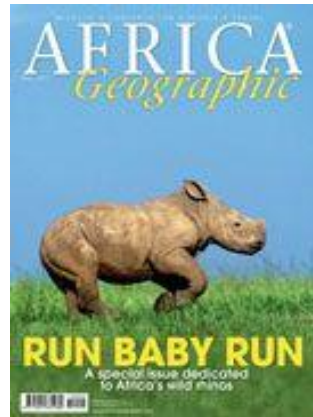


# AFRICA GEOGRAPHIC

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April 2012: All about rhinos

Special issue - rhinos & the poaching crisis

80 and counting...

That's the number of rhinos killed in South Africa in the first two months of 2012. We dedicate this entire issue to finding out about rhinos and their precious horn, establishing exactly what is driving the poaching onslaught and examining the pros and cons of suggested solutions.

features

## All about rhinos

Find out what we know about Africa's rhino species – how many there are and where they live – and about their horns, the unique evolutionary attribute that arguably makes them the most controversial and written-about animals of our time.

## A chequered past

Prior to colonial times, Africa's rhino population across all species is thought to have numbered in the hundreds of thousands, possibly over a million. From the 1800s to the present, our summary tells their story. Rhino numbers, however, remained guesswork until the 1960s – and even today there is an element of uncertainty that is compounded by secrecy for security reasons.



### The crisis

Crisis? What crisis? After all, rhino numbers for both species in southern Africa are actually increasing. It sounds crazy given a poaching scenario that is seemingly so out of hand, but it is true. It doesn't mean that rhinos in the wild aren't in trouble though – they are. We unpick the inner workings of the poaching syndicates and look at what we know about the Vietnamese and Chinese consumers who are driving the demand.



### The solutions


We know rhinos are in trouble. We know we want to save them. But how do we do this, in the face of such seemingly overwhelming odds? The proposed solutions are as hotly debated as they are numerous. Do we increase security and penalties, should we stop legal trophy hunting or focus our efforts on changing mindsets in Asia? We evaluate every one, including the hottest potato of them all: calls to legalise the trade in horn.

Find it here:

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Peter Borchert  
Founder

We chose our engaging little model for the cover of this issue for two reasons: relief from the brutal images that inevitably accompany so many stories about rhinos these days, and as a message of encouragement: for as long as there are rhinos being born that will grow up in the wildest of possible circumstances, there is hope for the species. Our exhortation 'RUN BABY RUN' is, therefore, as much a call for our baby pachyderm to be the essence of what it is, as it is a call to run for its very life.



# Dissuasive measures

SELOMIE MARITZ

Some radical procedures are being undertaken in the current quest to put the brakes on rhino poaching. **Tim Jackson** investigates two options – one pre-emptive and one proactive – that have triggered impassioned debate.

## WHERE'S THE POINT?

It's a simple idea: you cut the horns off a rhino, the animal is no longer valuable to poachers and ultimately it is spared from death. That's the theory, but does dehorning work in practice?

The first to dehorn rhinos were the Namibians; in the late 1980s they cut off the animals' horns to deter poachers in the north-west of the country. From 1991 the practice was adopted on a much larger scale in Zimbabwe, with mixed results. Many local experts considered it to be a success, but adverse publicity in Hwange National Park and the subsequent loss of many of its dehorned rhinos to poaching led conservationists further afield to doubt its effectiveness.

But Peter Lindsey from the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria disagrees. 'The failure of the Hwange programme cannot be attributed directly to dehorning,' he says. 'The main problem was a reduction in anti-poaching measures due to budgetary constraints. This happened several months after the rhinos had been dehorned and left them exposed.'

Dehorning is normally carried out alongside other interventions, so it is difficult to tease apart how effective the various strategies are. Nevertheless, there are indications that the procedure can improve a rhino's prospects of survival. When rhinos were dehorned in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, rangers noted a drop

in the number of animals lost to poachers in each raid. Also, fewer of the rhinos killed in the 1990s and 2000s were dehorned individuals, and there was evidence that in some cases poachers ignored the individuals without horns.

'In South Africa, dehorning has only been commonly used as an anti-poaching tool for the past two or three years,' says Lindsey. 'There is a perception among critics of the practice that it is meant to be a "cure-all" for preventing poaching,' he adds. 'This is not the case. Our experience has shown that dehorning does not work if you do not also have good security.' Under current circumstances, if rhinos are dehorned but security is poor, they will probably still be poached.

According to Lindsey, dehorning should be regarded as a drastic intervention for use at times of extreme threat to rhinos, and only as one tool in a broader anti-poaching programme. And while security

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Is a rhino without a horn still a rhino? Some would emphatically answer no, but others argue that a dehorned rhino is better than no rhino at all.





LOWVELD RHINO TRUST, ZIMBABWE

## GETTING PRACTICAL

Removing the horns from a rhino is a job for an expert. While the animal is sedated, a chainsaw or cross-cut wood-saw is used to cut off the horn close to the base, taking care to avoid damaging the growth area. The stump is trimmed and filed smooth, then covered with a tar-based mix to prevent it from cracking.

The operation costs about US\$1 000 and has to be repeated every two years as the horn grows. For these reasons, dehorning is not a viable solution in large populations and areas, where funds are probably better spent on security.

is one additional factor that will help success, a second essential is publicity. 'Poachers must be made aware that your rhinos have been dehorned,' he advises.

Lindsey equates the success of dehorning to a risk:reward ratio in economic jargon. 'If you decrease the rewards of poaching while maintaining the risk through effective security in a particular reserve, you decrease the likelihood of that reserve being targeted.'

Dehorning does have its critics. It can have a negative effect on the tourism value of rhinos as well as on their worth in live sales, and hunters in particular will not pay top dollar for a dehorned rhino. Moreover, the technique leaves a stub of horn, making the rhino not completely worthless to poachers. It is also believed that dehorning could affect a rhino's ability to defend itself or its territory. 'While there are negative issues associated with dehorning,' concedes Lindsey, 'when poaching levels are high, these are probably the least of your worries.'

## THE EXPERTS SAY...

*Tony Conway, chairman of the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Rhino Management Group, South Africa*



R. TAYLOR

'Dehorning is the last intervention you would use before you remove rhinos from a region. In fact there is little support for it in our large protected areas. And you definitely don't want to see dehorned rhinos in a prime tourism destination. But there is a place for dehorning in small and vulnerable rhino populations, mostly in the private sector where protection costs are prohibitive. It's not an official form of intervention currently used by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.'

*Raoul du Toit, director of the Lowveld Rhino Trust, Zimbabwe*

'There's no doubt that dehorning can sometimes be effective in deterring poachers within the overall balance of reward versus risk, but it's not a stand-alone solution. In one area we were only able to dehorn the males, as we had put radio transmitters in the females' horns. (There were a lot of snares around and calves were getting caught in them. By tracking the females, we were able to rescue their calves.) This backfired on us because poachers then shot only the females and left the males.'



GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL FOUNDATION

## POISONED CHALICE

Ed Hern, owner of the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve outside Johannesburg, has set up a new initiative, the Rhino Rescue Project ([www.rhinorescueproject.com](http://www.rhinorescueproject.com)), to counter rhino poaching on his property. With his eye on discouraging the end-users of rhino horn, he says the idea is to inject his animals' horns with a medicinal compound and a bright dye that will show up under an X-ray scanner to warn of the horns' toxicity. 'No deterrent is a guarantee that your animal will be protected,' concedes Lorinda Hern, the project's manager, 'but this will be another arrow in the quiver against possible poaching incidents.'

The technique involves infusing the horn with an ectoparasiticide – a poison that kills ticks and other parasites that target livestock – and a pink dye similar to that used to mark bank notes. Once a rhino has been sedated, the cocktail is forced into its horn under high pressure to ensure that it penetrates throughout. ►

A vet monitors the condition of an anaesthetised rhino throughout the procedure of transferring the poison/dye cocktail (in the pressurised cylinder) into its horn.



TIM JACKSON





TIM JACKSON (3)

The cocktail is pumped under high pressure through the blue tube into the rhino's horn. The hole at the horn's base will house a radio transmitter that will monitor the animal's movements.

While introducing the poison into the rhino's horn apparently does not jeopardise the animal, it does expose anyone ingesting the doctored horn to a potential risk – and thus presents something of an ethical dilemma.

The Rhino Rescue Project has sought advice from lawyers and, based on this, is confident that the strategy holds no legal implications. 'We are not trying to kill anyone, or cause anyone harm, by treating the horn. It is purely meant to act as a deterrent, just as dehorning is intended to be a deterrent,' affirms Lorinda. 'The legal opinion we obtained assured us that we could not be held civilly or criminally liable as it is not our intent to do anyone physical harm.'

Charles van Niekerk leads the veterinary team that is working on the treatment. 'Rhino horn is dead tissue, so [applying the cocktail to it] has exactly the same effect as pouring or spraying it onto the skin or putting the animal in a plunge dip,' he reasons. He is more coy about how the compound may affect humans. 'As far as people are concerned,

we can extrapolate this compound's toxicity from the complex that it belongs to and what the registration holders have published [about it],' he explains, adding, 'I can't say that it would definitely not be fatal to humans.'

There are no external signs that the horn has been treated in this way (it doesn't turn bright pink!), so the project's success hinges largely on letting the poachers know. 'The biggest thrust of our campaign is going to be awareness – people must know that the horns have been doctored and are therefore no longer suitable for human consumption,' warns Van Niekerk.

And what of the effect on rhinos? At a highly publicised media event held in February at the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve to demonstrate the application of the cocktail, the subject, a rhino named Spencer, died under anaesthetic. The post-mortem revealed that he had abnormal heart, liver and kidney conditions that together probably contributed to his demise. While sedating a rhino to carry out a procedure such as this does involve some risk, it is considered to be relatively small. 'Deaths from sedation are very uncommon, less than one in a thousand,' confirms Pelham Jones of the Private Rhino Owners' Association.

AG

## TO POISON...

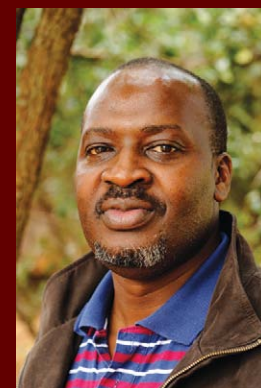
*Dr Charles van Niekerk, veterinarian, Rhino Rescue Project*

'We are driven by a desperate need to try to do something and at the same time balance it against



what we know and what is safe for the rhinos. When one looks at the rate at which rhinos are being poached, we've had to [launch the project] perhaps sooner than we'd have liked to. But if we wait another three or four years, will we have any rhinos left?'

## ...OR NOT TO POISON



*Dr Joseph Okori, African Rhino Programme Manager, WWF*

'WWF believes that using the dye can be equated

to dehorning because the objective is to create a deterrent to poaching – as long as people know that it's not worth poaching a dyed horn. The dye enables us to trace the horn, like stained bank notes. Poisoning, however, is a different matter. We at WWF do not believe that this is the route to go. It's unethical in that there is a deliberate motive to harm a person. That isn't right and we cannot support it. In legal terms, you could be charged as an accomplice to murder, which is not what we're here for. You're targeting the end-user, who is innocent – you're not targeting the people who are involved in the trade or do the actual poaching.'



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