

Embracing technology

By Ken Banks

Over the past few years the development community has made great strides in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in its work. Unfortunately, the conservation community has been a little slower off the mark and as technology today, in particular mobile phones and other mobile devices, becomes a part of everyday life for literally billions of people, there is clearly an opportunity to harness its potential.

However, technology, by its very nature, is technical! What's more, advances are occurring at such a rapid pace that very few conservation organizations have the capacity to investigate, adapt and implement them. Without doubt, partnerships between conservation NGOs, governments and the private sector provide the best opportunities to fill this gap. FFI's strong relationship with the Vodafone Group in Europe and now with Vodacom, the leading cellular network in South Africa, is a prime example of what can be achieved.

Traditional donor/recipient relationships stop and start with a cash donation. Many corporates, however, have much more to offer than just money – Vodafone, for example, has a huge pool of technical skills, resources and knowledge at its disposal. Sharing these with NGOs such as FFI can provide real, tangible benefits to *both* organizations and open doors to new technologies that might otherwise remain shut. FFI's *wildlive!* project, which aims to bring conservation news to mobile phones, is a case in point. In addition to funding development, Vodafone provided staff time and technical advice to FFI and, more importantly, access to its global mobile phone networks.

Through its relationship with companies such as Vodafone and Vodacom, FFI is today carrying out some of the most innovative ICT-based research within the conservation community. One project in particular – *t4cd*, or *Technologies for Conservation and Development* – is looking at ways in which governments, civil society, corporates, the private sector and conservation



Juan Pablo Moreiras / FFI

Sophisticated tracking systems are a useful weapon in the armoury of anti-poaching units.

NGOs can put technologies to work for the combined benefit of disadvantaged people and conservation. Although the initial focus of the project is Southern Africa – FFI is working in collaboration with ResourceAfrica, a South Africa-based NGO partner – many technologies such as hand-held data collection devices or animal tracking units have the potential to work anywhere in the world.

t4cd is unique in a number of ways. One of the first projects of its kind, it brings on board some key strategic technology partners, both South African and global. The project is producing the first comprehensive electronic library of ICT-based projects, technologies, grants, technology manufacturers and educational opportunities available to the conservation practitioner, both in the form of a website and an interactive CD. A recently convened symposium in Johannesburg brought together, for the first time, a wide range of conservation projects with a technology component and was a huge success (see page 27). *t4cd* is also in the process of introducing *wildlive!* to South Africa, with the financial and technical support of Vodacom, and in partnership with another South African NGO – the Endangered Wildlife Trust. The *t4cd* project is only one year old, but its potential impact is considerable.