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Wilton Town Counsel goes undercover

WILTON -- Ken Bernhard may practice law in Connecticut, but he worked undercover overseas for a different cause.

During a recent trip to the African nation of Kenya, Bernhard worked with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), to conduct a sting operation in the underworld of poaching and ivory trading.

Poaching is often the first violation in a sequence of crimes, said Bernhard, of the illegal practice where elephants are hunted for their ivory tusks and other animals are killed for their furs or skins.

Bernhard, who has served as Wilton's town counsel since 1992, recounted his experience during a Wilton

Kiwanis Club meeting at the WEPCO Complex on Wednesday afternoon.

The trafficking of wildlife is the third most profitable (illegal) business in the world, behind drug dealing and

gun trafficking, said Bernhard. The catastrophic losses in Africa can be attributed to the demands of industrialized nations, including the United States.

The financial incentive to kill, capture and smuggle is astronomical, Bernhard added. For example, a kilogram

of raw ivory sells for \$40 in Kenya. It is valued at \$200 when it is smuggled into Somalia. By the time it arrives in China, Thailand or Japan, it is worth \$1,800. The tusk of a single elephant is worth \$18,000 in one

of those countries.

Protected by armed KWS rangers, Bernhard wore a wiretap on his undercover mission and spoke in code to

ivory dealers so he would not appear suspicious.

'I'm looking for something African, Bernhard said to dealers during the sting. If dealers do not comply, he

reiterated by saying, No, I'm looking for something really African.

Bernhard 's involvement in the investigation led to four or five arrests of ivory dealers, including a 60-year

old grandmother.

He potentially placed himself in harm's way by going on the mission. According to KWS Spokesman Paul

Udoto, six KWS rangers have died in the line of duty since December, a record high in such a short period.

The illegal trade continues to plague Kenya.

KWS rangers shot and killed three suspected poachers Tuesday in Tsavo East National Park in the latest in a

series of poacher killings amid a rise in elephant deaths, an official said Wednesday. Last week, rangers shot

and killed another three suspected poachers near Mount Kenya.

In 2007, Kenya lost 47 elephants to poaching. In 2008, the number rose to 145 elephants. In 2009, 271 elephants were killed, while 187 were killed in 2010, and 278 were killed last year.

Possession of ivory in Kenya is punishable with a two-year mandatory sentence if caught, according to

Bernhard. Bernhard is also a principal at the law firm, **Cohen and Wolf** in Westport, and has served as town counsel in

Weston from 2000 to 2009.

Some of the creatures that we love are under assault in Africa, said Bernhard. It really is a warfare out there.

What is happening in Africa slowly but relentlessly can only be called a destruction of nature.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.