

800

HOW MUCH LONGER WILL WE SEE THIS IN THE WILD?

It's no secret: Africa's rhinos are in crisis. If poaching continues as it is, it will outpace natural population growth by 2016.

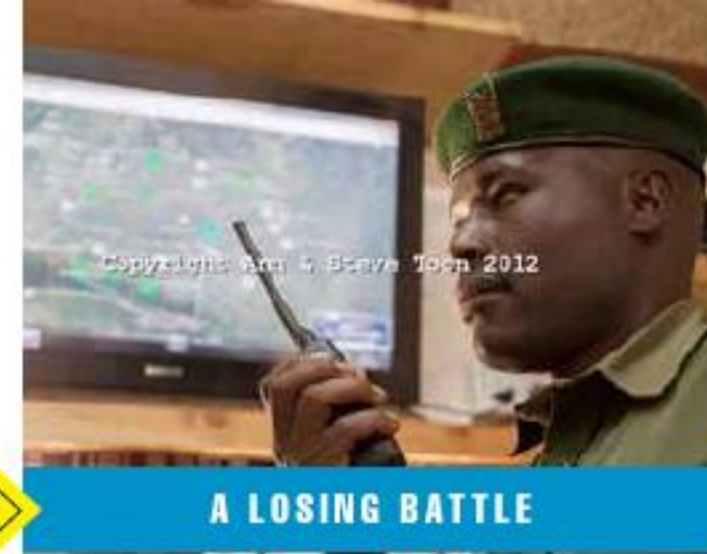
Worst-case scenario: rhinos could be extinct in the wild within 13 years.

BYE-BYE BIG FIVE, HELLO BIG FOUR?

Wildlife journalists Ann and Steve Toon take a look at some of the radical solutions being proposed to curb the killing

THE FACTS

Last year a record 668 rhinos were killed in South Africa alone. With demand for horn in countries such as China and Vietnam showing no sign of slackening, that figure is expected to top 800 this year.



A LOSING BATTLE

State and private rhino owners have supplemented armed patrols and tracker dogs with hi-tech equipment, including thermal-imaging night vision optics, military radar and even surveillance drones. But with horn fetching more than \$60,000 (about R550,000) on the black market, poaching is big business, run by sophisticated international crime syndicates. Kruger National Park, which holds 40 per cent of Africa's total rhino population, has been particularly hard hit, losing 425 in 2012. Private owners, who account for more than a quarter of SA's rhinos, have resorted to poisoning the horn of living animals or dehorning them in a bid to deter poachers. And as the value of live animals drops and the cost of security escalates, a growing number are bailing out, with the result that vital rhino habitat is being lost.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

1 LEGALISATION

As anti-poaching measures have failed to staunch the loss of animals, support for legalising the trade in horn, from animals that have died naturally or harvested from live animals (it grows back after cutting), has grown. The SA government has signalled support for legalisation, and a proposal to lift the trade ban could well be tabled at the next meeting of CITES, the international convention on trade in endangered species, in 2016.



FOR

'The CITES ban has been ineffective, and as a desperate measure we believe sustainable utilisation is the only solution left,' argues Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners Association. 'Only horns from accredited private reserves and provincial or state reserves would be traded. Each horn would be

identified by DNA and micro chip.' 'You need to think at a global level how you're going to control supply and demand,' says Jabulani Ngubane, rhino security co-ordinator for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. 'We're confident that if we have a single, central selling organisation to control it, we can make rhinos a resource.'

AGAINST

Opponents argue too little is known about the demand or the amount of stockpiled horn. Mary Rice, executive director of the Environmental Investigation Agency, points out that a one-off legal sale of ivory in 2008 merely provided 'a massive smokescreen' for the illegal trade, as China failed to abide by assurances that no illegal ivory would be allowed to enter the market. 'A legal trade can only work where there are stringent controls in place,' she says. 'How can China be considered a suitable candidate for introducing a similar system for rhino horn?'

2 FARMING

Legalising the trade raises the prospect of rhinos being 'farmed' for their horn. SA's largest private rhino breeder, John Hume, owns more than 800 rhinos, which are dehorned every 18 months and the horn stored in secure bank vaults. He's sitting on a stockpile worth potentially more than \$30 million (about R270 million) if trade is legalised. 'If you put even three or four tons a year into the market, I honestly believe it will reduce poaching,' he argues. 'Those people who have their horn confiscated, it's a big loss for them. We'd be giving them a legal option. We'd be saying to the buyer: "You don't have to kill my rhino to get the horn, I'm growing it for you anyway."'



3 DEHORNING

In a park the size of Kruger, where up to 10,000 rhinos are widely dispersed in dense bush, it's unlikely widespread dehorning would be logistically practical even if the idea was accepted by the wildlife-watching public. 'I think we need to view the preservation of rhinos in our national parks and reserves as the sacred cow: we must not intervene there, we must not dehorn them,' argues Markus Hofmeyr, head of Kruger's veterinary services. 'But we need a buffer to do that. That's where the private guys could come in if they had added value in keeping rhinos.' Some private reserves outside Kruger are already dehorning their rhinos. If the horn trade is legalised, an increasing number of safari goers could be viewing rhinos without their characteristic asset. For some conservationists, it seems this is a price worth paying. ■

RHINO HORN: THE USES...

Rhinos rub horns when greeting, males use them to fight over territory (sometimes to the death) and females use them to protect their calves from predators. Black rhinos also use their horns when feeding, to snap or push down branches and to uproot shrubs. Some scientists believe rhinos' horns are a vestige of times past, when they needed to protect themselves against larger predators than today. Certainly, animals that lose their horns in accidents, fights or through deliberate dehorning seem to survive without obvious problems.

...AND THE ABUSES

Rhino horn has been used for centuries to make ceremonial daggers, cups and other ornaments, and as a traditional Chinese medicine. It's a myth that rhino horn is used as an aphrodisiac: its main traditional use is to reduce fever and inflammation. Rhino horn is largely made up of keratin, similar to the protein in human nails and hair. Western clinical trials have shown that it may have a mild fever-reducing effect, though no more than aspirin, and there are traditional substitutes such as water buffalo horn and various herbs.

More recently, rhino horn has been touted as a cure for cancer – almost certainly a rumour put out by illegal traders – and more and more being used by wealthy Vietnamese as a hangover cure and to 'detox' after overindulging. In the increasingly affluent societies of Vietnam and China, the two largest markets for horn, it is seen as a status symbol, sometimes given as a gift to employers and business contacts.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Support Namibia's desert rhinos (savetherhinotrust.org).
- Save the Rhino International (savetherhino.org) is a highly respected global fund-raiser that supports many worthwhile initiatives.
- To help Kruger's rhinos, SanParks' honorary rangers (sanparksvolunteers.org) channel precious funds into anti-poaching.



WHERE TO SEE RHINOS

South Africa is one of the best places on the planet to watch rhinos up close. Despite the high level of poaching, **Kruger National Park** (sanparks.co.za) remains one of the best places to see wild rhinos. In KwaZulu-Natal, **Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park** (kznwildlife.com) is hard to beat, and nearby **Mkhuze** also offers great sightings from its hides in the dry season. **Pilanesberg** (parksnorthwest.co.za) near Sun City is reliable for close encounters with white rhinos and is easily accessible from Gauteng. Plenty of private reserves offer a more upmarket experience, including **Phinda** (andbeyondafrica.com) in KwaZulu-Natal, where both black and white rhinos are all but guaranteed. Tracking Namibia's desert rhino is an unforgettable experience, but try to add a few days in **Etosha** (nrw.com.na) – nocturnal sightings of black rhino at Okaukuejo and Halali rest camp waterholes are a highlight.

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