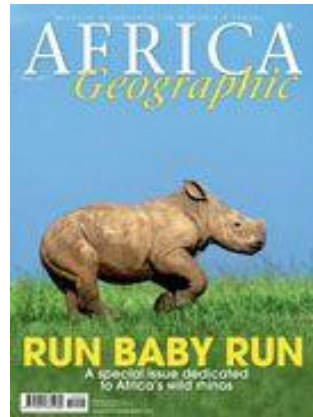


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April 2012: All about rhinos

Special issue - rhinos & the poaching crisis

80 and counting...

That's the number of rhinos killed in South Africa in the first two months of 2012. We dedicate this entire issue to finding out about rhinos and their precious horn, establishing exactly what is driving the poaching onslaught and examining the pros and cons of suggested solutions.

features

All about rhinos

Find out what we know about Africa's rhino species – how many there are and where they live – and about their horns, the unique evolutionary attribute that arguably makes them the most controversial and written-about animals of our time.

A chequered past

Prior to colonial times, Africa's rhino population across all species is thought to have numbered in the hundreds of thousands, possibly over a million. From the 1800s to the present, our summary tells their story. Rhino numbers, however, remained guesswork until the 1960s – and even today there is an element of uncertainty that is compounded by secrecy for security reasons.



The crisis

Crisis? What crisis? After all, rhino numbers for both species in southern Africa are actually increasing. It sounds crazy given a poaching scenario that is seemingly so out of hand, but it is true. It doesn't mean that rhinos in the wild aren't in trouble though – they are. We unpick the inner workings of the poaching syndicates and look at what we know about the Vietnamese and Chinese consumers who are driving the demand.



The solutions

We know rhinos are in trouble. We know we want to save them. But how do we do this, in the face of such seemingly overwhelming odds? The proposed solutions are as hotly debated as they are numerous. Do we increase security and penalties, should we stop legal trophy hunting or focus our efforts on changing mindsets in Asia? We evaluate every one, including the hottest potato of them all: calls to legalise the trade in horn.

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Peter Borchert
Founder

We chose our engaging little model for the cover of this issue for two reasons: relief from the brutal images that inevitably accompany so many stories about rhinos these days, and as a message of encouragement: for as long as there are rhinos being born that will grow up in the wildest of possible circumstances, there is hope for the species. Our exhortation 'RUN BABY RUN' is, therefore, as much a call for our baby pachyderm to be the essence of what it is, as it is a call to run for its very life.

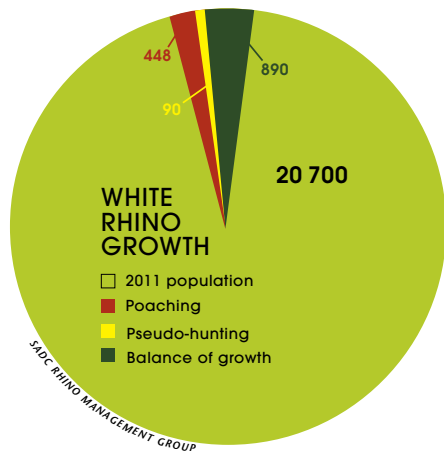


THE CRISIS

Crisis? What crisis? After all, rhino numbers for both species in southern Africa are actually increasing. It sounds crazy given a poaching scenario that is seemingly so out of hand, but it is true. It doesn't mean that rhinos in the wild aren't in trouble though - they are. We unpick the inner workings of the poaching syndicates and look at what we know about the Vietnamese and Chinese consumers who are driving the demand.



UNDERSTANDING THE ASSAULT



Behind the current surge in poaching lies a complex web of criminality – syndicates, foot soldiers, corrupt insiders – factors that make it especially hard to quell the onslaught. **Peter Borchert** pieces together what we know about the inner workings of a rotten business.

In recent historical times rhino populations have never been as high as they are now, with the total 2011 tally, as estimated by the

IUCN, standing at 20 700 white and 4 800 black rhinos. By comparison, at their nadir in 1895, white rhinos numbered no more than 200, and in 1995 black rhinos reached an all-time low of 2 410. So, should we not be celebrating an African conservation success story rather than talking of a crisis?

Well, as so often is the case, the story is more complicated than that. And in many respects it gets murkier the deeper you go. True, rhino numbers are on the increase and current breeding data from the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group show that, in the right circumstances, white rhinos would increase by 9–9.5 per cent and black rhinos by 5–5.5 per cent year on year.

But the right circumstances don't exist. Enter factors that would make the plot for a novel seem far-fetched – poachers, unscrupulous hunters, veterinarians and conservators gone wrong, modern automatic weapons, chainsaws, anaesthetics, a

PROFILING THE POACHERS

Subsistence poachers. Snaring or hunting rhinos for food, usually by people from poor communities near a reserve, is a thing of the past. Before 2007–08, rhino poaching was done on a small scale and probably involved subsistence poachers; nowadays it is far more structured.

Commercial poachers. Responsible for the majority of incidents, these poachers work in well-organised groups and usually have a military background. The groups, comprising four to six individuals, are highly mobile and well armed, and have good means of communication. They infiltrate the local community, asking about the whereabouts of rhinos in the area, stake out the rhino farms and plan their attacks. If the shooter is not skilled, random shots are fired at the rhino's head and chest, and often at its knees to prevent it from running away. The horns are usually removed very roughly, with an axe or a panga. These groups are most active in the late afternoon or at night, when they take advantage of the full moon. Pick-ups are well planned, with weapons and horns often hidden for collection later, and the poachers having a change of clothes and shoes to avoid being easily identified at a road-block. They are paid on delivery of the horns, and the remuneration is high.

Skilled poachers. There have been incidents where a rhino has fallen from a single shot indicating that the poacher is a skilled marksman. These people have vehicle support and may remove the horn with surgical precision.

Chemical poachers. These are the most professional poachers of all. Having scouted an area for rhinos, sometimes from a helicopter, they dart their target with an often lethal dose of immobilising drug, which causes the animal to collapse very quickly and, unlike gunfire, has the advantage of being silent. Although highly organised and relatively low-risk, this type of poaching is seldom encountered.

Source: www.stophinopoaching.com



KARL AMMANN

WHY THE SPIKE?

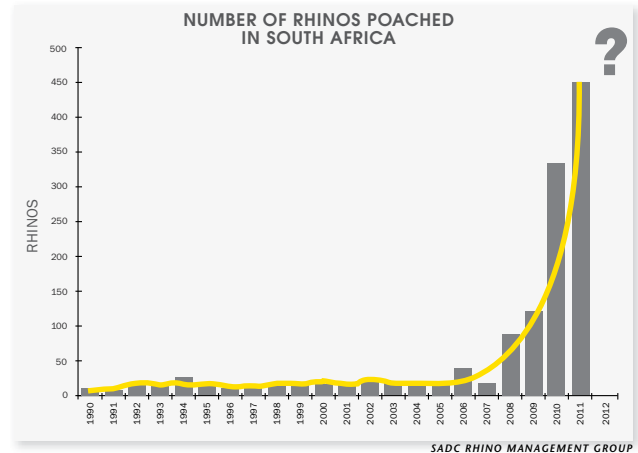
As with virtually every aspect of rhinos, opinions on what caused the dramatic upswing in poaching in 2008–09 are divergent.

WWF's African Rhino Programme Manager Joseph Okori believes that the spike was rooted in the rumour about a Vietnamese official (or his wife) who was cured of cancer after taking rhino horn. This created a market in Vietnam that has been pushed by crime syndicates keen to exploit the money-making potential in a country where growing affluence means that more people can afford rhino-horn preparations.

According to Rynette Coetzee of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Law and Policy Programme: 'If you think about the small amount of horn that a medical practitioner uses, we suspect that there are guys who are stockpiling so that they can control the black market – the more horn they have, the more they can control and manipulate the price of horns.'

Tom Milliken, TRAFFIC's Global Elephant and Rhino Programme Lead, believes that the figures are misleading. 'I think there were a lot of rhino horns from the private sector going into trade but not captured in any of the data,' he says. 'There are serious discrepancies between the volume of horn that is officially registered with government by private rhino owners and what many observers believe should be in private hands, given the number of rhinos under private ownership.'

'It is believed that large volumes of horn were illegally disposed of and moved to Asia (Vietnam) in the early to mid-2000s. That stream of supply, coupled with horns from the legal



hunts, comprised most of the trade in those years. By the time these private sector stockpiled supplies had dried up, [South Africa's] national moratorium on internal trade had been proclaimed and steps were also taken to curtail sport hunting. This shifted the game decisively to poaching.

'All this coincided with expanding demand in the end-user market at a time when the Vietnamese had more private wealth at their disposal and less economic restriction than ever before.'

'It was,' Milliken concludes, 'a perfect storm of deadly consumption.'

belief that rhino horn can cure cancer and other ills, and sophisticated networks of organised criminals, dodgy police and customs officials – and a very different picture starts to emerge.

Over the past six years in South Africa there has been an exponential increase in the number of rhinos lost to illegal trade. With the aid of compromised elements within the country's security systems, the animals' dismembered horns are being smuggled into markets in the Far East, primarily Vietnam.

The Vietnamese are quick to point a deflecting finger at neighbouring China as the true destination of the rhino horn flow into their country but, according to Tom Milliken, TRAFFIC's Global Elephant and Rhino Programme Lead, there is in fact very limited evidence of onward cross-border trade. Of the hundreds of rhino horns that have entered Vietnam from Africa, TRAFFIC has documented only three that continued directly into China's Guangxi Province.

AN INSIDE JOB

That there has been collusion and corruption in South Africa has been known for some time. Back in September 2008, *Africa Geographic's* investigative journalist Ian Michler conducted an exclusive interview with the Van Deventer brothers, two convicted

legalised poaching?
'Pseudo-hunts' are trophy hunts that exploit a legal loophole. Conducted largely by Vietnamese nationals, the mounted, CITES-permitted trophy is exported back to Asia where the horn enters the black market.

rhino poachers who, in an extraordinary outpouring, gave readers a chapter-and-verse account of their escapades. Even then, the Van Deventers spoke of at least five syndicates operating in the country – these crime rings could not have been successful without people at all stages of the game being open to bribes for services rendered.

Further evidence of corruption was cited by Michler in the March 2011 issue of *Africa Geographic* when he spoke of Mafia-style intimidation that destroyed a court case. 'Two key witnesses appearing for the state suddenly withdrew their testimony – one flatly refused to give evidence, the other asked for witness protection before he would reconsider. Unconfirmed reports indicate that private investigators on the payroll of the accused received in excess of US\$140 000 to ensure this took place, and each witness was offered at least US\$42 000 to change their mind.'

The February 2012 arrest of four SANParks staff members on poaching charges bears further testimony to the scale of the problem.

Arrests are being made (232 in 2011, up from 165 the previous year) and some convictions have resulted in jail time. But for the poachers at the bottom of the food chain – and even opportunists higher up, the crooked vets and conservation ►

PICKING UP THE PIECES

For every adult female rhino killed by poachers, there is often another silent statistic: a calf. Very young calves, four to five months old, tend to stay close to their mothers where they risk being killed by poachers for their nuisance value. Even park rangers will take their lives for they will not survive without intensive care, which the rangers cannot provide. From the time a calf is about six months, its horn is big enough to be a target. Some of these older calves are killed, but many escape.

Enter rhino rehabilitation expert Karen Trendler (below), whose Rhino Response Strategy was launched at the start of the year. Previously involved with the Wildcare Africa Trust, she has coaxed more than 200 hand-reared rhino orphans to independence. 'The poaching upsurge started and we constantly got requests to take in calves. So in 2011 we put together a manual on how to rear them,' says Trendler. 'But that hasn't been enough.'

To provide more effective care, Trendler has partnered with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to provide a comprehensive training programme for individuals who encounter rhino orphans, from conservationists, rhino owners and vets to anti-poaching unit members. 'For these youngsters, the first 24 to 48 hours alone in the veld are a time of enormous physical and emotional stress,' she says.

Once a calf has been rescued the real work begins, and Trendler has overseen the construction of a new facility geared to caring for these poaching victims. 'Both EWT and I believe these orphans need to be treated as traumatised, high-care patients with the best possible veterinary and nursing attention. We will have a full-time vet and facilities that are designed to keep the animal completely quiet, allow us to care for it and enable it to interact with other rhinos,' she elaborates. Amazingly, given their recent ordeals, calves bond quickly with their human foster mothers.

Trendler recommends that interaction with the calf be limited to just two people: a 'mother' and a backup. 'It's not so much the amount of contact, but the number of people they have contact with,' she says. 'If they've only bonded with one or two people, that bond is broken when you release them. But if a rhino interacts with a large number of people, it loses its fear of humans and in seven to eight years, when it's back in the wild, it could start causing problems.'

Ultimately, the calves need to be running free again with as little physical or mental scarring as possible. 'The whole aim, from a conservation point of view, is for the rhinos to breed and to be part of a normal population,' she concludes. *Tim Jackson*

officials – the odds of being caught, let alone shot, by anti-poaching patrols and imprisoned are so slight that they don't appear to provide any sort of meaningful deterrent.

SERIAL KILLER MO

Every syndicate has its own modus operandi, says Elise Daffue from the advocacy and information website *stoprhinopoaching.com*. 'In some cases, a ground team is involved; in others a helicopter crew is responsible for the darting and horn removal.' In large reserves, she believes it would make more sense to search by air, while in quieter, public protected areas it is easier for gang members to enter as 'visitors' and locate a rhino. They then alert a helicopter



RHINO RESPONSE STRATEGY

crew armed with a dart gun (Robinson 44 helicopters are most associated with poaching). The airborne team administers the drug and flies off while the ground crew gets the horn. Since 2010, however, farmers and reserve owners have been on high alert for low-flying aircraft and the use of choppers is not as prevalent. 'Of late,' she says, 'you get small walk-in gangs that carry a dart gun.' She estimates that, depending on the cocktail of drugs used, the knock-down time is about eight minutes, and, if the poachers are experienced in horn removal, a sharp knife will do the job swiftly and cleanly. Axes and pangas are commonly used, chainsaws less so.

Catching poachers either in the act or, preferably, before it, is not easy. According to WWF's African Rhino Programme manager, Joseph Okori, 'Most parks don't have a response team within range; it can take anywhere up to 24 hours to scramble the guys. The best response time I have heard of is 90 minutes.'

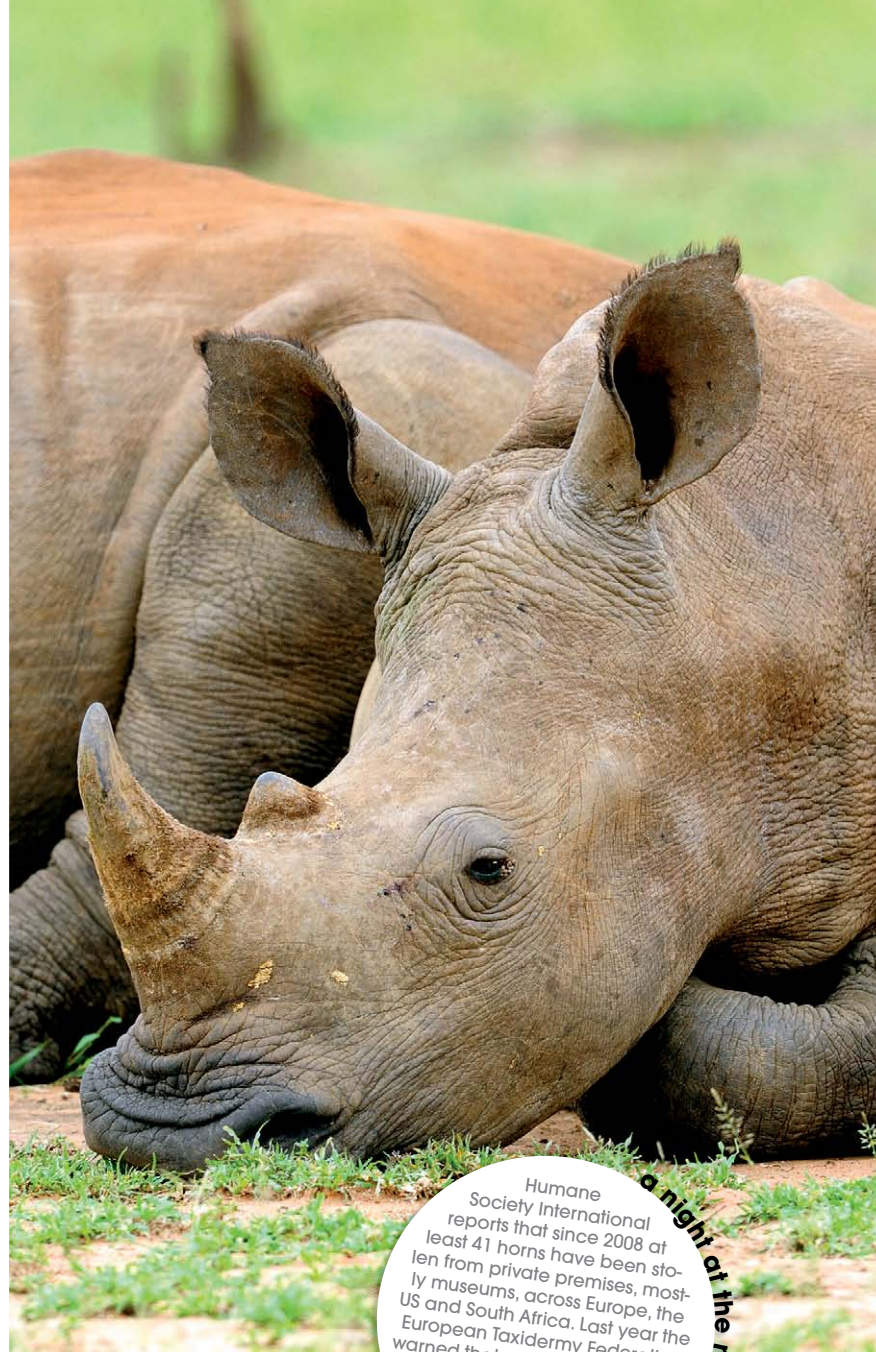
Once the horn has eluded Africa's customs network, the rhino killers are pretty well home free. The higher-ranking operators in the chain are seldom fingered or apprehended, while no 'Mr Bigs' have been arrested.

A VIAL OF WORMS

M99, a chemical compound 10 000 times more potent than morphine, is used by some poachers to immobilise rhinos. An effective tranquilliser for the pachyderms, just 0.001 millilitres can be lethal to humans. In South Africa, M99 is classed as a Schedule 6 drug and is highly regulated. Only registered veterinarians can acquire it, and it is illegal for them to sell it to a lay person. Despite this, some vets are making easy money on the side, with the result that 45 per cent of M99 use in South Africa is by untrained non-veterinarians. *Michael D. Kock*



MICHAEL D. KOCK



Humane Society International reports that since 2008 at least 41 horns have been stolen from private premises, mostly museums, across Europe, the US and South Africa. Last year the European Taxidermy Federation warned that some of its members had been approached by clients wanting to source rhino horn for 'museums and castles'.

TIM JACKSON

THE BIGGER PICTURE

To put it in further sobering perspective, rhino horn is part of a global illegal trade in wildlife that is estimated by Interpol to be in the range of US\$10-billion to US\$20-billion a year. This is greater than the individual GDPs of more than 75 per cent of African countries! For instance, the GDP of Mozambique, whose eastern border abuts the Kruger National Park, is less than US\$10-billion, or just over US\$400 per person, a year. Such poverty – and a history of alienation from conservation areas – provides enough motivation for a solid supply of foot soldiers. ▶

ABOVE Under attack. A wide variety of poachers, using a number of different techniques – are putting increasing pressure on South Africa's white rhino population.

LEFT The powerful synthetic opioid M99 (Etorphine) is presented with its reversal M50-50 (Diprenorphine).

RHINO HORN & ORGANISED CRIME

According to a number of sources, chief among them Colonel Johan Jooste of South Africa's Hawks police unit, there is a chain – or pyramid – of distribution. This can be broken down into five distinct levels, with a fair degree of flexibility between them: the rhino horn may skip a level or two and pass, for example, from a national buyer directly into the upper international market. The more middlemen there are, the more has to be paid out and the greater the risk.



SOURCE: STOPRHINOPOACHING.COM

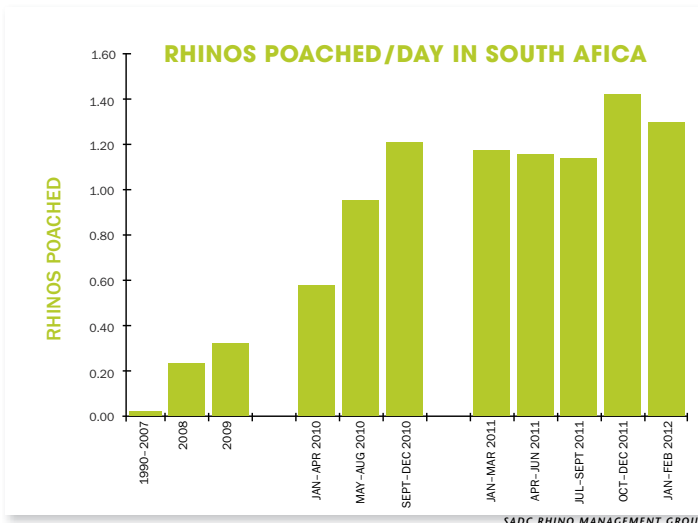
HOW LONG HAVE WE GOT?

Against this backdrop, the number of rhinos poached has continued to climb. In 2007, 13 rhinos were killed; in 2011 it was 448 – that's more than a 30-fold increase in five years, an alarming trend in any circumstances. At the time of writing 80 rhinos had been attacked in the first 60 days of 2012 – that's an average of 1.33 per day.

Although the rate of increase has slowed (see graph on page 33), statistically these figures point to an imminent tipping point when rhino deaths will outstrip births and the population will start to decline. This will come – according to figures published by the Southern African Development Community's Rhino Management Group (RMG) – when we lose more than 1 400 rhinos a year from both poaching and hunting. Last year, that combined total was 538 (despite this fact, rhino numbers were still projected to increase by about 900 during 2011).

Counting the cost

Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs Rejoice (Joyce) Mabudathasi says, 'South Africa suffered an R80-billion loss in the 2010-11 financial year as a direct result of environmental crimes that included the illegal trade in abalone, ivory and rhino horn.'



When will we reach that tipping point? If poaching increases at the rate it did in 2010 (+35 per cent), negative growth will occur from 2016 says the RMG; if the 2011 rate of increase (+22 per cent) persists, we have until 2018.

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

To this frightening projection we add yet another concern. Some 28 per cent of South Africa's rhinos are in the hands of private owners who find their assets under pressure. When you consider that from 2008 to 2011 the average auction price of white rhinos fell from R274 712 (US\$36 595) to R227 674 (US\$30 329), it's no wonder that fewer people are prepared to take on the responsibilities of owning them. Some owners, reluctant to shoulder the cost risk or asset loss, have already disinvested. For those that remain, the cost of security is daunting – Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's Rhino Intervention Co-ordinator Jabulani Ngubane estimates it to be R50 000 or US\$6 650 per rhino per year.

In economic parlance, should private owners get the jitters and move out of rhino 'futures', there will be fewer opportunities for national and provincial conservation authorities to offload surplus rhinos for much-needed cash – and the knock-on effect could be serious. SANParks spokesperson Wanda Mkutshulwa says that the state conservation agency is already feeling the pinch. 'With this assault on rhinos, interest in buying live animals has waned as owners fear losing their investment. We have also had to revise our takeoff figures because we don't want to compete with the poaching figures. The money we received from rhino sales was vital for key conservation projects, and now we have had to put some of the projects on the back burner.'

Clearly, and very quickly, old strategies for rhino protection that haven't worked need to be revised and new ones given voice and opportunity.

AG



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Over 20 years in the industry have taught the Moolman family to recognise that seasoned South African nature lovers want to savour the bush in their own time, at their own pace. With morning and evening game drives or bush walks, the mood at the new Vuyatela is more relaxed, leaving guests time to unwind and absorb the exquisite surroundings. 'It's like having your own game farm without the hassle,' said Jurie.



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Alison Nicholls is a professional wildlife artist who lived in Botswana and Zimbabwe for nine years. She is a member of Artists for Conservation, and her work has been featured in art magazines in the US and UK. Her paintings have been used to promote the US Department of State's 'Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking' initiative and have also been exhibited at the Botswana Mission to the United Nations in Manhattan. Nicholls' Conservation Expedition programme entails visiting conservation projects in Africa, then holding exhibitions to raise awareness and funds for the enterprises on her return to the US.

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