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Murrysville video firm gives a window to wild

Remote cameras peek at rare species

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PixController Inc. in Murrysville has developed motion-sensing cameras that have been used to capture videos and stills of wildlife, worldwide. The small, self-contained units are assembled in Murrysville and designed by Bill Powers, right, who is with his wife, Donna.

Emerging from jungle darkness into full view, a Javan rhinoceros and her calf casually inspect their surroundings -- that is, until the mother senses something amiss.

She stares straight into the lens of the hidden video camera that's filming her.

And, as the film shows, rhinos don't tolerate trespassers, living or technological. She sniffs before attacking, and the video blinks, then dies.

But the system, developed by an upstart Murrysville company, successfully captured the first video of Javan rhinos in the wild -- a sizable accomplishment, given there are only about 60 known to exist.

PixController Inc., owned and operated by Bill Powers and his wife, Donna, produces remote surveillance systems, motion-activated wildlife scouting cameras and wireless-triggered cellular and digital video recorder systems.

PixController equipment is attracting accolades from wildlife enthusiasts for being reliable, affordable and efficiently sized. The camera and video systems, smaller than a lunchbox, can remain in the wilds for months without losing battery power.

Mr. Powers has designed the 30 systems his company sells, while Mrs. Powers does marketing and advertising.

Beginning in 1999, they worked out of the garage of their Murrysville home and only recently moved operations into a storefront at Murry Corporate Park, where they develop, manufacture and ship their products. They have seven part-time employees.

The company features motion-activated digital camera and video systems used for wildlife photography and law enforcement surveillance.

Its Web site, www.pixcontroller.com, where it sells its products, also features videos of wildlife in Western Pennsylvania, including bald eagles eating carcasses, a roaming black bear, and red and gray foxes, including fox pups playing near their den. Many of its videos are posted at www.youtube.com/pixcontroller.

Internationally, PixController systems have captured the Javan rhino, the even rarer Sumatran rhino in Borneo and a rare Malayan tiger.

"PixController's cameras are an amazing leap forward in the tools we use to study these extremely rare and secretive species," said Christy Williams, head of the World Wildlife Federation's Asian elephant and rhino program.

Before PixController video cameras existed, the foundation used still cameras to get single pictures, but the flash disturbed the animals. PixController cameras, Dr. Williams said, allow more detailed study of animals without producing noise or a light source.

"This has enabled us to take a much more detailed and longer look at individuals of two of the most endangered rhino species," he said.

Wildlife is an important but not exclusive focus of PixController technology. Company video cameras have captured space shuttle launches from just 200 yards away -- far too close for humans. The company's surveillance systems for law enforcement use the same technology.

Mr. Powers, a 44-year-old Kent State University graduate, started the company to develop a more efficient method of taking wildlife photography and

movies. Originally, the company sold 4,000 kits to allow people to use 35 mm or digital cameras or video to photograph wildlife.

Key to PixController systems are infrared lighting systems and motion detectors, along with software that combines surveillance and photography. A recent development is a cell phone system that takes, then sends, photos to a computer.

Success in filming some of the world's most elusive animals has helped PixController capture a growing market.

A two-minute video of the Sumatran rhino in Borneo was broadcast on ABC's "Good Morning America," "NBC Evening News," Fox, CNN and the BBC, among other networks. Only 25 to 50 Sumatrans remain in the interior forests of Sabah, Malaysia, and they are so secretive that a first-ever still photo of the rhino was taken just two years ago.

The video "could not have been better," Stephen Hogg, head of audio visual at the World Wildlife Federation in Malaysia, said in a release. "This is further proof that these cameras do work and are of value to our conservation work."

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