

RHINO VICE SQUAD

The rhino vice case was one of several scandals involving smuggling of rhinoceros horns and elephant ivory that led to the formation of a special Endangered Species Protection Unit of the South Africa police, operating covertly to smash the criminal rings that have led to the country's being tabbed a "wildlife outlaw."

The special unit began operations in 1989, after an international hue and cry over the way South Africa has been used as a funnel for illegal wildlife products, especially ivory and rhino horn. In a December 1988 letter to the South African Ministry of Environmental Affairs and of Water Affairs, Dr. John Ledger, director of the nation's Endangered Wildlife Trust, cited the Connecticut case as evidence that South Africa is "guilty" on the charge of being a "wildlife outlaw."



Confiscated horns from white rhinos, Natal, South Africa. There are probably no white rhinos now living outside protected areas or zoos.

He added that "the truckloads of ivory and rhino horn entering South Africa are carrying the remains of elephants and rhinos from Zaire, Zambia, Angola, and Zimbabwe. It is South African criminals who have made it possible for poachers in these countries to find a ready market for tusks and horns."

Ledger led the campaign for the creation of the special police unit to stop wildlife smuggling, adding that conservation agencies in the country could not handle the scope of the smuggling operations. South African news media reported that the individuals involved in the smuggling were major criminals and labeled them the "South African Mafia."

South Africa became a channel for wildlife contraband for several reasons: the country's major shipping ports, excellent transportation, the existence of established racketeering rings, and a readily convertible currency.

In an exclusive interview from Pretoria, Major Pieter Lategan, who heads the unit, described how it was established with help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and a now-defunct British firm, KAS Enterprises, made up largely of former commandos in the elite British Special Air Services. (FWS also has assisted other African nations in combatting wildlife poaching and smuggling.) Lategan singled out FWS Special Agent Carl Mainen, based in Washington, D.C., as especially helpful in developing the wildlife squad.

He said that members of the special unit now closely work with wildlife agencies in neighboring black African countries to root out and prosecute smugglers and poachers who are the source of supply. South African police have conducted operations in Zambia, Mozambique, and Botswana, he added, with the support and cooperation of their governments. The political changes that have occurred in South Africa have made this possible, according to Lategan.

The police wildlife unit consists of 10 men. However, it can draw on personnel and resources from other units within the police force, such as squads that investigate narcotics, diamond and gold smuggling, and stock theft. Lategan said that the sophistication of the smuggling rings is such that cracking them requires police expertise in intelligence and other investigative techniques.

"We have found that if someone smuggles drugs, gold, or diamonds, that person may be involved in smuggling wildlife and firearms as well," Lategan said. "The routes used to move the contraband are the same."

The police major said that his unit was well on its way to developing a sophisticated data bank on wildlife rackets in Africa and would be happy to cooperate with other African nations by sharing information and resources. "If other African countries need us, they should just put in a call and we'll be there."

— E. Ricciuti