No Wizards, Just Patient Teachers

Bart Weetjens  
APOPO

Jina Kim

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The presence of landmines all over the world is an issue the United Nations and other world organizations are trying to address. But the difficult question lies in how to find landmines that are undetectable using metal detectors because the iron-containing, laterite soils in Sub-Saharan Africa trigger metal detectors indiscriminately. Since every signal his hit with a chance of being a mine, there are more landmines in the world than ever before. The authors describe the basic idea behind this unique concept.

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APOPO is a Belgian-African nongovernmental organization that trains rats to be at new mine-detection tool. The authors describe the basic idea behind this unique concept.
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Because the iron-containing, Laterite soils in Sub-Saharan Africa trigger metal detectors indiscriminately. This is why APOPO recently started Adamu to leave his motionless yellow baby rats in Tanzania. He says that during the first three months he will be in Tanzania, he will spend half on teaching two habits from finger training up to a level where they can walk on a leash in the open, searching independently for training targets in a sandbox. This training provides me with sufficient skills to train the whole training process, and to teach others how to train rats. According to Adamu, the purpose of the Tanzania training course is to “learn the finesse of rat training. This idea is [the] day I train an independent Mozambican MDR capacity. To reach this goal, APOPO gives us the opportunity to learn all the aspects of an MDR program, especially the preparatory training stages, which we lacked so far in Mozambique.”

Rats are also easy to train and tame, which is useful in detecting mines quickly. According to Adamu, “Rats work quite independently from their trainers. They deposit food on their trainer’s position, in a similar way, which allows the animals to be easily directed by multiple handlers. In addition, due to the small size of the rats, they are less likely to die or suffer from training or an unhealthy diet. They are inexpensive to maintain.

In a real minefield, trained pregnant rats, usually between 6 and 8 weeks of age, will walk on a leash. Two trainers guide a single rat on a leash. While one trainer rewards a rat for correct behavior by offering food, the other trainer will note the rat’s behavior to ensure that the rat has indeed located a mine or piece of suspected ordnance. MDRs state that they have located a mine or UXO by transmitting the rat’s behavior in the vicinity of the mine.

Adamo thinks APOPO trainers must be patient above all else when it comes to training the rats. “You don’t need to be a wizard to train rats. You merely need a lot of patience. And in addition, it’s important that your animals have a problem that they don’t know how to deal with, there are always new experimental protocols to help them out,” he says.

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