VETERANS SPONSORED TO WORK WITH WILDLIFE AND COMBAT PTSD

Wednesday 18 April, 2018

Military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) will have the chance to travel to South Africa and work with endangered wildlife as part of their therapy thanks to support from Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC.

UK-based charity Veterans for Wildlife (V4W) has secured support from Lord Ashcroft for its innovative Footprints of Hope programme, which will see veterans care for baby rhinos orphaned by poaching as part of a structured series of activities.

V4W CEO and former Royal Marine Wesley Thomson said Footprints of Hope was based on the proven concept of animal-assisted therapy (AAT), in which pets and other animals have been used to help people suffering from exposure to trauma.

“By putting the needs of animals, often in a worse position than the participants, first, veterans will be able to gain perspective on their own lives and to find a sense of purpose in caring for something other than themselves,” Mr Thomson said.

“In this respect the programme will be similar to the life veterans knew in the military, where a high emphasis is placed on the ‘buddy’ system, where people are taught to look after each other.”

In the Footprints of Hope programme the ‘buddies’ are juvenile rhinos whose mothers have been slaughtered by poachers. About a thousand rhinos are killed every year in South Africa to feed a market in south-east Asia where rhino horn is prized as a status symbol and for unfounded medicinal qualities.

Footprints of Hope will involve a wellness retreat conducted at the Care For Wild Rhino Sanctuary in South Africa.

Veterans deeply affected by their wartime experiences will undertake a novel combination of activities including art, yoga, and day-to-day hands-on care of orphaned rhinos.

Mr Thomson said veterans would learn how to understand their own trauma and to adjust to it through human-animal connection.

Lord Ashcroft is a key figure in the veterans' community thanks to his work as the government’s special representative for veterans’ transition from military to civilian life. He is also a committed philanthropist.

Lord Ashcroft said: "I am delighted to be supporting this extremely worthwhile and innovative project and I plan to travel to South Africa at the end of the year to see the programme first hand. I am sure that this will provide a significant long-term benefit to veterans who have experienced trauma as a result of their military careers."

“Veterans for Wildlife would like to thank Lord Ashcroft for his generous support of this ground-breaking programme that will help men and women who have given so much for all of us,” Mr Thomson said.

Mr Thomson urged veterans who have suffered as a result of their service to contact the organisation at www.veterans4wildlife.org if they are interested in applying to attend the Footprints of Hope program in South Africa.

V4W also pairs military veterans with conservation and anti-poaching programmes in Africa in order to pass on the experience of former military personnel to those fighting to protect Africa’s rhinos, elephants and other endangered wildlife.

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