



RENAUD FULCONIS

Hot potatoes in Mokala National Park

The 10th meeting of the IUCN/SSC African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) was always going to be crucial, given the current rhino poaching crisis that has escalated so dramatically. When we last met, in May 2008, the talk was of rhino reintroduction programmes and how to monitor for maximum population growth, with workshops on conservation priorities, community-based conservation models and compliance with CITES regulations.

Cathy Dean | Director

How everything has changed. 2010 saw 333 rhinos poached in South Africa – the most since the Rhino Wars of the 1970s and 1980s – and the gloomy prediction for 2011 is that we could see as many as 1,000 animals killed.

This put a whole different light on our discussions during the six-day meeting in Mokala National Park, with a heavy emphasis on security and on consolidating the most important existing populations. And hot potatoes aplenty.

Tom Milliken of TRAFFIC set the scene with a report on links between Vietnam and the poaching crisis. As already discussed in a key document, CoP15 Doc. 45.1 Annex¹: 'In 2003, for the first time, South Africa issued CITES permits for nine rhino trophies and two rhino horns to be exported to Vietnam... Vietnamese

nationals reportedly conducted 203 white rhino hunts in South Africa in 2005-07, which would have yielded 406 rhino horns; South African exports, however, only account for 268 horns to Vietnam during this same period, suggesting that one-third of these hunts took place without the subsequent acquisition of CITES documents.'

That much we knew already. However, Tom went on to explain that Vietnam has no professional hunters, no hunting associations, and no culture of collecting and displaying trophies. Furthermore, no private individual is allowed to own a gun. It is illegal to hunt in Vietnam; the only hunters are poachers by default. So who are the 107 Vietnamese who have applied for hunting permits in South Africa? And who are the private game farm owners who are violating CITES regulations by side-stepping the permit system?

The same CoP15 Doc. 45.1 Annex reports that since 2000, Chinese data suggest that South Africa has exported 141 live rhinos to China. So where are the facilities? Where are the husbandry guidelines? Where are the studbooks for the Endangered Species breeding programmes that zoos in Europe, Australia and the USA maintain to ensure optimum genetic diversity?

Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa all presented on their responses to the poaching crisis. Here too there are problems. Kenya gave an example of an armed intruder arrested in a private sanctuary in Laikipia, who was charged with trespass and was sentenced to one day's community service. Zimbabwe showed pictures of an unlicensed heavy weapon concealed in the tailgate of a 4x4: fine \$100. South Africa made 156 arrests in 2010 and almost 50 in the first two and a half months in 2011, but has only achieved four convictions (many of the cases are pending). Court prosecutions need to be speeded up if they are to act as a deterrent; sentencing guidelines need to be set much higher; and we need to catch criminals higher up the food chain, not just the guys who pull the trigger.

Don't get me wrong: there are many, many really good people working in rhino conservation who need our funds to buy the basic tools of the trade: GPSs, cameras, camping equipment, uniforms, vehicles etc. We have to continue to support community conservation and environmental education programmes if we are to enlist the support of local communities to act as informers if strangers come into their villages, asking questions about rhinos.

But what is needed, just as much as funding, is government commitment: to enforce the laws of their countries; to increase the severity of sentences for wildlife crimes; to clamp down on abuses of the trophy hunting and live export permits; to support Parks staff after armed conflicts with poachers, so that rangers are not charged with shooting an armed trespasser; and to share cross-border intelligence. With those in place, we can win this battle.

STOP PRESS... Stop Press... Stop Press

The official press release issued after the meeting highlighted that black and white rhino numbers have increased, to 4,800 and 20,100 respectively, but warned that, in spite of these modest increases, African rhinos are facing the worst poaching crisis for decades. To read the full press release visit: www.savetherhino.org

¹ Available to download at tinyurl.com/6fdn3lr



Above: Raoul du Toit, Executive Director of the Lowveld Rhino Trust in Zimbabwe

Below: Joe Okori, WWF-ARP Coordinator, talks to Michelle Gadd of USFWS RTCF



Grants

Save the Rhino awarded \$5,000 to help cover the cost of this meeting. SRI's Trustees also awarded \$10,000 towards the core activities of the African Rhino Specialist Group's Secretariat.

