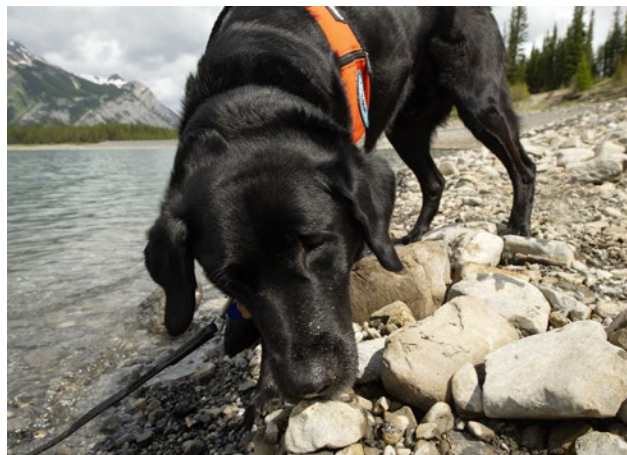


CAN YOUR DOG BECOME A CONSERVATION CANINE?

By Isabelle Groc



K9 trainer and instructor Kyoko Johnson once had a golden retriever named Luka who did not like normal dog activities such as fetch, swimming, and playing with other dogs. She attended a seminar about canine nose work at a pet dog trainer conference and decided to try scent detection activities with Luka. “He just loved it and he gained a lot of confidence,” Johnson says. “Nose work enables dogs to do something they are good at doing, instead of being stuck in the human world where we don’t let them practice their instincts.” This is how Johnson became passionate about nose work and decided to teach scent detection classes in Hawai’i, where she resides. “I felt it was important to share this with other pet dog owners because my dog got so much out of it.”



Rediscovering dogs’ noses

In nose work classes, dogs get to use their noses to hunt for a favourite food or toy. The canines search vehicles,

containers, indoors and outdoors settings so that they are exposed to the full experience of scent detection with a variety of distractions and air flow challenges. Then a target odour — usually essential oils — is introduced, and dogs learn that every time they detect this scent, they are rewarded with treats or a favourite treat. “You almost see a look of surprise on the dog’s face the first time they do this,” Johnson notes.

We have lived with dogs for thousands of years and many of our canine companions had working roles then. Today, lifestyles have changed drastically and dogs have lost the jobs they were historically meant to do. In our modern, urban world, canines no longer have sheep to herd or animals to hunt, and they don’t get to fully use their amazing sense of smell for those jobs. In fact, humans often discourage them from sniffing, and dogs have become dependent on us for everything. “We don’t ask dogs to be independent often. Most of the time the dog is looking to you for directions every step of the



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are increasingly being put to work in a variety of wildlife conservation projects to help the world's most vulnerable species. Detection dogs are quick and efficient and help scientists collect vital information about plants and animals. Because their expert noses can smell what humans can't, dogs are sent to find tiny elusive or rare endangered animals and plants in huge areas. They detect unwanted and harmful species, find animal traces such as minuscule scat or caterpillar larvae that are almost invisible to the human eye, detect illegally obtained wildlife products such as rhino horns, shark fins and elephant ivory, and retrieve animal carcasses by following scents hidden in deep vegetation or even in the water.

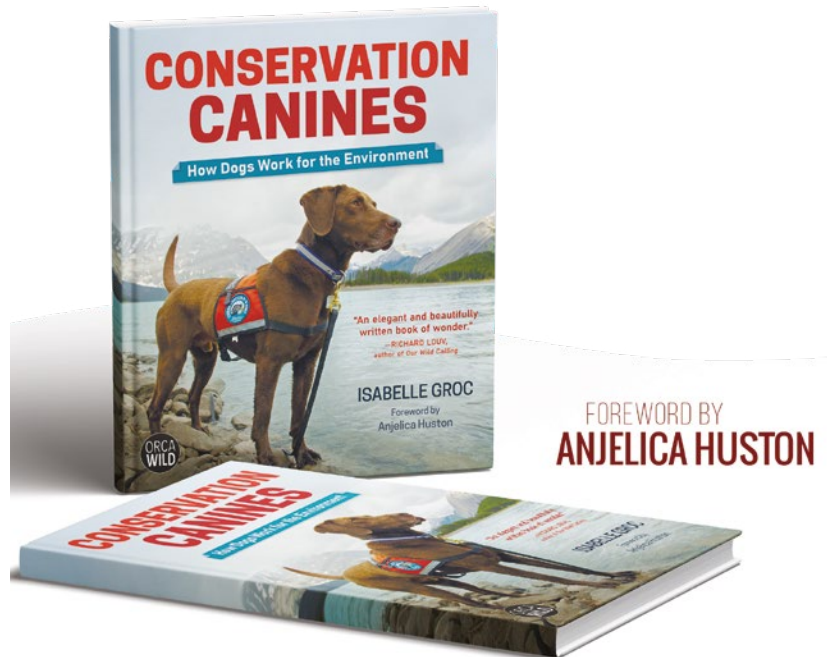
way,” says Christina Young, a Nanaimo-based canine behaviour consultant and canine coach “A lot of dogs are under-stimulated mentally,” she adds.

This is where nose work comes in. Scent detection activities tap into dogs’ natural instinct to hunt, get them to think independently, and can significantly improve their physical and mental wellbeing. Young now incorporates nose work in most of her training plans for dogs with aggression and reactivity issues. “It gives the dogs a positive, happy outlet that satiates them, tires them out and get them out of anxious, reactive or frustrated mindsets,” Young says.

Conservation: A new purpose for unwanted dogs

For some high energy dogs, a chance to use their sniffing power has given them a new purpose in helping humans solve complex environmental problems. Dogs have long been valued for helping with difficult tasks such as searching for drugs and explosives or locating missing persons. But today canine skills

These four-legged conservation heroes do not need to be a specific breed. In fact, animals chosen to be conservation dogs often start out as unwanted pets. They are highly energetic and need lots of exercise. While most dogs love toys, these ones have an obsessive play drive. In a home where their needs are





not met, they can become aggressive and destructive. They do not make good pets and are often surrendered by their owners to animal shelters. Sadly once in shelters, they have little hope of being adopted. Yet their intense energy, obsession with play and ability to focus make them ideal conservation dogs.

Of course not every shelter dog is cut out for wildlife search missions and candidates are carefully evaluated and trained by the organisations that work in this field. Over the years, Heath Smith, cofounder of Rogue Detection Teams — a Washington-based group that utilises detection dogs for conservation projects — has facilitated the rescue of over 40 energetic, unwanted dogs from shelters to redirect their insatiable play drive to wildlife conservation. “Often when dogs join our team we can see that they can be hesitant to partake in certain behaviours, like tugging on a ball or even just roaming a bit further from us. So we work to let them be themselves. We want them to be independent, confident and trust us.”

However, successful working conservation dogs must have more than just a good nose. They must be physically fit, able to tolerate heat and cold and have sufficient stamina to search for hours in rugged and often inhospitable conditions. A dog without the drive to want to search every day and play ball will not do well, no matter how fit it is. The success of a wildlife mission also largely depends on the handler and the teamwork involved. The two-legged partner must know how to work with the dog and help unleash its true sniffing power. While the canine’s job is solely to smell, the handler must pay attention to changes in the environment and consider things such as wind speed and direction. “Just like not every dog is a conservation canine, not every person is a bounder,” warns Jennifer Hartman, a bounder and field scientist for Rogue Detection Teams. The group refers to the handlers that work with the dogs in conservation as “bounders” because they are bound to their dogs and to the ecosystems in which they work in.

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Citizen science meets canine scent detection



Hawai'i, an organisation that facilitates the research and use of ecological detection dogs in the Hawaiian archipelago.

In addition to conducting field surveys with her professional dog-handler teams, Johnson has recruited volunteer pet-dog handler teams from her scent detection classes to conduct field work and contribute to conservation. Johnson currently has five volunteer pet dog owners who search for the invasive devil weed, a plant that is highly toxic to livestock and threatens the native ecosystem in O'ahu. The dogs are useful because they can lead their handlers to plants that are visually obscured by thick vegetation or distance. Johnson carefully screens both the dogs and the owners to participate in this program that requires physical stamina and high drive.

Even though pet owners may not pursue nose work for field conservation purposes or long-term activities such as competitions, anyone can

benefit from unleashing their dog's sniffing abilities. "It is something that every dog can do," Johnson says. "Pet owners also benefit from trying it because it gives them an understanding of what a dog is really about and how they perceive their world."

Pet owners who have taken scent detection classes with their dogs may not be able to do what specialized conservation dogs do in the field, but there is still some potential for citizen science to help with environmental projects. In addition to training pet dogs, Kyoko Johnson is also the lead K9 trainer of Conservation Dogs of