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In 2003, six white rhinos were released into the Makuya Game Reserve. But today, disturbing reports indicate that the reserve has no rhinos left.

According to intelligence sources, there have been no reports of rhinos illegally killed in the reserve, which is situated on the western boundary of the Makuleke region of Kruger National Park.

However, the latest ground surveys have found no living rhinos in the reserve – and no carcasses, either.

It was also reported that the reserve’s rhino “middens” (dung piles that rhinos use to communicate with each other) have not been used for at least two years.

At this time there are no rhino left on the reserve. Middens are dead and have been so for the last couple of years.

There are concerns that another “Letaba situation” could be developing, in which 18 (initially thought to be 17) rhino carcasses were found dumped near Tzaneen.¹

At this time, there are still no definitive answers regarding the shocking discoveries at Letaba Lodge or Makuya Game Reserve.

Sources close to the situation suspect these findings are the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Mass graves, missing rhinos, and more questions sadly seem inevitable.

Illegal rhino horn trade driven by factors outside - and in - South Africa

In the meantime, the surge in rhino horn demand for use in traditional medicines in China³ and Vietnam⁴, despite the fact that rhino horn has been extensively analyzed⁵ and contains no medicinal properties.

Neighboring Zimbabwe is now down to its last 700 rhinos.²

Research conducted by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC found that most rhino horns leaving Southern Africa are being smuggled to China and Vietnam.⁶

It has also been noted that the spreading Chinese footprint in Southern Africa has placed the demand for rhino horn perilously close to the supply⁷, and counter poaching efforts have linked the increase in rhino and elephant killings to a flood of Chinese weapons.⁸

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There are further concerns that a state-funded 2008 rhino horn research project in China served as one of the catalysts for the surge in rhino killings across Southern Africa by encouraging the use of rhino horn, and that the researchers are attempting to circumvent CITES research provisions by farming rhinos.⁹

One of the most nefarious developments in the escalating illegal rhino horn trade is the proliferation of apparent business alliances between members of the South African rhino conservation community and offshore crime syndicates.

In September, eleven alleged members of a rhino horn syndicate were granted bail by the Musina magistrate’s court and are scheduled to appear in court again on April 11th, 2011.¹⁰

The suspects included a well-known safari operator and game farmer, along with two veterinarians, and a professional hunter.¹¹

Investigators later unearthed a mass grave of at least 20 rhino carcasses on the property of one of the suspects.¹²

The following month, a rhino horn syndicate case¹³ involving two safari operators and a professional hunter was thrown out by the North Gauteng High Court (the State's star witness was apparently intimidated into not testifying).¹⁴

In both syndicate cases, multiple charges had been brought against the suspects, including racketeering, money laundering, various counts of theft, malicious damage to property, illegal ammunition contraventions of the various provincial Environment Acts, and the Aviation Act.

Another factor which has stimulated the appetite for rhino horn is the intention to age of private rhino horn stockpiles from South Africa into the illegal

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Article adaptation: “Game Reserve in Limpopo Found Emptied of All Rhinos”, *Rhino Horn is Not Medicine*, November 22, 2010.
See <http://www.rhinoconservation.org/2010/11/22/game-reserve-in-limpopo-found-emptied-of-all-rhinos/>

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