

# rhino rage

The statistics are by now all-too familiar: 333 rhinos killed in South Africa in 2010, poached for their horns. And, despite emergency summits and a public outcry, the slaughter continues. For investigative journalist Ian Michler the time has come to confront the unpalatable truths that lie at the heart of this crisis. ▶

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**F**rom between 1 January to 31 December 2010 in South Africa, poachers killed 333 rhinos (323 white and 10 black) for their horns. That's one animal every

26 hours. The new year has brought no respite – at the time of going to press, 11 white rhinos had already been slaughtered and their horns removed. While the numbers alone are startling, the brazen regularity and scale of the attacks has added gravitas and a sense of outrage to the situation. And given the conservation history of rhinos and their global standing as one of the so-called 'charismatic species', it's fair to say you have the makings of a national environmental crisis.

As a result, both the private and government sectors have been galvanised into a range of actions. Specialised anti-poaching units, assistance from the military, countrywide fundraising drives and emergency conferences are just some of the

measures that have been introduced. At its most recent summit in October 2010, the South African government committed itself to the national Strategy for the Safety and Security of Rhinoceros Populations in South Africa.

Despite all this, however, nagging questions remain. Are we taking the correct approach and, most pressingly, will these measures slow the killings?

#### NO CURE FOR CANCER

Everything about this crisis comes back to two principal factors: foolishness and greed. Or, if you prefer, demand and supply. The growing market for rhino horn – a product composed primarily of keratin, a protein that is the vital component in

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hair, plus some calcium and melanin – is intriguing in its senselessness, and the most extensively covered and familiar part of the saga. But, while it's commonly known that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), aphrodisiac-type potions and dagger handles and pouches for Yemeni men are the primary drivers of demand, there has been a degree of uncertainty over the exact size and nature of each sector.

The details are hazy because trading occurs on illegal markets, but having a better understanding of these elements is crucial for the formulation of any counteraction strategy. The Yemeni market was assumed to be as significant if not larger than that of TCM for example, but a 2009 IUCN and TRAFFIC report on both African and Asian rhino species ([www.cites.org/common/com/SC/58/E58i-10.pdf](http://www.cites.org/common/com/SC/58/E58i-10.pdf)) showed otherwise. It established that the vast majority of horns now go through Thailand, Vietnam and China to be used in TCM. These findings seem to corroborate the high demand for horn in the Far East, on the back of the region's dramatic economic growth. Its burgeoning middle classes reputedly believe that the horns can cure cancer and a host of other maladies.

As the figures and statistics paint a clearer picture of where the horn is going and who is using it, questions need to be asked of the role of Asian governments. Although a signatory to CITES, China, far from debunking these myths, is reportedly funding studies and proposals that advocate the breeding of 'endangered medicinal-use animals' as a way to meet the demand for TCM without violating the convention's regulations. (One report actually recommended stockpiling 'raw medicinal materials', such as rhino horn.) In Vietnam, the use of horn is actively promoted. Could there be a link between these official endorsements and the surge in poaching?

#### WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

On the supply side, TRAFFIC believes that more than 90 per cent of the global trade in horn now comes from the two African species, and nearly all of this goes through South Africa. It hasn't always been this way: prior to the 1950s, the vast majority of horn came from the three Asian species but, with those populations

#### LOPHOLES

The only way to export rhino horn legally is via a valid trophy hunting permit issued by CITES and restricted to one person. However, a number of Vietnamese and Chinese nationals have been caught applying for trophy hunting permits to export horn that was either poached or obtained via a canned hunt. (Certain private farms, ranches and professional hunters bought all the white rhinos offered for auction by the Kruger National Park, knowing that they had been presold to buyers interested solely in the horn.) Since February 2008, the South African government has been trying to close this loophole by ensuring that trophy hunting permits are sold only to bona fide hunters who can prove the channel of export and the horn's whereabouts thereafter.

ABOVE Some estimates have put the retail price of rhino horn as high as US\$60 000 per kilogram, which makes a mockery of some of the fines meted out by South African legislation.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE More rhinos were poached in South Africa during 2010 than the combined total for the previous 10 years.

OPPOSITE, BELOW With a sharp butcher's knife, experienced poachers can remove a horn in less than a minute using the same technique used to dislodge abalone from its shell.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Due to the fact they occur in reasonable numbers, white rhinos have borne the brunt of the killing spree – in 2010, 323 were killed in South Africa alone.

**IT'S UNSURPRISING THAT THE NOTABLE ARRESTS OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE INVOLVED GAME RANCHERS, SAFARI OPERATORS AND PROFESSIONAL HUNTERS. WHO ELSE HAS THE KNOWLEDGE, INFORMATION AND MEANS TO RUN SUCH EFFECTIVE WILDLIFE CRIME SYNDICATES?**



South Africa provide a perfect template for this type of abuse.

Within a certain constituency of the private sector, much of what passes for the wildlife industry is nothing more than a collection of farmers and businessmen profiteering in any way possible. Approximately 23 per cent of South Africa's rhino population is in private

## THESE ARE NOT SUBSISTENCE POACHERS SELLING HORN FOR A PITTANCE TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES



hands and has become a significant source of horns. These enter the black market through the abuse of the trophy hunting permit system (see 'Loopholes' on previous page) and by owners simply removing horns to sell illegally.

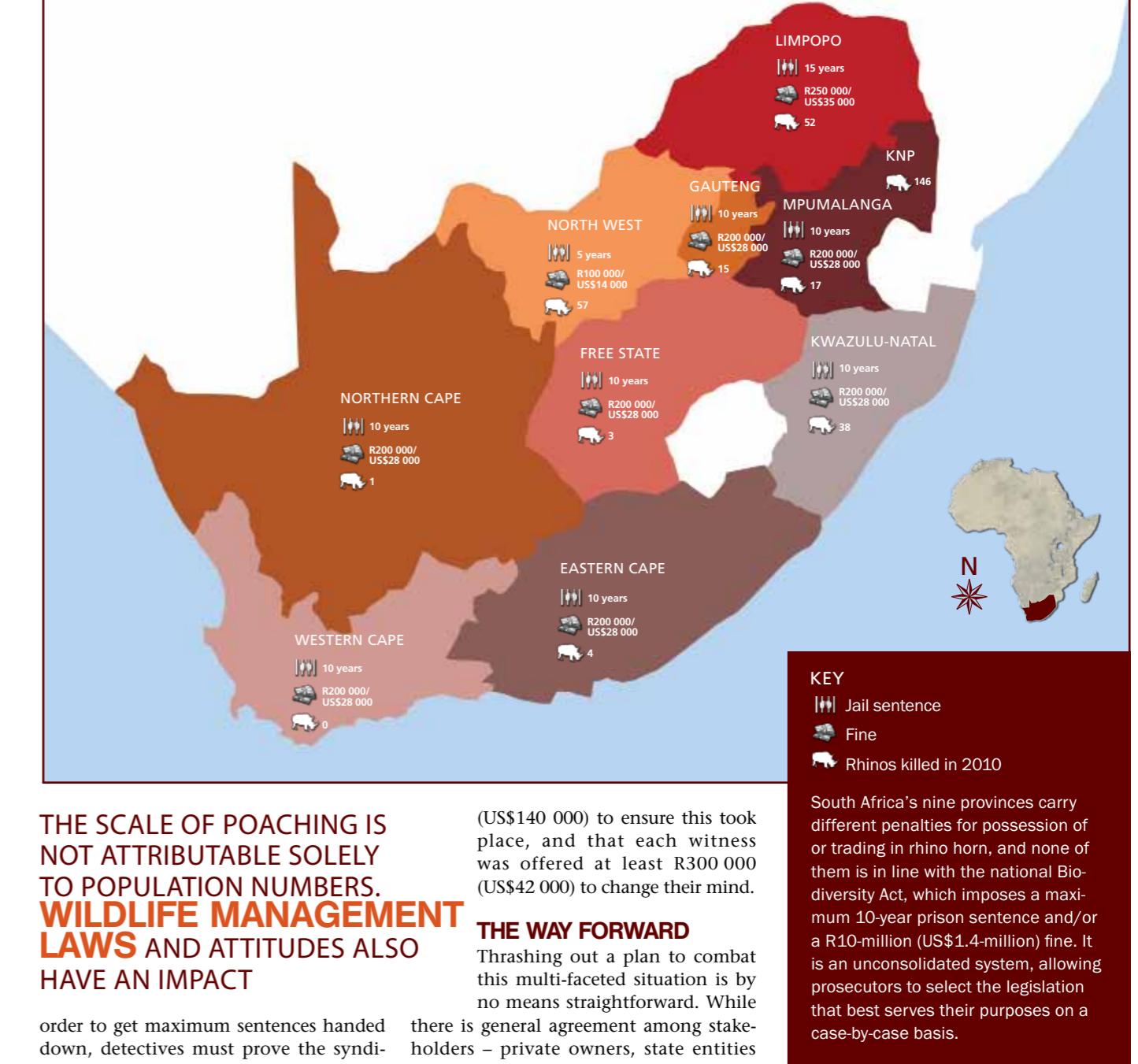
Given this state of affairs, it's unsurprising that the notable arrests over the past few years have involved game ranchers, safari operators and professional hunters. Who else has the knowledge, information and means at their disposal to run such effective wildlife crime syndicates? It also doesn't help that at any given time any number of auctioneers, game capture specialists, transport personnel, pilots, hunters, rangers and veterinarians know exactly where rhinos, from both private and state stocks, are located.

### THE LAW

Black rhinos are listed by CITES on Appendix I, which prohibits international trade. In 1994, the southern subspecies of white rhino was downgraded to Appendix II and a degree of international trade, strictly controlled with import and export permits among other measures, is permitted. In 2005, CITES sanctioned the reintroduction of black rhino hunting, with five permits for adult males issued per year in South Africa. There are no limits on hunting white rhinos.

Hunting or trading without the required paperwork results in prosecution under national or provincial legislation. Penalties differ from province to province, and prosecutors are able to choose which set of laws best serves their specific case (see map). The national Biodiversity Act, for example, carries a fairly stiff 10 years in jail and/or a fine of R10-million (US\$1.4-million), whereas poachers convicted under North West Province law may get away with a US\$14 000 penalty – hopelessly inadequate when rhino horn is retailing at US\$60 000 per kilogram. As a result, prosecutors find that jail terms are a more effective deterrent. In the words of one official I spoke to, 'If we can get jail time, the penalties are OK, but the criminals pay these fines out of their back pockets.'

The crucial factor here is the profile of those being prosecuted. These are not subsistence poachers selling horn for a pittance to feed their families. The authorities are dealing with well-funded and widely connected syndicates that use the latest technology and equipment. In



## THE SCALE OF POACHING IS NOT ATTRIBUTABLE SOLELY TO POPULATION NUMBERS. **WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT LAWS AND ATTITUDES ALSO HAVE AN IMPACT**

order to get maximum sentences handed down, detectives must prove the syndicate links rather than mere possession or killing, and to do this the forensic evidence must be thorough and conclusive. Compiling it is a much more drawn-out process.

Another development is the amount of money syndicate suspects throw at their defence. This aspect was recently highlighted when one case was temporarily removed from the court roll in late 2010. In what seems to be a case of Mafia-style intimidation, two key witnesses appearing for the State suddenly withdrew their testimony – one flatly refused to give evidence; the other asked for witness protection before he would reconsider. Unconfirmed reports indicate that private investigators on the payroll of the accused received in excess of R1-million

(US\$140 000) to ensure this took place, and that each witness was offered at least R300 000 (US\$42 000) to change their mind.

### THE WAY FORWARD

Thrashing out a plan to combat this multi-faceted situation is by no means straightforward. While

there is general agreement among stakeholders – private owners, state entities and conservation NGOs – on immediate anti-poaching measures, long-term strategy is less clear. Almost everyone supports tighter and more effective security, with options ranging from establishing strongholds in popular parks and reserves, with fortified fencing and specially trained defence units, to the implanting of tagging devices (a number of rhinos have already been fitted with GPS chips and alarms) and the use of drone helicopters to monitor populations.

There is also support for streamlining the prosecutorial process and enforcing more severe penalties, with magistrates ▶

KEY  
 Jail sentence  
 Fine  
 Rhinos killed in 2010

South Africa's nine provinces carry different penalties for possession of or trading in rhino horn, and none of them is in line with the national Biodiversity Act, which imposes a maximum 10-year prison sentence and/or a R10-million (US\$1.4-million) fine. It is an unconsolidated system, allowing prosecutors to select the legislation that best serves their purposes on a case-by-case basis.

OPPOSITE Poaching syndicates have upped the stakes by using high-powered weapons and sophisticated GPS and night-vision technology. As a result, anti-poaching units, like the one in Pilanesberg National Park, have had to respond accordingly.

**ANY LONG-TERM SOLUTION MUST ENTAIL A SUBSTANTIAL EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN THAT DEBUNKS THE BELIEF THAT RHINO HORN HAS MEDICINAL PROPERTIES**

**Dr Ian McCallum:** Naturalist, psychiatrist and author of *Ecological Intelligence: Rediscovering ourselves in nature*.

'I am alarmed but not surprised by the ongoing rhino slaughter in our country. Rhino horn is being marketed in the Far East as a cure for cancer and that's what is driving the massive upsurge in poaching. To me, it is a brilliant move by psychopathic syndicates to make up for lost earnings caused by the recent success of Viagra as a genuine erectile stimulant. This calls for nothing less than a high-profile educational and political campaign to refute these opportunistic and superstitious claims. How about a worldwide media display of the burning of South Africa's stockpiled rhino horns, attended by key political and environmental leaders from Africa, Europe, America and the Far East? Along the lines of Arap Moi's burning of Kenya's ivory stocks in 1989, it would serve as a fourfold message: 1) No-one is going to destroy the ingredients for a cancer cure. 2) We actually care about the lives of wild animals. Rhinos have already come perilously close to extinction and we will not allow that to happen again. 3) Legislation against the poaching or sale of rhino horn will result in unprecedented financial and custodial consequences for offenders. 4) Dare I say it? Some things are simply not for sale.'



**Jason Bell-Leask:** Director for Southern Africa, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

'Witnessing what is happening to rhinos in South Africa, I am reminded of the state of conservation today and how things have gone horribly wrong. There is a serious problem with attitudes, values and conservation objectives. Greed, economics and a total disregard for ethics and animal welfare have won the day. Now is the time to focus on non-utilitarian values where wildlife conservation, especially with regard to consumption, is concerned. As long as there are markets for rhino horn, ivory, tiger bone ... the list goes on, we will continue to fight *in situ* conservation battles.'



**Dr Peter Morkel:** Rhino Coordinator, Frankfurt Zoological Society, and one of the most experienced rhino capture and translocation veterinarians.

'The current surge of rhino poaching in Africa is driven by the new-found wealth of China. Its economy will continue to grow and so will poaching. South Africa has more than 85 per cent of the continent's rhinos as well as vast mineral deposits, which China needs. Conservation groups in South Africa must get the country's president to contact his counterpart in China directly and request a clampdown on the importation and use of rhino horn. Similar pressure should also be applied to Vietnam.'



**Dr Joseph Okori:** African Rhino Management Programme, WWF South Africa

'The unprecedented economic growth in Asia coupled with weak socio-economic and political systems in Africa have heightened rhino poaching and crimes. We must address the global dynamics of the rhino horn trade and build international commitment towards conserving the African rhinos. African states should also boldly engage consumer nations in addressing this debacle. Our need to conserve the planet's biodiversity and maintain ecological process cannot be overemphasised.'



**Grant Woodrow:** Managing Director Wilderness Safaris, Botswana, and the initial coordinator of Botswana's Rhino Relocation and Reintroduction Programme.

'Botswana has become a small, but increasingly important player in rhino conservation in southern Africa. Its success has been driven by high-level political commitment and an acceptance of conservation values. The government has collaborated with the private sector and the joint effort has reaped fantastic results. This, together with the fact that Botswana has vast expanses of acceptable rhino habitat, makes it ideal for nurturing a growing population.'

Rhino populations in neighbouring states have attracted increased poaching attention. Not enough is being done across the SADC region to move animals whose survival is threatened by these illegal activities. Botswana could act as a recipient nation for rhinos under threat. This will ensure the survival of threatened populations and at the same time assist with the growth of new populations.'



and judges being encouraged to take a harsher line on convicted poachers and syndicate members. And greater cooperation in managing populations, at regional level as well as between the private and government sectors, is something many stakeholders endorse.

In the longer term, opinion is broadly divided along pro- or anti-use lines. The pro-use lobby has called for the legalisation of the trade in horn, arguing that regulation would lower the price and therefore remove a key poaching incentive. This would pave the way for rhinos to be bred and killed, with all dealings managed through a central clearing house. Other measures include tightening the present trophy hunting permit system to exclude nationals from countries that do not comply with systems that trace exported horn, and selecting more carefully the veterinarians and game-capture teams that have access to rhinos.

The anti-use lobby is based primarily on neutralising the current commodity value on

horn, focusing on educational programmes and toughening legal deterrents. Removing rhino from hunting lists has backing and, despite the controversy over reducing an animal's chances of survival, de-horning remains a preferred option in some quarters.

#### THE END GAME

In concluding, I come back to the core of this crisis: foolishness and greed are feeding the criminal behaviour that is putting endangered species at risk. To me, it is obvious that the most vital component of any long-term solution must entail a substantial educational campaign that debunks the belief that rhino horn has medicinal properties.

Focused in the regions where use is highest and working in conjunction ▶

**THE PRO-USE LOBBY HAS CALLED FOR THE LEGALISATION OF THE TRADE IN HORN, ARGUING THAT REGULATION WOULD LOWER THE PRICE AND THEREFORE REMOVE A KEY POACHING INCENTIVE**

## THE SECTOR OF THE WILDLIFE INDUSTRY IMPLICATED IN THE POACHING SCOURGE IS THE SAME ONE THAT IS INVOLVED IN PREDATOR BREEDING, CANNED HUNTING AND A HOST OF OTHER APPALLING WILDLIFE ABUSES



### Join the dots

If you're think we're making any of this up, read on...

On 18 January 2011, professional hunter Christiaan van Wyk was found guilty of hunting a white rhino without a permit on a farm in Limpopo Province in 2006. He was given the option of a R30 000 (US\$4 000) fine or 1 000 days in jail. The rifle that he used was forfeited, as was a set of rhino horns (obtained from a different hunt) in his possession. Van Wyk has been barred from obtaining a hunting permit in Limpopo Province for the next three years, although this does not prohibit him from applying in other provinces.

'We expected a higher fine,' said Faan Coetzee, coordinator of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Rhino Security Project, who was instrumental in Van Wyk's arrest. 'We know that he has been involved in at least four rhino hunts, and would probably have earned about R20 000 to R25 000 per hunt. While he has not been found guilty of illegal activity in all these hunts, the money he may have made probably far exceeds the fine he has received.'

While hunting a rhino without a permit is illegal, the owner of this rhino had given permission for the animal to be shot, which means that Van Wyk couldn't be prosecuted as a poacher, a far more serious crime. The magistrate also said that there was insufficient evidence to prove that he had shot three other rhinos in a similar fashion.

Van Wyk's client, Vietnamese national Michael Chu, was also later arrested by police after being found in possession of five illegal rhino horns. He was fined R40 000 (US\$5 600) and deported.

with major international conservation agencies and NGOs, the campaign should be compiled and driven by the UN and modelled on the global initiatives that are used to prevent malaria and HIV. It is also time for CITES to move away from its one-dimensional role as the monitor of the trade and become one of the pivotal bodies that drives such a campaign.

On the supply side, arguments for the legalisation of the trade in rhino horn can be challenged on a number of levels. Firstly, the pro-use arguments are underpinned by the same attitudes and practices that got us into this mess in the first place. The sector of the wildlife industry implicated in the poaching scourge is the same one that is involved in predator breeding, canned hunting and a host of other appalling wildlife abuses. It can hardly be relied upon to reform itself into a respectable self-regulating trading house.

Secondly, where is the evidence that legalising the trade will result in decreased demand and prices? In fact, the reverse may be true. There are over 1.5 billion potential users and fewer than 25 000 rhinos: creating an open market could boost demand by exposing horn to new customers, which could have serious consequences for the survival of the animals.

And thirdly, the private owners and others within the pro-use lobby are primarily businessmen and farmers. They have invested in these animals on the expectation of huge returns from hunting revenues, trading opportunities and even the possibility that the trade in rhino horn will become legitimate. So, their support for legalisation is understandable – revenue goes to them instead of to criminals – but this is an agricultural approach based on economic self-interest. The conservation card is played only when their animals are poached and it is expedient to call on government, NGOs and the public to protect them. (One police source revealed that security measures on some of these farms are totally inadequate – fences are poorly maintained, there are no guards and the rhinos are not tagged.)

In short, we need to root out the rot and focus on securing the conservation status of rhinos.

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