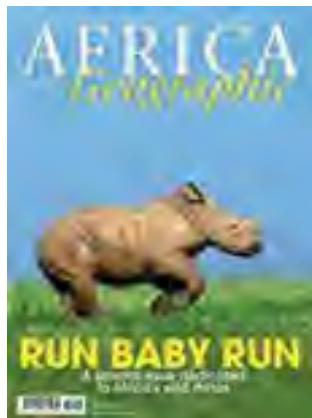


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April 2012: All about rhinos

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.

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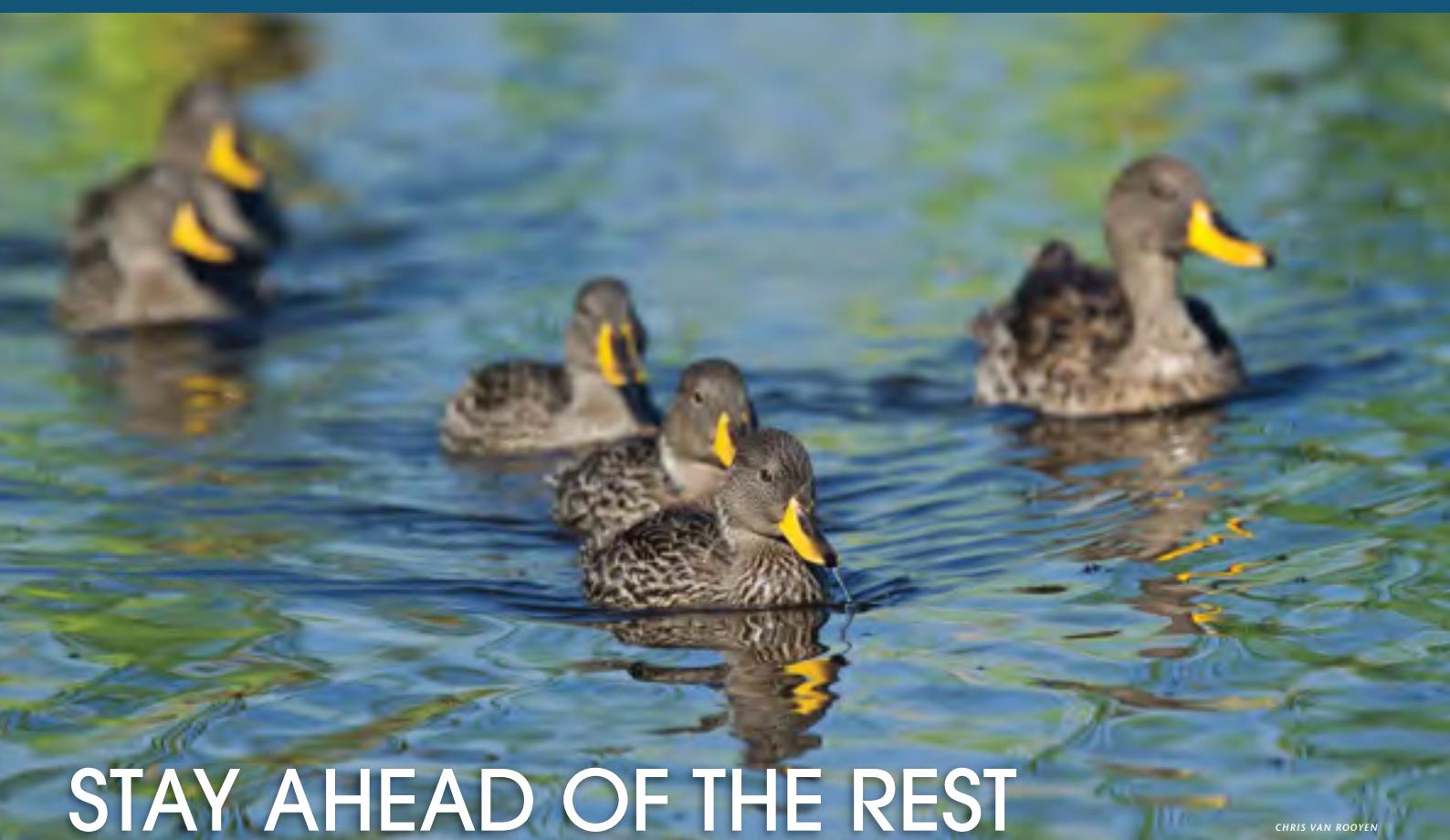


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White rhino *Ceratotherium simum*
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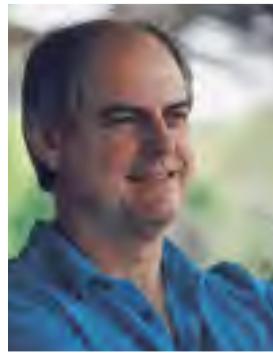
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FOUNDER'S NOTE



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.

There is no hyperbole in this statement as Africa's wildlife is in the throes of an onslaught, the likes of which boggles the mind in its relentlessness and brutality. And it is happening to so many wild creatures of the land, sea and air. Yes, the onslaught is not limited to Africa, but that is no comfort. The difference here, however, is that Africa is the epicentre of the world's megafauna and it is these great beasts of the plains and forests that are in the front line. For example, some

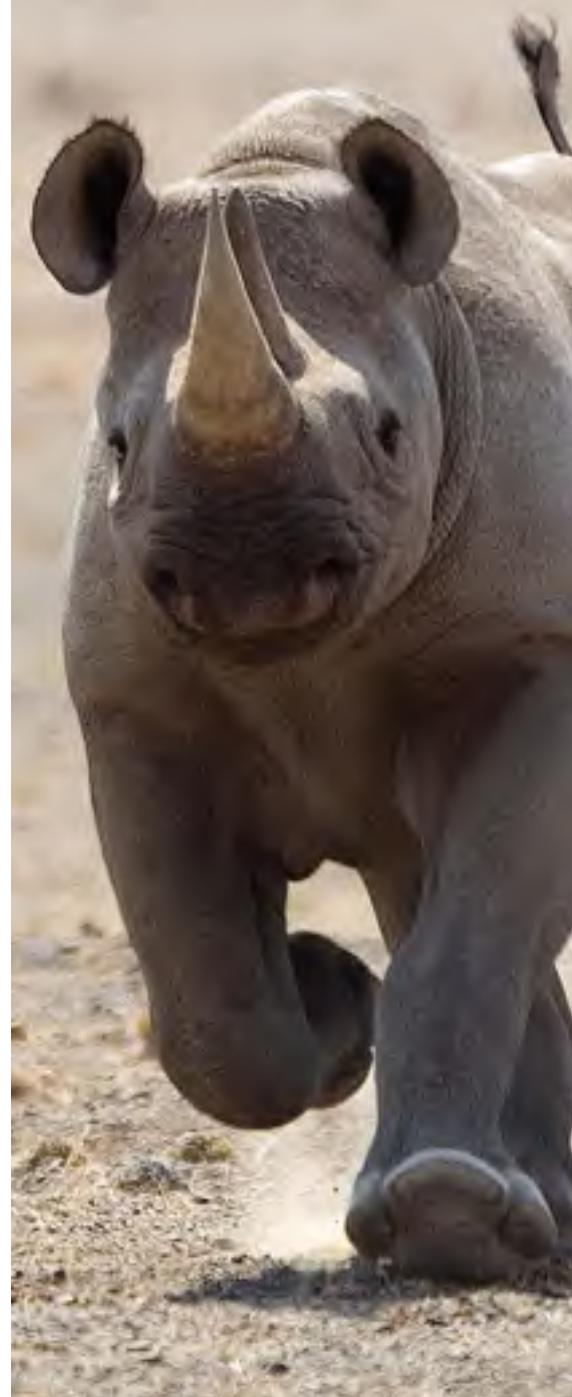
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40 000 elephants are being killed each year, many of them for the 'blood ivory' used to fund warfare. But that is a story for another day. Here, we are focused on the plight of Africa's rhinos, which face a killing crisis of their own because they also have stout protuberances that are as valuable as gold, not tusks in this instance, but keratin-based compactations called horns.

Rhinos have been around for an impressively long time, certainly compared with us. Our species' antecedents entered the world stage a mere two million or so years ago. By that time, the rhinoceros family had been through many ups and downs in its evolutionary fortunes: it had survived warm times and cold times, droughts and periods of inundation over a span of 30 million-odd years. The rhino evolutionary peak probably came about 17 million years ago, when the forebears of the black and white rhinos of Africa split from the Asian one-horned species. Today rhinos are arguably in the twilight of their time on earth. Certainly there is nothing in their evolutionary bag of tricks that can fight back against the force that is driving them towards the precipice of extinction: the actions of one super-competitive species – human beings.

Should we care? Are there not more pressing challenges for the seven billion of us on the planet? Some would say no, we shouldn't care. Some would adopt the utilitarian view of 'if it can pay (that is, be of commercial value), it can stay'. Others would say an emphatic yes. Certainly we face an inescapable moral responsibility; fairly and squarely, it is we humans who have brought rhinos to their knees. And it has taken us little more than a hundred years to do that.

At the beginning of the 20th century the combined populations of African rhinos probably numbered close to a million, if not more. Enter trophy hunters and poaching and the ensuing massacre left the animals perilously close to the brink within 60–70 years. Enter too that time of supreme arrogance, Africa's colonial period, that put rhinos to death for other reasons – witness the 1 000 black rhinos killed by a single hunting team in Kenya during 1946–48 for the clearance of land for agriculture.



That rhinos survived and have grown back to some 26 000, and are still increasing, is due to the efforts of a handful of men and women. Standing tall among them, of course, is the extraordinary treasure of Africa that is Dr Ian Player (see page 26). But the 'rhino wars' are far from over, led by the seemingly insatiable demand for the putative curative powers of horn among the people of Asia. Unless the killing is curbed soon, the scales will once again tip Africa's rhinos onto the slippery slope to oblivion. That is a certainty.

On the day we went to press we learned that rhino killings in South Africa had reached 109 in the first two months of the year (this is substantially up from the 80 poaching deaths previously reported – and the figure quoted frequently in the coming pages). Also came the news that all official information and statistics about rhinos in South Africa will now come only from the Department of Environmental Affairs. In response to criticism and suggestions of a darker reason, spokesman Albi Modise said: 'The only reason that information about rhino poaching is being centralised is that the issue has become a crisis. We want a single message to reach civil society.'

Indeed a crisis. So what do we have to do?

A good many months ago, when the *Africa Geographic* editorial team sat down to discuss dedicating an entire issue of the magazine to rhinos, we knew we were embarking on a project fraught with difficulty – as one would assume given the underworld nature of poaching, illegal trade and all the nefarious goings-on associated with these activities. Yes, we came across secrecy and obfuscation, and as much as we have been appalled at the extent of the dark side of rhino exploitation, we have also been overwhelmed by the openness of so many people – academics, conservationists, law enforcers, private rhino owners and others – who have been only too willing to share their research, opinions and thoughts with us.

For me rhinos are more than rhinos alone; I have a deep sense that we have reached a tipping point in Africa and the world. Lose rhinos and conservation suffers a mortal blow.

There is no 'silver bullet' that will save the animals. But we are humbled by the commitment and fortitude of people all over the world – often with vehemently expressed opposing views – who want only one thing: the survival of rhinos in the wild. To all of you: thank you and do not give up. Set aside moral judgements of each other, focus on the facts and the common purpose, and find a sustainable global solution.



PS We will continue to follow the rhino saga in future issues of *Africa Geographic* and to engage with our broader community across Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube and other social media platforms. They are extraordinarily powerful tools at the disposal of each one of us, so let's use them together to help save the rhinos.

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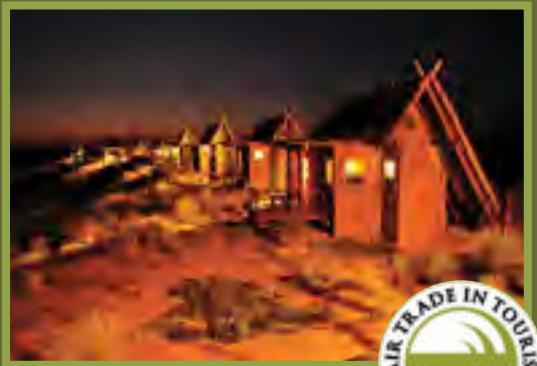


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EDITORIAL



'A fter all this, rhinos had better bloody survive,' I muttered under my breath. Dog-tired and bleary-eyed, I'd been presented with yet another round of corrections to an article I thought was safely signed off. At that point in a stressful and increasingly impossible-to-achieve deadline, dedicating an entire issue to rhinos was rapidly falling into the category of Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time.

We had some inkling of what we were getting ourselves into when discussions for this issue first took shape towards the end of last year.

'What we really want to do,' said Peter Borchert, 'is put together something that says, "This is a rhino. This is what we know about it. This is what is happening to it. This is what we think we can do about it."' It sounded simple enough, but the more people we spoke to and the more we read (boy, did we read), the more the realisation dawned that rhino conservation is one of the most complicated issues we've ever tried to get to grips with.

Whether or not we have succeeded depends on what you make of the pages that follow. If you're moved to condemn, praise or point out an obvious spelling mistake, please know that we tried. Really hard. So, a big thank you to my tireless, eagle-eyed, patient and surprisingly good-humoured editorial and production team whose overtime (and understanding families) made this possible.

Of course, as challenging as our jobs were, they're nothing compared to the heroic efforts of rhino conservationists, rangers, investigators, prosecutors and advocacy campaigners. Here's to you – and to the rhinos we all care so much about. Damn right they're going to survive.

WE COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT...

Africa Geographic would like to thank the following people for generously sharing their knowledge and their time with the team who compiled this issue:

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YOU LIKED THIS



Can you see the weekend yet?

Another photograph by Anton Walker went down extremely well!

'Photo of a female leopard peeking at a herd of impala. I am fortunate to be a field guide at Kirkman's Kamp and as such have opportunities to be out in the bush every day. But this is something that I have never seen before [and] I was lucky enough to have my camera ready. Two hours later she managed to kill an adult impala and spent the next two days feeding off the kill.' Anton Walker



PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Talk about being in the right place at the right time! Anton Walker's capture of this heated discussion between an African fish-eagle and a saddle-billed stork is something quite special and we have selected it as our best picture of the day entry.

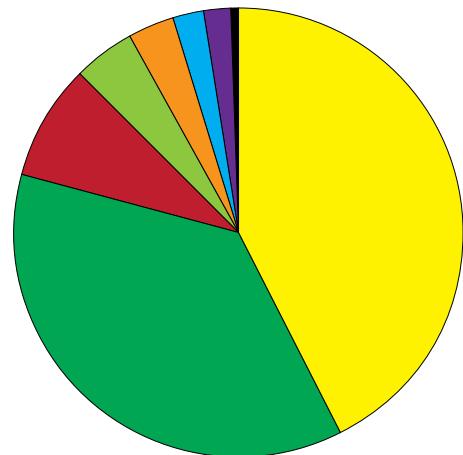
'Driving in the Kruger [National Park] on the way to Satara from Skukuza, I was fortunate to see a female saddle-billed stork walk up to and start attacking this fish-eagle that was sitting at the water's edge. She had two chicks feeding in the shallows with her.'

Anton Walker

WHAT YOU SAID

What do you think is the solution to the current rhino-poaching crisis?

- █ Upping penalties.
- █ Security: increasing anti-poaching controls, tightening controls at airports.
- █ De-horning.
- █ Treating rhino horns with poisons.
- █ Legalising the trade in rhino horns.
- █ End-user campaigns: educating the end users of the products.
- █ A combination of measures.



Simon Espley - 'All of the above, except for legalising trade. Legalising trade should only be done once the beneficiaries (traders, farmers, vets, hunters, service providers) undertake to operate under one banner and agree to a high degree of moral/ethical behaviour, complete transparency and cutting out the poachers/criminals from their networks.'

Carol Werth - 'Security, increasing anti-poaching patrols, tightening controls at airports, etc., especially our ports. Strengthening our border control into all neighbouring countries. Combined with treating the horn with the parasite treatment for added protection. We should implement harsher measures rather than just a penalty, as money in this arena seems easy to come by; perhaps the poachers will remember when they look at their missing finger? Lastly, end-user campaigns... I say this last as it will take the longest to see results but [it's] not impossible.'

Fading...

Beautiful...



For How Much

RICHARD PECHE

Reader Richard Peche took this photo of a white rhino in Pilanesberg Game Reserve in South Africa's North West Province and made it into a poster that says far more than mere words.

The whole picture

When looking at the options that will help to decrease and perhaps stop rhino poaching, it's important to consider everyone involved, from those who protect rhinos – landowners, park managers and game rangers – to the poachers and end users of the horn.

What can we do? Starting with the consumers, we should educate them about what the horn is made of and what its properties are, and the effects that poaching is having on Africa's rhinos. The many South Africans who go to Asia to teach English can include rhino poaching in their lessons.

Cut out the middlemen – the transporters and sellers – by legalising trade in rhino horn and ensuring that sales are regulated. When doing so, include a clause that states that a percentage of the profits from sales must go back into the community. Some proceeds from the sales should also go towards higher salaries and better training for security personnel. The rhino owners will be able to afford better security when they sell the horn legally. As the number of harvested horns increases, the demand will decrease and we will be able to start letting our rhinos have long horns again.

As security personnel increasingly get involved in rhino poaching, there is little faith in their competence or ethics. Let's rather try a new solution. *Jennifer Marlton, North West Province*

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