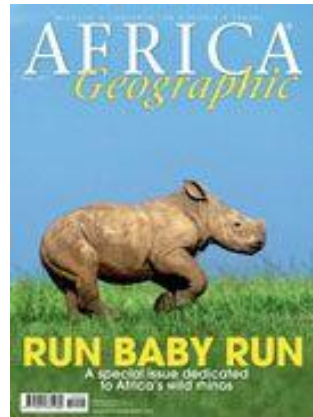


# AFRICA GEOGRAPHIC

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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.

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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.





# the **SOLUTIONS**

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SECURITY

# BEEFING UP SECURITY

Desperate times need desperate measures and, recognising this, the South African government has deployed defence force troops to help combat rhino poaching in the country's national parks. But is this enough? And how are private rhino owners coping? **Tim Jackson** finds out.

**A**s I happily bumped my way down a dirt road in the Kruger National Park near the end of last year, rhino poaching was the last thing on my mind. After all, I was on holiday. Then in my rear-view mirror I caught a glimpse of a vehicle approaching fast. It roared past me, hardly slowing down. Through the dust I made out its number plate: South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The dust settled, but my mood didn't. From my perennial position of concerned citizen helplessly reading about the plight of rhinos in the comfort of my home I was suddenly transported to the front line of a national war against poaching.

The Kruger is at the epicentre of the ground war. Official SANParks figures point to 252 rhinos poached in the park during 2011, adding up to more than half

the total number lost in South Africa that year. So how has the poaching pressure affected security efforts? 'The SANDF has been posted in the Kruger specifically to patrol the international borders of the country and is only helping to control rhino poaching for a limited period of time,' explains Wanda Mkutshulwa, the head of communications for SANParks.

South Africa is certainly looking to beef up security around its borders since rhino poaching erupted. SANDF troops were drafted into the Kruger to guard the Mozambique boundary in April 2011 and Justice Minister Jeff Radebe has promised additional coverage. 'We will be deploying a further four military companies on the Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Lesotho borders from April 2012, bringing the total number of companies to seven,' he announced. While the



TIM JACKSON (2)

SANDF has been directed to tackle all forms of organised crime, much of its focus will be on poaching.

Within the Kruger, security falls under the mandate of SANParks, and here too there are now more feet on the ground. 'SANParks increased the number of rangers in the Kruger by about 50 two years ago and will soon be adding another 150,' states Mkutshulwa. That will bring the total to 650, which is still small when you consider that the rangers are charged with protecting an area of nearly 20 000 square kilometres (similar in size to Israel or Wales). It is also woefully inadequate in view of the recommendation of the IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group: at least one ranger per 10 square kilometres.

National parks and provincial reserves may have a history of protecting their wildlife, but private rhino owners do not. 'The very first killing of rhinos on



private property happened in December 2008 in the Limpopo area,' recalls Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners' Association. Comprising about 400 property owners with rhinos on their land, the private sector accounts for roughly 28 per cent of the rhino population in South Africa. 'Before 2008, many of the private reserves had no security or anti-poaching units at all,' explains Jones. 'Only the bigger ones had some protective measures in place, but they were focused on the bushmeat trade.' Today most private rhino owners have joined a security node and work together to protect their animals.

Anti-poaching units (APUs) form the core of their efforts. While these obviously need to be well staffed, it's not just about the numbers; they have to be able to deal effectively with a poaching incident. 'If a rhino has been poached, the scene has to be managed forensically. So the APUs have to be trained to a minimum standard. A higher level of supervision is required, as well as a better knowledge of the relevant legislation,' continues Jones.

The same is true for security companies employed by some rhino owners. 'We now train our staff to a paramilitary standard because we never know when they might get involved in a fire-fight,' says Barend Lottering, the director of Nyathi Security, which serves many of Zululand's private reserves. 'But the first thing you have to do is clean up your own organisation before you start arresting outside guys,' he adds. Lottering subjects his employees to random lie-detector tests to prevent internal security breaches. He reckons that 80 to 90 per cent of the poaching incidents in Zululand are linked to insider information ►

LEFT AND ABOVE Given that rhino-poaching gangs are invariably armed to the teeth, anti-poaching units need to be better prepared themselves. They require a higher level of training, better equipment and a greater understanding of the law than was previously the case.

**unsafe haven**  
Of the 80 rhinos killed in South Africa in the first two months of 2012, 43 died in the Kruger National Park.

being leaked to criminal elements. 'We should also be carrying out ballistics tests on all the weapons that are carried in reserves. Each one has its own characteristics that could be loaded onto a database,' he concedes.

'But then, there are a couple of extra things that we've put into place over the past year or so,' Lottering continues. 'We have dramatically increased our vehicle patrols and now also have aerial surveillance from small fixed-wing spotter planes.' In an initiative sponsored through Project Rhino KZN ([www.projectrhinokzn.org](http://www.projectrhinokzn.org)), aircraft operated by the Bateleurs (a voluntary organisation that provides an aviation service to environmentalists; [www.bateleurs.co.za](http://www.bateleurs.co.za)) take to the skies with security personnel on board to look for illegal rhino-related activity.

inevitably, the cost of increasing security is putting extra strain on conservation funds. 'In the past three years, the budget linked to conservation management in the Kruger, which includes anti-poaching, has risen by more than R100-million,' says SANParks' Mkutshulwa. To some extent this has been met by additional support from SANParks Honorary Rangers and other donors. Nevertheless, 'The resources required to fight poaching have meant that we have had to cut spending in other areas,' she acknowledges.

Private rhino owners are facing a similar escalation in costs. 'The big issue is that until recently properties were able to operate with unarmed APUs. That has become a thing of the past – now heavily armed poachers come in and you have to confront them,' says Jones. But you can't simply issue automatic weapons to a private APU without the correct permits, and they are hard to come by. 'The Minister of Police has promised to fast-track the issuing of permits, but it's not happening. And the poachers aren't

**how deep are your pockets?**  
A state-of-the-art radar-and-camera surveillance system with a range over a 12-km radius costs about R6.9-million (US\$90 000).

blind to that, so to protect our animals we are forced to utilise an outside contractor who has an armed APU,' he says. 'The cost of hiring a security company depends on the size of the property, but it can run to between R30 000 and R100 000 a month.'

The dramatic increase in security costs is taking its toll on both private rhino owners and their animals. 'Many of the smaller owners cannot sustain the present cost of security, so either they become soft targets or they're forced to sell,' states Jones. He points to a shift in where poaching activity is happening, explaining that whereas previously 25 per cent of it took place on private land, that figure has grown to 37 per cent. 'Because of the increased security in the Kruger and other national parks, the private sector offers poachers relatively easy pickings. We simply don't have the resources that the state has.'

Lottering reports that the same is happening in Zululand. 'We're now seeing an increase in poaching in private game reserves, but a decrease on land belonging to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. Millions of rands are going to the official body [for security], but not to private landowners,' he says.

Once a shot has been fired, the damage has been done,' Lottering continues. 'We want to prevent that. Information is an extremely important resource that we're using, one that you can't really put a value on. We've achieved some positive results by using networks of informers. It takes a long time to put together an informer network – I'm talking years – but once it's established, it's worth its weight in gold.' His words reflect a shift from reactive to proactive security, indicating a determination to stop poachers and the criminal syndicates associated with them before they can strike.

Jones confirms this. 'For the first time we are starting to see arrests from proactive action. In February 2012 we captured about 20 poachers, confiscated five vehicles and recovered six firearms and three rhino horns – all as a result of proactive operations and crime intelligence.'

From a SANParks perspective, his words are echoed by Mkutshulwa. 'The key intervention in this scourge is the involvement of the Hawks because when it comes to organised crime syndicates, intelligence work is more effective than traditional ranger activity. We need to keep the poachers out of the parks altogether rather than catch them after the act,' she concludes. **AG**

White rhinos are most under threat on private land, as many landowners simply don't have the same level of resources to fight for their animals' security that their counterparts in state-run parks and game reserves have.



## ON THE FRONT LINE

The International Anti-Poaching Foundation had one week to turn journalist **Aaron Gekoski** into a hardened game ranger, but he may have signed up for more than he bargained for.

**T**he situation is this: we found a freshly laid snare line on the southern perimeter earlier today. Our mission is to lie in wait for potential poachers. Team designation will be Oscar One, Oscar Two and Tango One. On contact with the suspects, stop them, using the correct level of force, and detain. But remember, there is a shoot-on-sight policy in Zimbabwe for armed rhino poachers.' Steve Dean, operations manager at the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF), is briefing his team of rangers before an ambush. Welcome to the front line in the war on poaching.

The IAPF was founded by Damien Mander, a former sniper in the Australian Special Forces. Damien and his team use their specialist training to protect

and preserve wildlife in volatile regions. Based at a reserve in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, they recruit, train and deploy anti-poaching rangers.

Now, however, the IAPF was up against one of its toughest missions to date. Damien and Steve had just seven days to turn an out-of-shape English journalist into a plausible ranger. My week starts early. It's 05h00 and there's a rhino stomping around outside my tent. Not to worry, the alarm's about to go off anyway – it's morning patrol time.

The rangers cover up to 25 kilometres each day, sweeping for snares and searching for signs of trespassers. Last year they caught a gang armed with AK-47s, machetes and knives. Coupled with the human threat, the IAPF's private reserve boasts the Big Five as well as spotted hyenas, crocodiles, hippos and African wild dogs. Ranger Benzene briefs me: 'Stay downwind of rhinos. If they charge, get behind, or up, a tree. Be on constant guard for crocs. Remember, we may encounter lions. If we do, don't run away. Instead, puff yourself up and shout at them.'

While the patrols get my blood pumping, they're nothing compared to the grueling personal training sessions. Steve puts me through his 'tractor-tyre torture' work-out: 10 shattering minutes of tyre-flipping hell, followed by sets of burpees. After this it's on to pull-ups, press-ups,



sit-ups and weight lifting using a barbell fashioned out of blocks of concrete. To keep his team fit in the bush, Steve has to be inventive.

The rangers spend time in the classroom too, honing their knowledge and refreshing their medical skills. Cannulation practice ends painfully for Chelepele, as I use him as a pincushion. Once the blood's been mopped, he gets his own back during a camouflage-and-concealment lesson. As Chelepele smears buffalo dung down my face, he allows himself a chuckle. After slinging on a gilly suit, I blend effortlessly into the bush.

Next up is role-play and a lesson in detainment. Steve throws me a snare; I'm the poacher. The next thing I know, rangers are jumping out of bushes, wrestling me to the ground and clamping on handcuffs. 'What are you doing here? Where are you from?' they demand as they detain me. Real poachers would then be handed over to the police. The gang members caught last year are facing up to 23 years in jail each.

Poachers beware: the IAPF's Green Army is waiting for you.

*To learn more about the IAPF and how to assist them, visit [www.iapf.org](http://www.iapf.org), or head to [www.aarongekoski.com](http://www.aarongekoski.com) to view more of Aaron's work.*



GEMMA CATLIN (2)