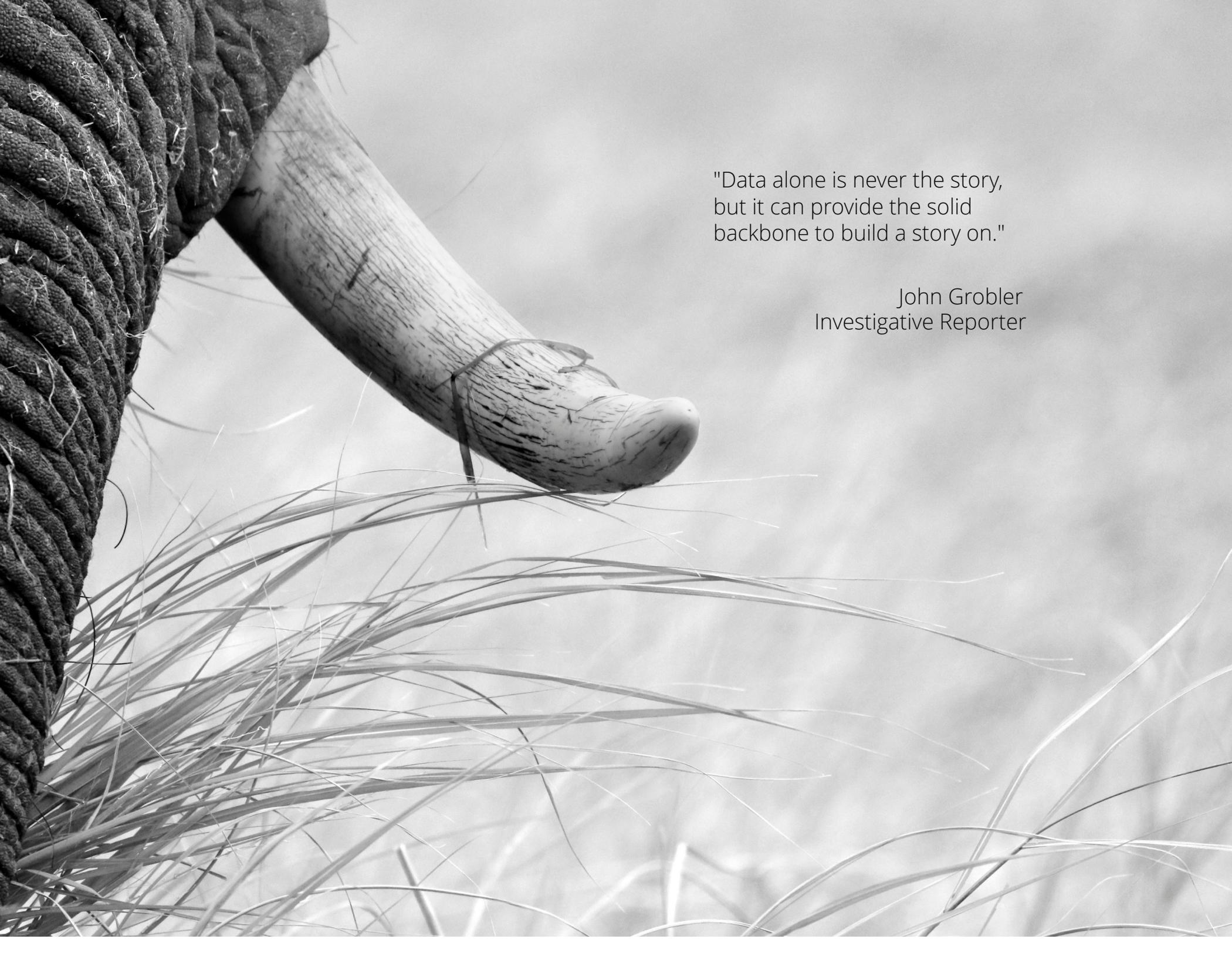
Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism

Oxpeckers is Africa's first journalistic investigation unit focusing on environmental issues. The unit combines traditional investigative reporting with data analysis and geo-mapping tools to expose eco-offenses and track organised criminal syndicates in Southern Africa and their global links.

Oxpeckers is a non-profit company with a proven track record in managing multinational journalistic collaborations. Its aims include building capacity for and improving the impact of African environmental journalism, among other things, by providing a home for investigative journalists interested in environmental issues.

Journalists working with Oxpeckers have conducted in-depth, award-winning, transnational investigations into wildlife trafficking, poaching, and law enforcement in the following landscapes in which the VukaNow project is operating: Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the GLTFCA (South Africa and Mozambique). The journalists have spent years building up unrivalled networks, insights, and reputations in these regions. Oxpeckers also provide crucial mentoring and training on reporting wildlife crime to selected journalists.





"Data alone is never the story,
but it can provide the solid
backbone to build a story on."

John Grobler
Investigative Reporter

Challenges for Wildlife Crime Reporters

Globally, the media industry is under pressure and faces harsh economic realities that often result in fewer resources in general, specifically when it comes to specialised reporting on issues such as wildlife crime. While it is no secret that species like rhinos, pangolins, and lions are killed and illegally traded, tracking, and reporting on these crimes is challenging because information sits in dusty court files in different countries with different access laws. Reporters and others gathering data face endless bureaucracy and often, intimidation. Many newsrooms end up relying on wire copy, and often only stories that have national appeal make the cut. This situation not helped by the fact that environmental journalism is one of the most dangerous areas of reporting. Few African countries have passed national freedom of information laws, while draft freedom of information laws in other African states are at different stages of progress towards adoption.



#WildEye Southern Africa

Recognising the critical role of journalists in exposing wildlife crime and the challenges they face in Southern Africa particularly, Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism developed #WildEye Southern Africa: a geomapping tool designed to track wildlife crime-related seizures, arrests, court cases, and convictions in the region.

The powerful new data-driven tool addresses a significant challenge facing wildlife crime reporters and investigators: information on these activities is hard to find and even harder to track over time and across borders. This has allowed criminal activity to remain hidden from public scrutiny and hindered reporting on the illegal wildlife trade.

Initially for Europe and Asia, the Southern African iteration of the open-source digital tool has been populated with data from Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe through the Oxpeckers professional support and training platform.

The tool allows anyone to find data on seizures, arrests, court cases, and convictions relating to wildlife crime in Southern African countries. Data helps highlight trends, gaps, and questions that journalists can use to build stories through court records or freedom of information requests. Data sets will continue to be collected and collated on cases relating to wildlife crime in the region. Users can subscribe to alerts on specific cases or themes to receive updated information and track new developments. The more information added, the more powerful the tool becomes.



Name: Godfrey Makechemu (47), Ignatious Maiga (30), Farai Chauno (27), Celestino Shate (35)

Place of Arrest/Seizure: Save Valley Wildlife Conservancy

Date of Arrest: 12-1-2017

Bail: Not available

Item Seized: ammunition, weapon

Number Seized: Not available

Route: Not available

Court Case Number: Not available

Court Appearances: Masvingo Magistrate's Court

Charges: Godfrey Makechemu, Ignatious Maiga, Farai Chauno and Celestino Shate were convicted for poaching rhinos in the Save Valley Wildlife Conservancy. They all pleaded not guilty on four counts of contravening the National Parks and Wildlife Act Chapter 20:4. They were, however, convicted due to overwhelming evidence and sentenced to prison. Three of the four counts were treated as one for the purposes of sentencing. They are linked to three other alleged poachers, Joel Matuku (42), James Makumba (33), and Jevas Mauto (39)—they were acquitted for lack of evidence.

Sentence: 10 years' imprisonment

Source: Herald

Link: [Visit link](#)

SUBSCRIBE TO POINT CHANGES

User experience expert Mark Hartman worked with developers using Mapbox, an open-source API, to enable the visualisations that make the #WildEye tool user-friendly, allowing journalists - or any member of the public - to see information, trends, and patterns in wildlife crimes across time and geographies.

It works a bit like Google maps, taking and converting data on wildlife crime into map boxes with additional layers of data on top of them. They have pop-ups, menus, links, and subscription services that form part of the tool.

The database is set up on secure servers using Amazon Web Services, which Mark describes as incredibly powerful and scalable. "This is important because as the amount of data increases, the system needs to be able to manage that without compromising performance," he said.

Launched in November 2021, #WildEye Southern Africa gives journalists and investigators access to data on wildlife crimes that will help drive investigative reporting and expose criminal syndicates.



Oxpeckers Professional Support and Training Platform

To build #WildEye Southern Africa and capacitate data journalists, the #WildEye professional support and training platform brought together experienced investigative reporters and mentees from Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe . It was designed to empower them with the skills and confidence to work with data when reporting on wildlife crimes. The participants completed a combination of modules and action-learning tasks linked to accessing, collecting, and sharing information nationally, regionally, and internationally.

The resource materials developed by Oxpeckers to further transform journalistic practices in the region and build a network of data journalists and wranglers will reflect their collaborative learning journey, to empower reporters to be data-savvy and understand how to find, access, and use it to support their work to expose wildlife crimes. At the same time, it has opened new opportunities for journalists to form a community of practice and to put the #WildEye tool to effective use.

"There's the story you know you can tell,
the story your sources tell, and the story
the data tells. Where those three intersect
is the sweet spot for investigative
journalists reporting on wildlife crime."

Jacqueline Cochrane
Investigative Reporter



The #WildEye Team

The work Oxpeckers has undertaken with USAID's support to strengthen the capacity of journalists to use data to investigate and report on wildlife crime was facilitated by an experienced team of specialists.

Fiona Macleod heads up Oxpeckers, pioneering the use of new media tools to expose eco-offenses in Southern Africa and track offenders worldwide.

Derick du Toit is a learning specialist working with the Oxpeckers #WildEye projects.

Andiswa Matikinca is a journalist who manages Oxpecker's extractives digital tool, #MineAlert.

Roxanne Joseph is an Open Data advocate and is the Project Manager for #WildEye.



The #WildEye mentors

The work Oxpeckers has undertaken with USAID's support to strengthen the capacity of journalists to use data to investigate and report on wildlife crime was facilitated by an experienced team of specialists.

Estacio Valoi is a Mozambican journalist who works with Oxpeckers on transnational investigations, focusing on poaching, climate change, timber looting, and wildlife trafficking syndicates.

Jacqueline Cochrane is a South African journalist interested in combating wildlife crime. She has worked with Oxpeckers for several years, turning complex issues into innovative and impactful content.

Oscar Nkala is a Zimbabwean freelance journalist who has worked with Oxpeckers since 2017, developing a pioneering dossier of work investigating the donkey skin trade and other issues.

John Grobler is a seasoned investigative reporter from Namibia. His current work in this field was prompted by the return of rhino poaching in Namibia, which has the single largest population of critically endangered black rhinos globally. (@JohnGrblr)

Richa Syal is a freelance investigative journalist covering topics of environmental exploitation across Asia and the Middle East. She joined Oxpeckers in 2020 as a data wrangler for our wildlife crime tracking platform #WildEye, and now supports our data-driven projects. (@richa__syal)



The Practice of Data Journalism

Data journalism encompasses an ever-growing set of tools and techniques that enable information sharing and analysis. The data on its own isn't meaningful, but when grouped, filtered, analysed, mapped, or visualised, it can become a powerful way of highlighting issues that trends that can underpin storytelling and investigations. An ever-evolving field, its methods tend to be transparent and replicable. It helps journalists sharpen their critical sense when faced with numbers and allows for professional interpretations of official information. Ultimately, it is all about good reporting and telling stories in the most appropriate way, promoting transparency and accountability.*

Accessing wildlife crime-related data in Southern Africa remains challenging for several reasons. As the participating journalists and data wranglers noted, sometimes this is due to bureaucracy or attempted cover-ups. Still, sometimes it's because the data isn't digitised or overwhelms the capacity of organisations tasked with collating or sharing it. Mentored by experienced data journalists through Oxpeckers professional support and training platform, the five data wranglers reflect on challenges they encountered, and how to overcome them to build data sets on wildlife crime in Southern Africa specifically. Summaries are paraphrased from original transcripts, which are available on request.

*Source: <https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/one/introduction/what-is-data-journalism>

Data Journalism as a Practice

Getting Data



Paid Information



Open Access



Cleaning Data



Scraping the Internet



Rights of Access



Tools of the Trade

Understanding Data



Data Literacy



Patterns & Trends



Telling Stories with Data

Delivering Data



Combining Data with Stories



Decision Makers



Data Driven Applications

AUDIENCE



Community



Data Visualisation



Government
Departments

Mbauwo Chavula, Malawi

Key lesson: good relationships with the right people don't mean they'll help you with the information you need, but if you are determined to get the data, you will get it.

Mbauwo Chavula is the News Editor for Blantyre Synod Radio and the Country Coordinator for Women in News under WAN-IFRA in Malawi. She has over 20 years of experience as a journalist. As a data wrangler for the #WildEye tool in Southern Africa, she hopes to learn new skills and stay relevant by constantly innovating and improving herself. "I'm very interested in hard news stories, like the trafficking of pangolins in Malawi," she said. "I hope to be among those who bring wildlife crime reporting to the fore, instead of it just being another story buried on page 30," she further added.

Challenges

- Self-censorship
- Access to official information
- Wildlife stories aren't a prominent part of the news
- Lack of contacts in the sector



Using the law to access the data was a total failure because the ones entrusted to give me the information did not care about their obligation and there is little way to hold them to account. In the end, I relied on the internet to meet my first data-collecting deadline.

Mbauwo's journey has been one that's taken her from a position of interest in data journalism, but little practical experience, to a point where she is empowered in how she accesses data, despite a system that's highly resistant.

I've always been interested in wildlife crime but haven't known where to start. A bit of self-censorship happens automatically in Malawi because if you step on the toes of politicians, there are repercussions. Initially, I didn't believe that I would face much opposition in accessing data on wildlife crimes because the government seems interested in conservation. But when I started gathering data, I met a lot of resistance from the police service, the courts, and the national Wildlife Department. Officials and spokespeople kept putting me off despite seemingly positive phone and WhatsApp conversations. They did not refuse to help outright, but I realized they were delaying me, and I wouldn't get what I wanted.

It was frustrating being referred to as many as five different people for a single inquiry. Having an already established, good working relationship with the police and the court registrar (I have been in the industry for 20 years) didn't help me. For a time, I was hopeful that bombarding them with requests would eventually provoke them into giving me something. I realized I needed to go to their offices physically, but I'm based in Blantyre, and having to travel to these places is a significant challenge.

I always feel uncomfortable if I don't deliver, so to get my data points, I went in full throttle on Google using quite different methodologies. I set up Google alerts and scoured various news sources, contacted the International Fund for Animal Welfare in Malawi, and contacted African Parks. I also joined various wildlife groups on Facebook. Fortunately, I found a website (www.lilongwewildlife.org) that was a treasure trove of well-documented information.



It's important to note that there is a fine line between maintaining cordial relations and pushing for information, and that is precisely where the problem lies. If you push a bit more, officials may choose to misinterpret it as if you are threatening them, but they'll still ignore your request. However, you can be sure that they'll punish you in some way further down the line, perhaps when you need basic information for another story, and they'll ignore you or your media house because of a perceived slight that you did to them in the past.

Despite these frustrations, the course was invigorating. When you've been in the newsroom and editing for as long as I have, you almost operate like a robot. The challenge and excitement are gone. But this excited me.



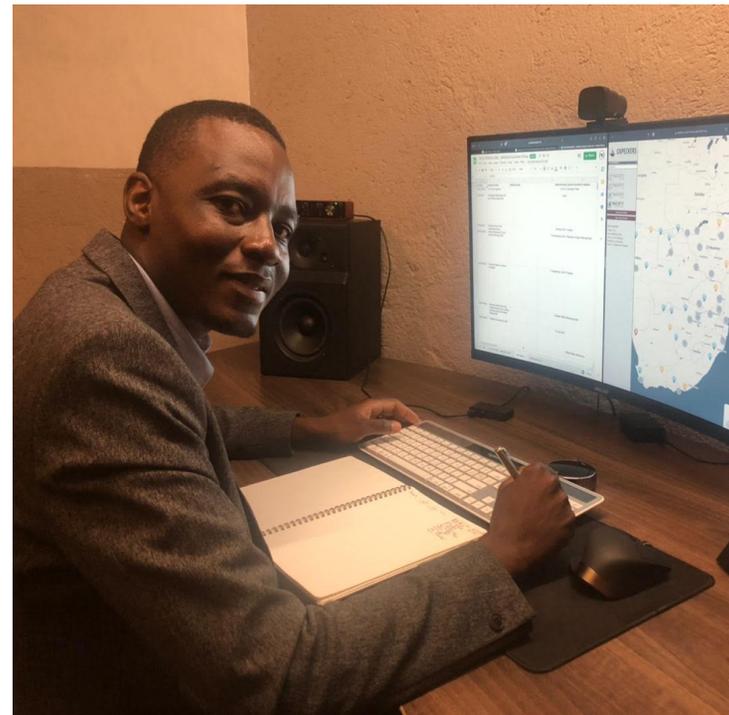
Sean Ndlovu, Zimbabwe

Key lesson: don't rely on online information. In Zimbabwe, you often need to physically go to an office and retrieve paper records.

Sean Ndlovu is based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. He began working with data in 2015 for community-based organisation Radio Dialogue before co-founding the non-profit media hub Centre for Innovation and Technology. In contributing to building the #WildEye data tool in Southern Africa, he hopes to cultivate sources in government, law enforcement, and environmental organisations, learn new skills and techniques for working with data, become part of a bigger network of data wranglers in Southern Africa, and deliver improved data visualised stories.

Challenges

- Official information is more likely to be typed, printed, and filed than put online
- Intimidation by authorities
- Lack of response and accountability amongst officials
- Culture of mistrust and suspicion
- Unclear/complex court processes



If you come across as arrogant, critical, or threatening, people are less likely to help. You need to know who to talk to as asking for data creates suspicion and can get you into trouble.

Through his participation in building the #WildEye Southern Africa tool, Sean's data-gathering has shifted from an online practice to cultivating relationships with people in the legal system who can help him get information that's archived on paper or locked in pdfs. While Sean gained skills and confidence in dealing with officials who were often suspicious of his motives and sometimes intimidating, gathering data on wildlife crimes in Zimbabwe remains a frustrating and time-consuming process.

After we got our first assignment, I was alarmed that I would have to see people at the court to negotiate and get information from them. At the back of my mind, I knew one could request information on the public record but talking to [officials] face to face and having my requests rejected was something I dreaded. Initial attempts to access data highlighted how important cultivating sources is because the only way to access certain documents is to deal with someone who knows where they are. Government departments and officials in Zimbabwe still use PDFs or paper records. I've learned that gathering data is a bureaucratic process at the end of the day, even when trying to access information that should be available according to the county's constitution. You must humble yourself. If you come across as arrogant, critical, or threatening, people are less likely to help. You need to know who to talk to as asking for data creates suspicion and can get you into trouble.

When getting data from the police or the courts, they asked me for ID and proof of my organisation. Perhaps they thought I was a whistleblower or someone assessing if they would do everything by the book. Or they were worried that by giving me access to data, they might inadvertently implicate someone more senior in a crime and face repercussions. When I mentioned getting legal help, their response changed to 'OK, let's see what we can do.'

As an introvert, I had to learn skills to engage with court officials to try and get information. This is because despite it being the law to make certain information available, there is also ignorance of the law, either real or feigned. There is also intimidation by authorities but understanding how the justice system works helps. In making my requests, I had to deal with different people and re-explain myself many times. When I tried to call, they kept me on hold until airtime ran out or transferred me to another officer, who transferred me to someone else. Then the line would drop, and I'd have to call again and go through the entire process once more. Emailing doesn't help. There are few official email addresses for some of these public offices, and I was told even if you send the email, it is best to drop off a hard copy of your request and follow up again.

Nonetheless, I have cultivated some allies in government departments and the police who now say, 'here comes the wildlife guy,' and assist me. I have also connected with a non-governmental organisation that collects wildlife crime-related data.

I am slowly moving the needle with a multi-pronged approach, sending crime-related requests to different departments in case they refer me back and forth. Having some data makes getting the rest more straightforward, so it makes sense to run parallel processes, looking online and collaborating with specific individuals to try and acquire information. It also helps to be precise and not ask for too much at the same time. I'm developing slightly thick skin. I know rejection is not the end of the world, and I must not give up.



 **BULAWAYO MAGISTRATES
COMMERCIAL COURT**
JUDICIAL SERVICE COMMISSION
"striving towards world class justice" 



Calistus Bosaletswe, Botswana

Key lesson: illegal wildlife crime involves several countries; hence there is always the need to look for information about seizures outside of your own borders.

Calistus Bosaletswe is a freelance journalist based in Gaborone, Botswana, interested in merging data with traditional reporting to investigate the illegal wildlife trade. He believes collaboration with data wranglers and journalists across borders is crucial given the transboundary nature of the illegal wildlife trade. "I want to use data from multiple sources and sets to follow an established supply chain on legal or illegal trade in a species," he says. Key challenges are around law enforcement and their lack of cooperation in sharing issues of wildlife crime, like rhino poaching.

Challenges

Media houses are slow to accept/commission data-driven stories from freelancers.

Stated political support for media freedom doesn't always translate into tangible support. Lack of response to requests for information, especially if linked to someone in power.

No law compelling people to respond to requests for data in the public interest.

The government information portal is unreliable.



It is important to have a network of journalists working together to build stories on the illegal wildlife trade that go beyond their individual countries.

Through gathering data for #WildEye Southern Africa, Calistus has deepened his appreciation for collaboration and recognised the value of collaborating with other journalists, data wranglers and international organisations in collecting data the officials within his own country are reluctant to share.

Botswana's President has said that freedom of speech will be respected, and journalists allowed to practice without intimidation and harassment from the state. But there are incidents where government officials choose to respond or not to respond to requests for information. This usually happens in my experience when a story involves a high official or someone close to someone in power. It can be difficult for us to compel officials to share information of public interest.

To get data for the #WildEye tool, I contacted members of parliament, as they are supposed to respond to such requests. They often want emailed questions but take time to respond, requiring follow-ups. I prepared questions for the Department of Wildlife and others. The absence of a specific freedom of information law in Botswana means government departments only help on their terms since they do not feel obliged to provide such information. The challenge was what to do next, when it was clear I wasn't going to get a quick response from the relevant authorities.

I realized I need multiple data sources and should also speak to affected communities. I found information online and in various databases, but there is always information lacking, especially about what happened next in a particular case, so you need to follow up. When relying on publicly available data, you must also check if data collected from other sources were similar, so you can be confident in it. In the end, most of the data I collected was through Google and social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, although links to older reports aren't working often.

I still think patience pays off, as does establishing a relationship with those individuals within those departments, but I realised that looking for data about wildlife crime in Botswana from outside of the country through international organisations may give better results. It also helps overcome the challenges of requesting permission from government departments. Working with TRAFFIC through their Wildlife Portal was a productive process. And I also think collaborating with people who have different strengths and experience – like in journalism, data gathering or data cleaning – is a smart way to work when telling wildlife crime-related stories.

Collaboration with other data journalists is crucial as it will result in more complete stories about the illegal wildlife trade with trade routes that go beyond borders. And as an individual, you get to learn from others how to approach things and you get to learn other ideas.





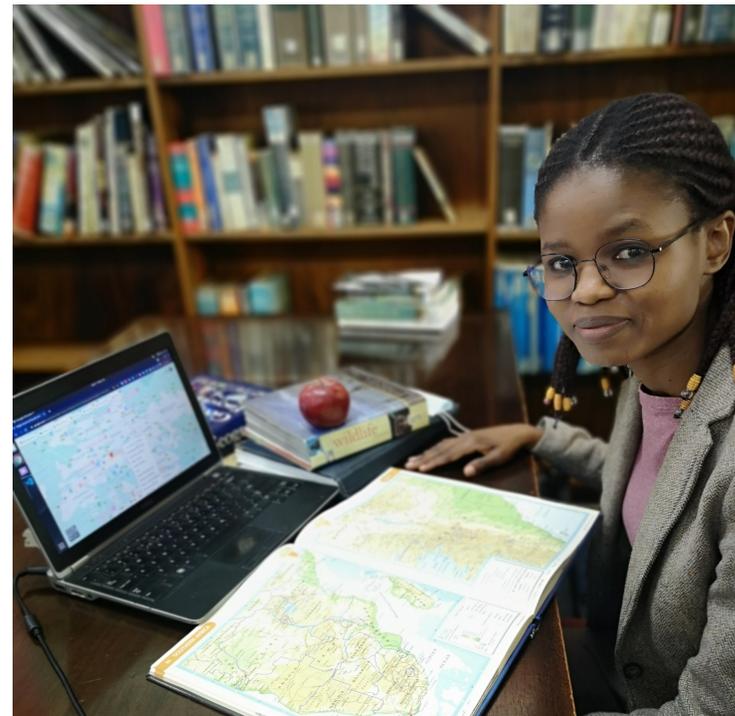
Nompumelelo Mtsweni, South Africa

Key lesson: don't just use data to confirm your hypothesis, but try to understand what it tells you, and keep adding data points to the already submitted datasets.

Nompumelelo Mtsweni is a seasoned data specialist in South Africa who works for Good Governance Africa. She has worked on publications such as GroundUp and the Daily Maverick, conducted academic data collecting, and has experience with reporting on environmental crimes. Mtsweni is interested in stories focusing on how wildlife crime threatens the security, political stability, economy, natural resources, and cultural heritage of Sub-Saharan African countries.

Challenges

- Slow response times from people in authority
- No journalism background
- Challenging legal terminology
- Gaps in data



Data is more about people than numbers, so treat data with scepticism - just because it's numbers doesn't always mean it's facts. Once you have it, interrogate your data - where does it come from, what does it show, and its limitations?

Mtsweni describes involvement with #WildEye as 'eye-opening.' Having worked with data since her student days, she knew that gathering reliable data can be a painstaking process. She has gained a new appreciation for its potential and limitations in reporting on wildlife crimes. At the same time, she understands better how to integrate data processing with investigative journalism and has learned that paper trails, persistence, and scepticism pay off.

"In South Africa, government departments do share a lot of information online. There is a recognised process for requesting information, and there are information officers that deal with public access to information requests through the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA). They don't always respond timeously, and sometimes documents they share are heavily redacted. They also use the protection of personal information as grounds to refuse specific requests.

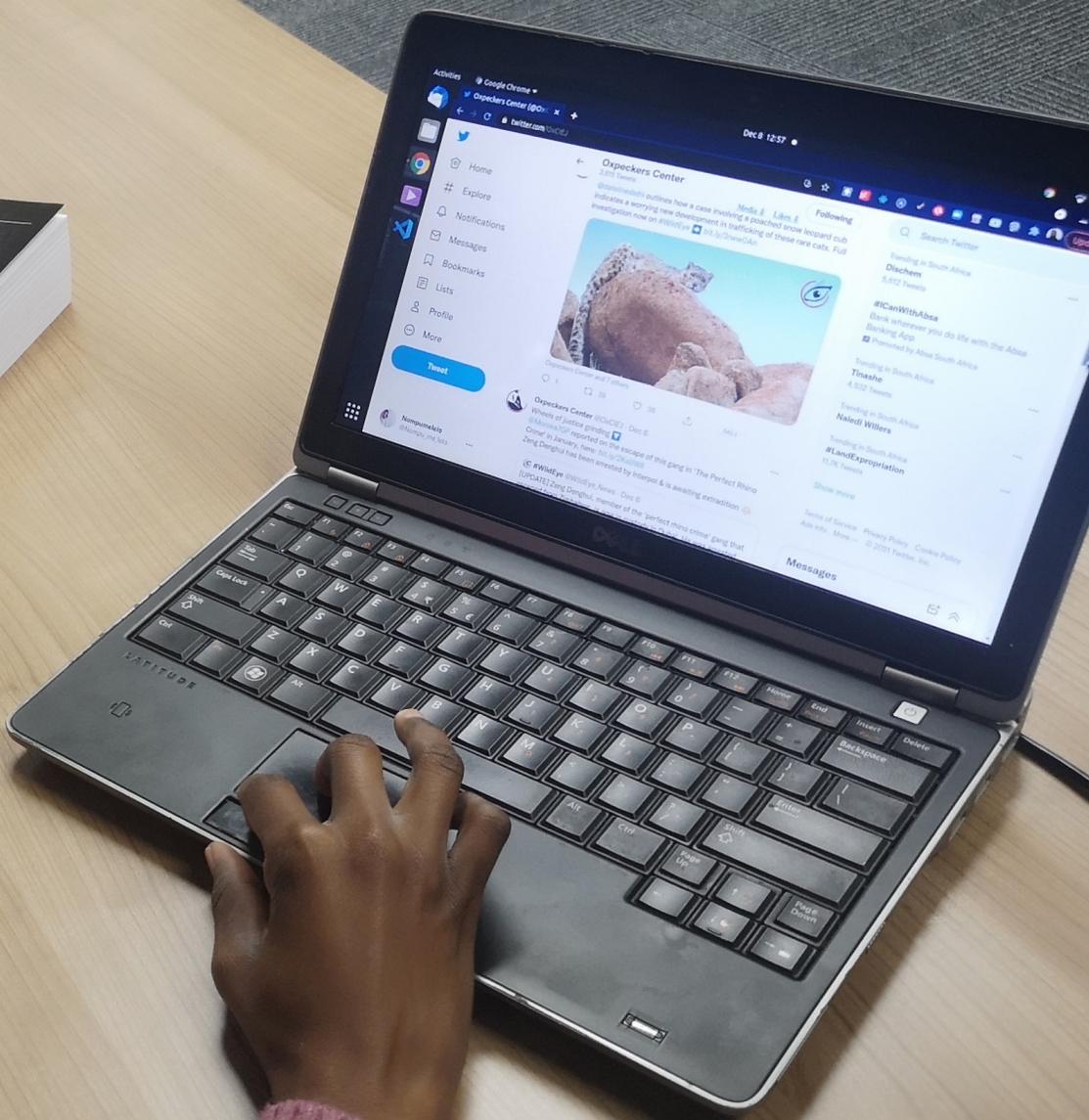
You need to acquaint yourself with the information officer if doing a PAIA. This is particularly important for when you're making your regular follow-ups, which need to be done within a certain timeframe of the application being filed because there are specific deadlines that you need to meet. It helps to keep a detailed timeline, record all communications, and then do your regular follow-ups because this forces them to take you seriously and help you out with the information you need.



Making requests specific, concise, and direct is helpful. So is including as many relevant people as you can when making the request—finding the right person to help you can be challenging.

My calls to the courts weren't picked up, and the police initially said I wasn't entitled to the information I was requesting, referring me back and forth to different police stations. One of the main challenges I faced was repeatedly explaining to various police officials why I needed this information, even although it is my legal right. Another challenge was not getting the right person from the get-go. I had to try three different approaches before even finding someone to tell me the steps to follow for the PAIA, and I had to prove who I was working for. The turning point was connecting with the person in charge of the communications and access to such information. It's been helpful to remember that officials are obligated to share data with you. They don't always make it easy, so knowing you have the right to ask, and they have the responsibility to respond is reassuring. Forming connections and collaborations with institutions and organisations with data haven't been easy, but it has been helpful.

With the help of the mentors on the programme, I realised having a concrete sense of your dataset is essential, as is approaching multiple people and organisations, from the courts to non-profits to government departments, to get what you need. Then, once you get the data, record it accurately, and make sure you are deeply familiar with it. Never just use it to confirm your hypothesis, but try to understand what it tells you, and keep adding data points to the already submitted datasets to build up the bigger picture.



Daiana Nhatave, Mozambique

Key lesson: getting information via formal channels seems to be impossible.

Daiana Rosa Nhatave is based in Maputo, Mozambique, and holds a journalism qualification from Eduardo Mondlane University. Her experience with working with data ranges from working with organisations such as research on Gender Equity in Mozambican, Media Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Communication and Social participation in social networks. She left the programme early to pursue a master's degree, but shared similar challenges with the other wranglers, specifically noting the highly bureaucratic system that makes collecting wildlife crime data in Mozambique difficult.



Challenges

Bureaucracy
Lack of clarity on legal rights



Common Challenges

- Feeling threatened or intimidated when requesting information
- Upsetting or damaging relationships with authorities
- Influential people have a vested interest in concealing data
- Enabling legislation doesn't make getting official data straightforward
- Available documents may be redacted
- It's not always clear who to talk to
- Having the right to access information means different things in different contexts, as not all countries or governments guarantee it
- Even if a formal application for information is successful, the document or information may be missing
- Repeatedly calling or visit offices to follow up on requests for information is time consuming and expensive
- Lack of accountability amongst those responsible for sharing information
- Officials may be scared to share information for fear of repercussions
- Legal procedures and jargon can be daunting
- It's not always easy to know what matters are being brought before the court or how to access a public hearing
- Using spreadsheets can be challenging without some training

“In my experience, most official channels for accessing information – outside of South Africa – don’t do what they are supposed to do. They actually hinder access to information.”

Oscar Nkala
Investigative Reporter



Tips for Data Journalists

While gathering data can be difficult, expensive, time consuming and even dangerous, it's worth the effort as good data drives excellent and verifiable storytelling. These tips can help data journalists to better navigate challenges around collecting data. If you have more to add, contact wildeyeoxpeckers@gmail.com

- When searching for data online, don't forget to do a PDF search.
- If information is not online, make a PAIA or FOIA application, write a letter, verbally go and speak and start getting the connections who can help you.
- Make friends with lawyers who can help you with legal language and processes.
- When reporting on wildlife crime, knowing specific names of suspects and court case numbers is important to be able to follow cases from start to finish
- Information comes from many sources, so work with non-profits, government, and the private sector to take a multi-pronged approach to finding information.
- Make friends with an information officer and build relationships of trust.
- A refusal to give you information is information itself. It is also often a tell-tale sign that something is wrong.
- Don't be disheartened when the government refuses to share certain information because it probably means you are hitting the right buttons.
- Know what process must be followed and which timelines are important ones, e.g., in South Africa, the government needs to respond within 30 days, and if they don't, you can follow an internal appeal process.
- Understand the law on accessing information. If you don't have time to do the research or feel confident, find an organisation or person that can help you.



- When filling out a request for access to information, be as detailed as possible. Vague requests will not be processed speedily or accurately and may even be ignored.
- If your country doesn't have a form, write a letter. It must be dated so you can track it.
- If there isn't a timeline for these types of requests in your country, then dictate that, but be reasonable and also be fair.
- Check what payments you need to make as part of your official application for information, but NEVER pay someone for information. Remember, there are waivers for the poor and marginalised.
- Most forms require that the requestor shares their ID. If having your name on the form puts you at risk, have a law firm or another party do it on your behalf.
- Be clear about how the information you are requesting should be provided.
- Always make sure you've got a USB with you or a scanner on your phone, as bringing your own infrastructure removes another reason not to help you.
- You also have to be practical. If somebody is willing to give you information you requested, take it in whatever form you can.

- If you're going to ask for information from a specific department, you need to find out who the person is in that department that you can submit your request to.
- Copy many people on your email request and follow up, including senior officials and ministers, unless there is a good reason not to.
- Consider whether you can pursue the data from another jurisdiction that may provide you a lot more information than in your own country.
- Engage with international organisations like the United Nations Human Rights Council to get support for your efforts.
- Bureaucracy is a good reason to create a personal network that will give you access to leads when you need them.
- Use social platforms if emails and calls don't work. You may find one sympathetic person, and that can be enough.
- Be aware of whistleblowing laws that can offer some layer of protection.
- Pay attention to information security, especially if you're working electronically.



- Connect with networks that exist internationally or locally that are tackling intimidation by the state.
- International organisations can apply pressure in different ways, like maybe writing to their governments.
- Be aware that there are instances where information is private, and that's just the way it is. In some cases, a legal route allows you to ask for a waiver.
- If you've pursued every avenue and are still being ignored, you can name and shame.
- Remember, there are a lot of good people in government. You need to find them and work with them.
- Befriend the court registrar as a way to get information on what's going on in court.
- Have an excellent legal network that can give you information about who's going to court and what's happening.
- Knowing the law in the country that you want to try and get that information is critical. Familiarity with the law can give you some power not to intimidate but to create a sense of accountability.
- When you go to a department, get a date stamp or receipt to keep people accountable and keep track of timelines. Keep any slips or receipts of money you spend, and keep letters and emails on record.
- How you format data is essential, especially if it feeds into a tool like #WildEye, so make sure you follow best practices.
- Understanding spreadsheets and excel is important.
- Data wrangling is a social process as much as a technical one. Remain cordial and build relationships.
- Data wranglers have more power as a collective than as individuals.
- You don't develop the practice without practising.
- Not everyone has to be good at everything, and one can do some things better with assistance.
- Often one has to apply similar techniques to traditional journalism to track down the data.
- Be persistent.

Toolkit

Oxpeckers history and purpose: The #WildEye Journey

<https://youtu.be/zq2wjd2PtZE>

#WildEye Southern Africa: A tool for mapping and tracking wildlife crime

<https://youtu.be/NBpddsE2N4>

#WildEye Southern Africa: Oxpeckers Professional Support and Training Platform

<https://youtu.be/hY2jem5vq08>

#WildEye Southern Africa: The tech behind the mapping tool

https://youtu.be/Aliv_WjOWTM

#WildEye Southern Africa: Using the law to access data for combating wildlife crime

<https://youtu.be/m8TbeVcgyMI>

#WildEye Southern Africa: Using the law to access data for combating wildlife crime (PDF)

<https://oxpeckers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Using-the-law-to-access-wildlife-crime-data.pdf>

#WildEye Southern Africa: Data Wranglers and their experiences

https://youtu.be/iIW2W_0E0Es

#WildEye Southern Africa: Building a Community of Practice

<https://youtu.be/AVw4FTjztTI>

