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## The War On Rhinos

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During August a flurry of blogs, webpostings and newspaper reports focused on the worsening rhino crisis in Southern Africa. I attempted to summarize the information in this article, adding some comments and thoughts of my own.



Photo credit: John Van Den Berg

On August 18<sup>th</sup> one male white rhino was killed with one shot to the head by poachers armed with an AK-47 assault rifle close to Masinda Camp in the iMfolozi Game Reserve - a place that is world famous for its successful restoration and conservation of the white rhino. Later the same day, a 40 years old rhino cow with a horn measuring 93 cm was shot dead presumably with an R5 assault rifle near Roedtan in Limpopo province; the animal was found with hamstrings and horns chopped with an axe. On August 23<sup>rd</sup> an armed gang of ten men held up two farm workers before proceeding to shoot and kill two rhinos on a farm between Modimolle and Vaalwater in South Africa's Limpopo province. The brazen daylight attack near Modimolle was unusual, in that most reports of the 300 rhinos believed to have been poached in South Africa since the beginning of last year suggest the attacks were done stealthily and mostly at night.

The highly organized poaching syndicates, probably steered by Asian mafia-like structures are using state of the art technical equipment like night-vision technique, global positioning systems from the air and ground, all kind of aircraft like microlights, helicopters and small fixed wings, high-tech air guns and cross bows delivering darts with efficient veterinary drugs and high-powered hunting rifles. Invariably they are heavily armed and ruthlessly willing to open fire on anyone who gets in

their way. They are working with top-of-the range communication gear and surveillance/spotting and action teams; they are also not shy to use substantial bribes to make some security and conservation officials look the other way or collude in the killings; they pay high fees to induce people smuggling horns across international borders – and so on.

End of July 2010, the chief executive of South African National Parks (SANParks), David Mabunda said in a statement that "Perhaps it is no longer appropriate to refer to [the] illegal killing of rhinos as poaching given the levels of sophistication, violence, precision and the money behind it. We are dealing with unprecedented high levels of organized crime which the Police and all security agencies are helping to defeat." [Wildlife Ranching South Africa](#) (WRSA), a nonprofit association established in 2005, said in a recent press release that "over 180 rhino have

*Continued on Page 2*

Contents Volume 8, Issue No. 4	Page
The War On Rhinos	1
Angola: Giant Sable Update	4
Rhino Darting In South Africa	5
Uganda Suspends Trophy Hunting	5
PHASA Counters Unfounded ARA Accusations	6
Understanding Animal Rights	6
Conservation Status Of The Lion In Mozambique	8
Rowland Ward Lion Taken In Mozambique	10
Illegal PAC Hunts Sold In Mozambique	10
The Zambia Lion Project	10
Towards Sustainable Wildlife Management Areas In Tanzania	11
Tanzania: Serengeti Shall Not Die! Really?	11
Fence Leads To Mass Mortalities	13
Agriculture Development And Wildlife - Conservation in Africa: Call For A "Green" Revolution	14
Lion Trading The Same As Cow Trading For Some	17
Arabian Oryx Reintroduction In Abu Dhabi – UAE	18
CIC: National Parks And Sustainable Hunting: Two Sides Of The Same Coin	19
New Kenyan Scheme: KWS Asks The World For Funds!	20
Godzilla Versus King Kong – East African Style	20
World Record Nyala Versus South Africa's Conservation Revolution	22
South Africa: Overseas Hunters Must Comply With The Law	24
In Memoriam: Gilberto Vicente	25
The Selous Game Reserve	26
Peter Sarsfeld To Sing For Conservation	28



Continued from Page 1  
The War On Rhinos

been killed in the past 8 months alone in South Africa. This [threatens] our African heritage and the safety and livelihood of many thousands of game farmers. The situation is now out of control and urgent new initiatives will need to be taken to deal with the escalating crisis."



Photo credit: John Van Den Berg

In this increasingly brutal war some desperate rhino owners have been reported to exploring biological warfare. There have been rumors that they have or are planning to inject toxins into horns which are essentially tightly packed hairs. The toxins wouldn't have a way into the animals' bloodstream and cyanide or any similar toxin would, theoretically, remain in the horn material when it is ground up. The assumption obviously is that a global awareness of poisoned rhino horn might act as deterrent for consumers of traditional Chinese medicines from using those that are or are said to containing powdered rhino horn. The demand for rhino horn could thus be dried up and the poachers will have no incentive to kill rhinos.

A recent, but questionable, report from the "Bangkok Star" circulated on Facebook about a Thai man who died after consuming medicines which were purported to contain rhino horn said that "the source of the contamination is still to be verified but it is thought to be from a private game farm somewhere in southern Africa." Commenting on this incident WRSA said "while there is a huge empathy for the game farmers, WRSA does not support this unilateral action.

Although many people (especially from the extreme animals' rights corner) have applauded the idea of poisoning rhino horn, it is not a good solution to the rhino poaching crisis. Innocent people who might not even know they are taking rhino horn could die and if any person dies from consuming poisoned horn material, it is murder. The people who actually do the poaching and smuggling – and who finance the sordid business would in all likelihood remain unharmed. A better way to tackle the consumer side of the rhino trade may be that the governments of the consumer countries in the Far East promote a general awareness that rhino horn is completely useless as a medication. In high-profile publicity they could expose the scams involving fake rhino horn in traditional medicine, so users may think twice before they part with their money.

Rhino horn, a time-honored component of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for thousands of years, has been credited with the potency to cure an unusually wide array of mala-

dies from headaches to pus-filled boils – and even evil spirits, hallucinations and bewitching nightmares. Ironically, it seems the only condition rhino horn is not prescribed for is a lagging libido, although western media often report to the contrary.



NGS stock photo by Steve Raymer

Research in 1983 by Hoffmann-LaRoche, and 25 years later during a study at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) also concluded that rhino horn has no medical properties. Testing confirmed that "rhino horn, like fingernails, is made of agglutinated hair" and "has no analgesic, anti-inflammatory, anti-spasmodic nor diuretic properties" and "no bactericidal effect could be found against suppuration and intestinal bacteria." The tests at ZSL confirmed what by Hoffmann-LaRoche researchers found earlier. "There is no evidence at all that any constituent of rhino horn has any medical property. Medically, it's the same as if you were chewing your own nails." Scientists at the Chinese University of Hong Kong also failed to confirm the alleged efficacy of rhino horn as a useful medicine. Interestingly, the ZSL analysis revealed that rhino horn contains identifying elements which could provide information about where the horns originated.

WRSA repeatedly called for controlled legal trade in rhino horns as a way to help address the rhino poaching crisis saying that legal trade rhino horn via the strictest controls and standards, overseen by the South African authorities is key to the solution. Proponents of opening formal trade argue that it allows for more transparency and profits that can be used for conservation (see also Michael Eustace's article in African Indaba No. 8-1 "*Rhino Poaching: Legalizing Horn Trade May Be the Answer*"). Michael 't Sas-Rolfes, a South African wildlife conservation economist with specialist expertise in trade in endangered species worked extensively from 1990-1995 on the rhino issue especially on economic approaches to rhino horn management and the world trade in rhino horn. 'T Sas-Rolfes concluded in his report to TRAFFIC/WWF that legal trade was probably the best long-term solution, but the final report never got published (probably because of 't Sas-Rolfes' conclusions). In 1995 some of the work was however summarized in a publication "Rhinos: Conservation, Economics and Trade-Offs" by the UK Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). 'T Sas-Rolfes also worked on the tiger products trade, which is in many ways closely related to the rhino horn trade. A major study on the tiger bone trade will be released in the next few weeks. His work increasingly demon-

Continued on Page 3



Continued from Page 2  
The War On Rhinos

strates that the continuing CITES trade ban might be a high-risk policy for rhinos and tiger, and may in fact be driving both closer to extinction.

The 2009 IUCN/TRAFFIC report [African and Asian Rhinoceroses--Status, Conservation and Trade](#) stated that the illegal rhino horn trade progressively worsened since 2006 and Southern Africa emerging as a hotspot. The combined numbers of theft from government facilities and private collections, abuse of legal trophy hunting and illegal private sector sales suggest that a minimum of 1,521 rhino horns entered the illegal trade since 2006 (a two-fold increase over the previous period). Trade routes shifted from Yemen, where rhino horns were used crafting dagger handles to the traditional medicine markets in China and Viet Nam. China as signatory of CITES has banned trade in rhinoceros horn and its derivatives in 1993, but it appears that the use of rhino horn continues unabated in the TCM markets.

Since rhino horn has been proven to be totally ineffective as TCM ingredient, opening a legal trade route is however probably not the golden bullet for the desperately sought solution.

Why do millions of people persist in their belief that rhino horn is a miracle cure for all? Is this simply because they do not have access to accurate information? Or has the rhino horn business become so profitable that **belief in the curative properties of rhino horn is actually encouraged** as Rhishja Larson of [Saving Rhinos LLC](#) assumes? The ghastly trade where buyers in Viet Nam and China are willing to pay as much as US\$1,000,000 for a single rhino horn is fueled by superstition, greed and skulduggery. **Should we fuel this sordid environment with a "legal" rhino horn trade?**

Yet, there might be still ample room for discussion and good arguments for the controlled horn trade issue. However, it seems to be clear that consumer education must play a major role. Hence the governments of China and Viet Nam face a major challenge to their credibility in an increasingly conservation-minded world. Apart from consumer education, syndicated commercial poaching, illegal wildlife trading and smuggling should be dealt with harshly within each country's judicial system. The Chinese government and many of the Far Eastern countries do so successfully (and sometimes against the pleadings of western governments) in case of drug smuggling. Their judicial systems have the clout to deliver the crippling blow to those who are profiteering from steering the rhino poaching pandemic. In Africa we can only stop the killings – we cannot eliminate the sinister forces guiding the African poachers. In the depressed rural economic environment there will always be willing (and poorly paid in relation to overall profits) accomplices. Our governments need to stress this in their political talks.

In June 2010 the South African Department of Environmental Affairs published a "National Strategy for the Safety and Security of Rhinoceros Populations in South Africa" The strategy focuses on strategic planning and critical intervention strategies:

- Implementing an immediate action plan aimed at mitigating the current escalation in the poaching of rhino and the illegal trade in rhino horns;
- Securing the shared commitment of government (at national and provincial level), private land owners, local communities and international stakeholders, as well as the necessary financial and manpower resources and political will to

implement this policy;

- Supporting the establishment of a national coordination structure for information management, law-enforcement response, investigation and prosecution;
- Developing an integrated and coordinated national information management system for all information related to rhino species in order to adequately inform security related decisions;
- Investigating proactive security measures aimed at facilitating regulated and controlled international trade in the species, and any associated by-products.

The recent spate of attacks on the country's rhino now prompted various bodies to unite in the fight against rhino poaching at the **LeadSA Rhino Summit** held at Primedia Place on Monday 23 August 2010 (on this day two rhinos were brazenly killed – see introduction). **LeadSA** initiated by South Africa's [Independent Newspapers](#) company and [Radio 702](#) aims at inspiring positive actions and so keeping alive the constructive spirit created by hosting the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

Sam Ferreira – SANParks representative and chairman of the newly formed committee to tackle rhino poaching stated after the meeting that a coordinated effort between all stakeholders will address the problem of rhino poaching in South Africa. The partners will look at what can be done to tackle the demand for rhino horn. The intention of the committee is to improve communication and coordination among the anti-poaching initiatives by SANParks, government, police and security agencies, private game reserves and rhino owners as well as other conservation and wildlife organizations. The initial priorities of the committee are:

- agree on a national anti-rhino poaching reporting number to allow the public to blow the whistle on poachers;
- coordinate the provision of intelligence from all groups to the National Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit;
- coordinate a national fund raising campaign for specific anti-poaching initiatives and
- run an information campaign about rhino poaching and the use of rhino horn.

Plans are going ahead for the establishment of a combined Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit within the next few weeks. The unit would include SANParks environmental protection services, the police, state intelligence services, SA Revenue Services, SA Customs, rhino owners and wildlife organizations.

The resolution was endorsed by South African National Parks; The Hawks; South African Police Service; Identipet/ID Africa; Space for Elephants Foundation; 50:50; NSPCA Wildlife Unit; Spots; Wildlife ID; Professional Hunters Association of South Africa; African Outfitter; WESSA/Taylor Environmental; Entabeni LGSR; Legend Lodges; Wildlife and Environmental Society of South Africa; Game Rangers Association of South Africa; Private Rhino Owners Association; Vaalkop NR; Endangered Wildlife Trust; SANParks Honorary Rangers; Mission Rhino; Mango Groove; Crimeline; Shout; EBlockwatch; Maquba Ntombela Found; CAA; StopRhinoPoaching.com; Yellowwood; Grey SA; Wildlife Ranching SA; Wildlife Group/SAVA; South African Veterinary Association; Department of Environmental Affairs; ConservSecurity; Aquavision; Working Wild.

**[For HAWK Hotline Numbers turn to Page 7](#)**

