

A PERSONALITY INVESTIGATION

SOUTH AFRICA'S RHINO-HORN SHAME

photographs by Marek Patzer



TOP: The carcasses of the rhino are left to rot in the veld. These skulls were photographed at the Save the Rhino Trust's headquarters in Wangwa Valley, Zambia.

ABOVE: An anti-poaching unit in Zambia sets out on patrol. Notice that the men are on foot and have only outdated weapons to use against poachers equipped with four wheel drives and AK-47s.

There is shocking evidence that South Africans are involved in the massacre of black rhino for their horn, which fetches astronomical prices in the Middle and Far East. With South Africa rapidly becoming the last bastion of black rhino, what is their future?

THE black rhino is arguably the most valuable creature on earth — because of the fortunes to be made from its horn. Tragically, for the very same reason this shy, vegetarian relic from prehistoric times has become the most endangered species on earth. There were 60 000 black rhino in Africa in 1970 but they have been butchered for their horn to such an extent that today there are only about 4 000 left! The killers take only the horns, callously leaving the bodies to rot in the bush.

by Michelle Hirshowitz



A black rhino. It's mind-boggling to him that these unique animals have been driven to the edge of extinction purely through the vanity of oil-rich Yemenis and a false belief in the Far East that rhino horn has medicinal properties.

"The illegal rhino-horn trade is a well organised, international operation — and the spotlight is rapidly falling on South Africa," says Clive Walker, director of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation. According to Clive, the horns are being smuggled from Zambia, Zaire, Angola and Zimbabwe into South Africa and from here to the Middle and Far East.

Although the poachers haven't got to our own rhino yet, over the past year they killed 250 in Zimbabwe alone. In their battle against the poachers, the national

LAST YEAR 250 WERE KILLED

park authorities, backed by security forces, killed 35 of them, but this hasn't stopped the slaughter.

"The root of the problem, and the reason why impoverished, rural Zambians risk their lives to kill black rhino, is simple — money," says Clive Walker. "For the poachers the amounts involved may be relatively small, but for the businessmen further down the line in Africa and South Africa, who are protected against prosecution by a corrupt system, they are big."

Three groups of people are involved in the operation. Firstly, there are the poachers who shoot the rhino and hack out the horns. Then there are the truck drivers who transport the horns, hidden in secret compartments behind stacks of "copper scrap", from Zambia or Angola to South Africa. And finally there are the South African-based exporters.

"The poacher is probably a poor black who is prepared to risk his life for only R1 000 — probably more than he normally earns in a year," says Clive. The real winners are the local racketeers who sell the horn illegally overseas. A single horn can fetch as much as R25 000 on the black market. In the main trading areas of the Far East and North Yemen the price is even higher. In Yemen, where rhino horn is used to make decorative hilts for daggers, they sell for up to R35 000 each.

"To the average North Yemeni yuppie, being well dressed means having a dagger with a rhino-horn handle stuck in his waistband," says Dr John Ledger, director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

In the Far East, rhino horn is ground down and used as a traditional medicine in the same way that animal parts are used as traditional "muti" in South Africa. In particular it's supposed to reduce fever and stop nose bleeds. "The irony is that it's probably as effective as biting your fingernails," says Dr Ledger, "because rhino horn is composed basically of keratin, the same substance as fingernails."

With an eye to the future, Taiwanese businessmen are now buying rhino horn as an investment because they know rhinos are going to become extinct in the wild. Chinese businessmen working in South Africa purchase rhino horn from

illegal South African dealers and smuggle the goods to Taipei. Their profits are huge. The current black market price of a horn in Johannesburg is R4 000, but once the horn gets to Taiwan it sells for the equivalent of R10 000 a kilogram. One South African operator has allegedly stockpiled a ton of rhino horn worth about R25 million in "safe houses" in Hong Kong. And a man in Pretoria is alleged to have smuggled more than R26 million worth of ivory and rhino horn out of the country.

But the Taiwanese are possibly not the only people to blame. Recently two members of the South African Defence Force, together with one of the men's wives and three Americans, were recently accused of running an illegal rhino-horn operation.

They allegedly smuggled a fortune in rhino horn out of the country. It was also alleged that one of the men, who was based in South West Africa, told another he had access to an unlimited supply of rhino horn, but unfortunately for him the conversation was taped by an undercover agent. The case was dismissed in South Africa but the American Justice Department now wants the South Africans to stand trial in the US.

For the poachers, killing the rhino and hacking out their horns isn't a problem. The slaughter occurs over vast areas which are difficult to patrol. For instance, in Zambia the poachers are working in 12 000 square kilometres of thick bush. In fact, the struggle between the Zambian game department and poachers coming across the Zambezi Valley has developed into a small bush war. But in many ways it's a one-sided battle.

"The game rangers, equipped with old-fashioned .303 rifles, are pitted against men who will stop at nothing because of the money involved and whose backers often supply them with AK-47s and four-wheel-drive vehicles," explains Keith Cooper, director of conservation for the Wildlife Society. Boats, trucks and even aircraft are made available to smuggle the spoils out to markets abroad."

"Like diamond and drug smugglers, rhino-horn smugglers are dealing in huge sums of money," says Raoul du Toit, who is doing research on rhino poaching in the Zambezi Valley. "They're like bank robbers. They know there's big money out there, they're armed and there's no way they're going to come out with their hands up. To them it's worth the risk of being shot."

Even though efforts are being made to stop the poaching and smuggling, rhino horn is still available in Johannesburg, through the right connections, and the fact that South Africa is the last stronghold for the black rhino means that all South Africans need to prepare for the inevitable onslaught on the species here.

Education about the crisis situation of the black rhino is being introduced at all

levels. Mrs Joyce Abrahams, chairlady for the Save the Rhino Foundation, has introduced a schools project in which children are given "Save the Rhino T-shirts" in return for their donations and are actively involved in the "prevent the extinction of black rhinos" campaign.

According to Joyce, money has to be raised in order to increase the number of men patrolling the areas where there are still black rhino. Recent work indicates that there should be at least one man to every 20 square kilometres. At present there aren't nearly enough men to match the poachers.

Other projects include:

- Programmes to encourage the co-operation of rural communities in protecting the rhino in their areas. In South West Africa these communities are being taught that tourists pay especially to see the rhino and the money they pay can be used to build homes and schools for them. As a result they are realising that it's worth protecting the rhino. "In fact, it's becoming a status symbol to have black rhino in your area," says Joyce.

THE PENALTIES ARE PAINFULLY INADEQUATE

- Operation Stronghold. This was launched in 1984 and is concerned with relocating rhino to safe breeding areas. Since then more than 300 animals have been moved.

- Black Rhino Project 2 000. This is providing information needed to decide on the best ways of conserving Zululand's black rhino. Conservationists hope to increase the South African black rhino population to at least 2 000 animals as fast as this can be done.

The question of penalties is being closely reviewed. "The penalties for poaching and illegally trading in rhino horn are painfully inadequate," says Nick Steel, director of the Kwazulu Bureau for Natural Resources. "In South Africa and SWA they vary from fines of R2 000 to R3 000 or three years in jail whereas the market value of a live black rhino is R150 000." But according to Dr Ledger, government officials have promised to drastically increase the penalties.

The police are also setting up a bureau to deal specifically with the illicit traffic in rhino horn. Game park security also has to be tightened and strict customs surveillance is essential. "Police train dogs to sniff out dagga but so far they haven't cared about rhino horn," notes Dr Ledger. And poachers still manage to get into the Etosha Game Park and shoot rhino.

If the black rhino becomes extinct, we will have wiped out not only one of the "big five" game animals that bring much tourist currency into our country — we will have slammed another nail into the coffin of our once beautiful planet.

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