

tip of the HORN

Between September 2006 and July 2007, the South African press carried reports detailing the arrest of the Van Deventer brothers on charges of poaching rhinoceroses. Hailing from Bronkhorstspruit outside Johannesburg, they both pleaded guilty to the charges and were also convicted of illegally trading in rhino horn and the unlawful possession of firearms. Their arrests came after some excellent detective work by a task team of the South African Police Service based in the Free State province. The team was assisted by various organised crime units, as well as SANParks officials and other wildlife authorities. Having entered into a plea bargain with the state, the brothers received reduced prison sentences.

Shortly afterwards, the Van Deventers contacted investigative journalist and *Africa Geographic* columnist **Ian Michler**. They wanted to tell their story and, over the course of a morning in a Kroonstad prison, they shared the hows and whys of what they claim was one of at least five rhino poaching syndicates operating in South Africa. While judging the motivation behind their confession is not easy, it is clear that they were willing to share every detail of their story. ►



TEXT BY IAN MICHLER

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‘We never liked doing what we did and telling our story will help the public be aware of how to catch other poachers,’ says Rhino One, the name the older brother goes by in prison. ‘We are relieved it’s over because we were always stressed. I lost perspective on life,’ added Rhino Two, his younger brother.

Involved from the very beginning, Rhino Two is serving a 10-year sentence, with two years suspended after admitting that he continued to poach after his first arrest in May 2006. The older brother was given five years, with two-and-a-half years suspended for his role as an accomplice towards the end of the killing spree.

Criminal activity that involves trade in ill-gotten goods and services of high value is usually carried out through syndicates. In essence, these operate as loose or informal associations, founded on the basis that members with the ability to distribute cash carry the most power and influence. Ostensibly the smart guys, they get others lower in the network to do the dirty work and take the greater risks. And finding people who are willing to take those risks in return for immediate payment is never a problem.

It is common knowledge that dealing in rhino horn involves big money, but it also comes with the threat of harsh jail sentences and heavy fines. These range in severity from a minimum of five years imprisonment or a R50 000 (US\$6 700) fine in North West province to 15 years or a R250 000 (US\$34 000) fine in Limpopo. With this type of risk-reward

profile, rhino poaching and the smuggling of horns are perfectly suited to syndicates.

In this particular case, the brothers who are sitting in jail were the bottom feeders, and they got involved because they needed the money, sometimes desperately. According to them, they were taking instructions, and the cash, from middlemen higher up the network. Amongst those arrested and charged in relation to this case are a number of well-known members of the South African hunting community, the youngest brother of the two convicted brothers, a prominent captive-predator breeder from the Free State and a private investigator (see ‘The accused parties’, opposite).

And then there is the ‘mule’, a customary and crucial player in the work of syndicates. Mules are used, often unwittingly, to carry out risky drop-off assignments. The handler is often nowhere near the vicinity of the assignment and step-by-step instructions will be passed on via cellphone.

For example, a mule may be instructed to go to a park or restaurant, pick up a bag lying in the toilets and then catch a flight to a particular city. Upon arrival, they will then be told to book into a certain hotel and leave the bag in a specific place before checking out at a given time. The bag, containing the rhino horn, will then be picked up by someone else, and so the trail continues. In one instance, an unemployed person from Port Elizabeth was arrested for doing the donkey work between those charged and the end users, thought to be a group of wealthy Vietnamese, who took delivery of the horn outside South Africa.

Between December 2005 and August 2006, when the brothers were caught at the gates of KwaZulu-Natal’s Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, they claim to have shot 19 white rhinos. Eighteen died within close proximity to where they were shot and one escaped wounded. Of the total, 16 were adults and three were calves, killed because they kept milling around their dead mothers. Eight of the rhinos were shot in the southern reaches of the Kruger National Park, two in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi and the rest on private game farms owned by people known to the syndicate members.

Rhino Two believes that he was recruited by members of the hunting

community to do the shooting because of his marksmanship and tracking skills. Using a variety of weapons, mostly illegal loans from gun shops and fellow hunters, he pulled the trigger on every rhino killed. His choice of weapon for the first few operations was a compound bow, but he soon found that its benefit of silence was outweighed by the need to get extremely close, and he switched to a light rifle, a seven-millimetre Mauser, fitted with a silencer. For the last few operations, a heavier calibre 30-06 was used, simply because it was made available to him.

Every animal was shot within just 100 metres of a road, some as close as 15 metres, and all during broad daylight. In the Kruger Park, busy roads were chosen to avoid arousing suspicion. During two operations that took place on private land, the brothers claim that a light aircraft was used to spot the rhino from the air before they went in on foot.

For Rhino One and Rhino Two, locating animals and pulling the trigger was the easiest part of the operation. Removing the horn and escaping the scene undetected was much harder. The chances of being discovered or having to abort a mission multiplied substantially if they dropped an animal, but had to spend an anxious night in a camp or lodge, usually under a false name, waiting to return and cut out the horn the following morning.

In the beginning, Rhino Two used a large panga to remove the horn, but soon switched to a smaller and sharper butcher’s knife. With the panga, it took 20 minutes of grunt work to dislodge the horns, but by the end he was completing the process in less than a minute, using the same technique employed to cut abalone from its shell. In most instances, once the horns were removed, they had enough time to cover the rhino’s body with brush and branches. The horns, in a state referred to as ‘wet’, were simply placed in a bag and stored under the seat of the getaway vehicle.

According to the two brothers, they cut out at least 85 kilograms of horn during 11 months of poaching. In the underworld, horn for trade is often ▶

ON THE LOOKOUT

The Van Deventer brothers were keen to point out behaviour that could be regarded as suspicious and they say that visitors to national parks and game reserves should be aware of:

- Lone drivers doing U-turns along park or reserve roads.
- Lone drivers hanging out at rest stops.
- Vehicles parked at the side of the road for lengthy periods.
- Occupants sitting in vehicles and reading.

The brothers also claimed that the park’s authorities never searched them, either going in or out of the reserves. In all cases, they carried rifles and bows in the back of their vehicles and the wet horn under the seats. A cursory search would have revealed the unlicensed firearms and the horns. They also pointed out that they never carried luggage, a situation they believe should arouse suspicion from gate attendants checking vehicles.

If you notice unusual or suspicious behaviour within a park or reserve, report the incident to the nearest camp, lodge manager or ranger. If anyone has specific information, call the Endangered Species Protection Unit on (+27-82) 779 8575/89. Your actions may help to close down these syndicates and save the senseless killing of more rhinos.



Contrary to popular belief, rhino horn is not used primarily as an aphrodisiac in the Middle and Far East. In Yemen and other Gulf states, dagger handles and pouches fashioned from rhino horn are highly sought after, and, for centuries, powdered horn has been a key component of many traditional Chinese medicines, particularly those used to counter fevers.

THE ACCUSED PARTIES

In June 2008, the South African Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism announced a moratorium on all trade in rhino horn. The step was taken in an attempt to eliminate the abuse of rhino-hunting permits and to cut down on the illegal trade. Loopholes in the current legislation allowed unscrupulous hunting operators and their bogus clients to ‘legally export illegally obtained individual horns as hunting trophies’. Vietnamese syndicates have been fingered as the main culprits in a process that involves applications for hunting permits being made simultaneously in a number of provinces with no intention of the hunts actually taking place. The permit holder then uses the legal documents to export horns obtained through poaching as hunting trophies.

Opponents of the re-introduction of rhino hunting and the relaxing of CITES regulations regarding the trade in rhino horn have long warned about these kinds of abuses. The lines between professional hunting and criminal activities are easily blurred and it is no coincidence that the chief suspects to stand trial in the case of the Van Deventer brothers are all members of the South African hunting community. Clayton Fletcher of Sandhurst Safaris in North West province and Gert Saaiman of Saaiman Hunting Safaris were arrested in police stings. Hours after Fletcher’s arrest, almost R1-million (US\$135 500) in cash and 12 unlicensed firearms were found in his home. Others that have been implicated and charged are Piet Swart Jnr, a game farmer and lion breeder from Kroonstad, Andre van Deventer, a professional hunter for Gert Saaiman and the younger brother of the convicted brothers, and Johan le Grange, a private investigator based in a farming district outside Pretoria. All these people are due to face charges later this year under the Prevention of Organised Crime Act, as well as a range of other charges that fall under various provincial ordinances.

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MARTIN HARVEY

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referred to as *harde hout* (Afrikaans for 'hard wood') and the prices they received varied between R12 000 and R15 000 (US\$1 600 to US\$2 000) per kilogram.

In general, these prices seem to be above the going rate paid at this level, but the brothers believe this happened because there were fewer ranks in the syndicate and, unusually, most of the members, except the mule and the Vietnamese buyers, knew one another. On one occasion, desperate for money, they accepted R6 750 (US\$900) per kilogram. As horns were passed up the syndicate ladder, however, the price increased with each transaction. According to the brothers, members just two levels up from them were receiving about R19 000 (US\$2 500) per kilogram. ■

RHINOS RETALIATE

Despite ongoing battles with poaching, there has been some good news on the population trends for both African rhinoceros species. According to the IUCN Species Survival Commission, the overall number of rhinos on the continent now exceeds 21 000 animals. Figures released by the African Rhino Specialist Group in June 2008 put the white rhino *Ceratotherium simum* population at 17 480, up from approximately 14 500 in 2005. Although this reflects a healthier situation in general, the northern white rhino subspecies remains on the brink of extinction.

Although the population status of black rhino *Diceros bicornis* has also improved – now estimated at just over 4 100, up from the 2005 figure of 3 730 – the species remains Critically Endangered. One of the big challenges facing conservationists is to establish viable populations outside the present strongholds of South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Kenya.

Asia has three species of rhino, two of which are listed as Critically Endangered and are close to extinction. Fewer than 300 Sumatran rhinos *Rhinoceros sumatrensis*, the smallest rhino, survive in the dense forests of Malaysia, Sumatra and northern Borneo. The Javan rhino *R. sondaicus* is the rarest, with no more than 60 animals left in the tropical forests of Java. The Indian or greater one-horned rhino *R. unicornis* numbers some 2 500 animals and is found in northern India and southern Nepal.