

SCRIPT APOPO TANZANIA (c) 2011, Ruud Elmendorp

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PRESENTATION Landmines stink like hell, and rats have a very good smell. That's roughly the slogan of the so-called APOPO project in Tanzania. Their indigenous African giant pouched rats are trained to detect landmines. These rats are deployed in former conflict zones where landmines form a hazard. Worldwide it is a big problem. In 66 countries there are still landmines, which claim victims everyday. Also it makes the rare farming lands unusable. Since 2006 APOPO has run a fully operational mine clearance program in Mozambique. This country suffered from a bloody civil war until 1992, and 10,000nds of landmines are left behind. The rats there prove a big success, and APOPO is planning to expand operations into other countries.

BETA LENGTH 3'40"

This proud young lady is called Jennifer. She is one of the 300 rats at the training site at Morogoro in the heart of Tanzania.

SOUNDBITE RAT SNIFFING

At sunrise when it's still not too hot, Jennifer is sniffing for landmines. There are 1,500 neutralized mines buried here for practicing.

SOUNDBITE SNIFFING

QUOTE STEVE MLAMBITI, rat trainer

If there is a mine the rat will stop at the position where the mine is. It will associate by grooming and then after scratching.

The rats are motivated to do all this for a tasty reward after finding a mine.

SOUNDBITE RAT EATING BANANA

Steve is one of the 50 staff members here. His life changed because of an animal who usually digs through filth and garbage.

QUOTE STEVE MLAMBITI

It's improving my life. If I take care of this, taking care for the treatment, giving enough food. It's good my life through rats.

SOUNDBITE BART WEETJENS CHATTING WITH STAFF

The idea came from APOPO's Belgian founder Bart Weetjens. He is a practicing Zen Buddhist who has been working with rodents for many years.

QUOTE BART WEETJENS

Rats have a lot of advantages. They're much easier to train than for instance a dog, and with the low levels of education in this environment, rats form a very suitable detector.

So these small heroes are treated as children, and a cuddle here and there is common.

SOUNDBITE RAT CUDDLING MAN

However there is work to do, and it starts indoors by training to trace TNT, an explosive that is used in most landmines.

SOUNDBITE CLICK, REWARD

After work they relax in kennels, and there are cages for playing and for romantic moments leading to procreation. All looking like a good rat life, but still after 9 months of training they begin a series of tests to become accredited and begin work in the minefields of Mozambique.

SOUNDBITE MINE BLAST

QUOTE BART WEETJENS

They're too light to set off landmines. We haven't lost any animal in operation. We lose some of old age and diseases through food poisoning. But we haven't lost any animal in a minefield.

The mine action team found over 800 landmines in Mozambique in 2010, and returned over 796,000 square meters of land to the local population which can be used again for farming or infrastructure. For just over 1 Dollar per square meter, which is half than the usual cost for demining.

SOUNDBITE RAT SNIFFLING

And these precious pointed noses are now even sniffing for more. They started training to smell tuberculosis which is endemic in Tanzania.

QUOTE BART WEETJENS

Where microscopes in labs are accurate up to 60 per cent on routine basis. Detection rats can screen people and find 80 per cent of suspected TB patients.

Here the rats are training on human sputum samples containing the TB bacteria. If the rat finds TB, it starts scratching.

QUOTE JOHN FIDELIS, trainer

So the scratching indication we use it for indication for the rat to get reward.

For the time being detecting mines remains the core activity, and with success. So the programme is hoping to soon expand into other landmine-affected countries such as Angola.