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Bushman tracking catches muggers

Ancient skills and new technology end beach attacks by predicting where criminals will strike next - enabling cops to ambush them.
By EDWIN LOMBARD

A computer system that combines ancient Bushman tracking skills and modern technology has been used to catch a gang of muggers plaguing a popular tourist beach.

When Louis Liebenberg, a nature lover, environmentalist and anthropologist, settled in the Noordhoek area of Cape Town, he did not know that the Cybertracker tool he had developed for following wild animals would become a powerful crime-fighting tool.

Liebenberg studied the tracking techniques of Bushmen, learning how they followed animals and could even predict their movements.

Over 10 years he used this knowledge to develop software that is today used by Bushmen and other trackers working in South Africa's national parks.

Hearing about the Noordhoek beach attacks , Liebenberg offered to help the police. At first they were sceptical, not understanding what Bushmen and wild animals had to do with catching criminals.

"I went on my own to the area where the attacks took place," Liebenberg recalled this week.

"What I saw allowed me to plot the movements of the attackers on a digital map. It took me 10 months to convince the police of what I can do. Then I took an inspector with me to see for the first time what I was talking about."

He photographed shoe prints at the scene of an attack and loaded them onto his hand-held computer.

Plotting the assailants' movements using satellite positioning, and using his computer software to make predictions, he was able to give police vital information about where the muggers came from, where they had gone and how they operated.
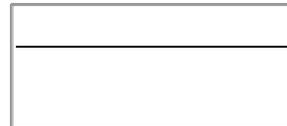
Inspector Heinrich Smith of the Fish Hoek police station said that once the criminals' "spoor" had been identified , officers waited for the next attack.

"We tracked the spoor of these guys to the bush and compiled a modus operandi, basically a pattern of how these guys operate," Smith said.

GOTCHA: Louis Liebenberg with his hand-held Cybertracker, which has now proved itself as a crime-fighting tool as well as a way to track wildlife Picture: AMBROSE PETERS

'We tracked the spoor and compiled a modus operandi'

"Louis was able to track the spoor, seeing how they approached, where they would lie in wait and how they would operate. He also gave us a position where we should lie so that we would not be seen by the attackers."

The police did not have to wait long for Liebenberg's system to prove itself. On the first day of their observation, a group of criminals emerged from the bushes - almost exactly where Liebenberg had predicted they would.

The shoe prints Liebenberg had stored on his handheld computer matched the shoes the robbers were wearing.

"We could see where the shoe was worn and where it was broken," said Smith.

Police arrested four people that day. One of the suspects got such a fright that he fled into the ocean and drowned while trying to swim away.

Liebenberg explained this week that Cybertracker recorded vital information on crime scenes, eliminating paperwork. This data was then analysed, producing information that police could use to predict how criminals would operate.

Smith added that Cybertracker could be particularly useful for police investigating stock theft.

Liebenberg's hand-held device has been so popular with conservationists that the Kruger National Park recently bought 115.

Judith Kruger, a data analyst at the park, said field rangers, many of whom were illiterate, were able to capture vital information on the animals in the park which could be used by researchers.