

Background to Rhino Poaching

The WESSA Rhino Initiative



In Africa we are currently seeing the methodical and calculated reduction of rhino numbers in their natural habitat. The number of poached numbers has been escalating year-on-year over the past 5 years. It is true that we have experienced severe poaching pressure before, and defeated it. However today, because of the insanely inflated price being paid for rhino horn, the poachers are now employing a diversity of methods which no longer fall within the traditional poaching mold. Banked-rolled by substantial finances, the modern day poacher can now afford the latest technology and buy the services of skilled people and influential officials.

For conservation, this becomes a big challenge whilst at the same time an opportunity. The challenge is to find lasting solutions to the problem which will secure the future of rhinos. The public can also be a part of this and therefore it is an ideal opportunity for every South African to become involved in conservation and the preservation of their heritage.

We trust that authorities are doing everything they can and they must be applauded for all the arrests they have made. Increased pressure has resulted in an increase in the number of arrests of poachers. However, this seems to have little impact. To have a better impact, those that are higher up in the poaching chain need to be nabbed, not just the so called 'foot soldiers' that they hire, of which there are an endless supply. More needs to be done in order to get these criminals into our courts, and WESSA would further like to see the judiciary fast-tracking court cases against suspected poachers

who, if found guilty, should receive the harshest possible sentence in order to send out a strong message to potential poachers. What is driving increased rhino poaching in South Africa?

The demand for rhino horn emanates from a few Asian countries (east and south East Asia). There are apparent reasons for the need for rhino horn, but it is used mainly as an ingredient in traditional medicines and not as an aphrodisiac as is often widely reported. In more recent times it is being marketed to cure non-traditional conditions such as cancer.

- Rhino horn is valuable because of the simple economics of the situation – demand far exceeds supply.
- South Africa has the largest rhino population in the world of both white and black rhino. We have traditionally been seen as a difficult environment within which poachers could operate. As the easier targets (i.e. other countries) have lost all their rhino, so the demand has shifted to South Africa. We also know that crime of all types is rampant in this country and rhino poaching is an extension of this.
- Law enforcement relating to wildlife crime has certainly not received the requisite attention. While South Africa has commendable legislation, it unfortunately is not well enforced in terms of implementing the law as well as achieving sentences that send out a strong message to would-be poachers. As a result of the rhino situation, we have seen positive progressive moves by government to improve systems and sentences. However we are in a lag phase where it will still be some time before we see the large scale benefits of this progress.
- The current economic crisis hit at a time when the incidences of rhino poaching were low. We have seen exponential increases in these incidences as the global recession gained momentum. One of the concerns is that private landowners (as well as public departments) may have cut back on security measures as a result of budget cuts. This would then expose increased opportunities for the criminals.
- Banked-rolled by substantial finances, the modern day poaching syndicates can now afford the latest technology and buy the services of skilled people and influential officials.

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