

the mozambique connection

Having recently walked and pedalled through the Mozambican provinces that border the Kruger National Park, Ian Michler has first-hand experience of the challenges faced by local villagers – and by those who are trying to save Kruger's rhinos.

SOUTH AFRICA'S RHINO POACHING is well into its fourth year and although the statistics continue to paint a gloomy picture, there appears to be some progress on a number of fronts. The increase in arrests and prosecutions is one obvious example, but of far greater significance is the fact that the South African government and security agencies have recognised that dealing with the Mozambique aspect of the problem is crucial to any long-term solution. The reason for this is quite simple: most of the poachers entering the Kruger National Park (KNP) come from its neighbour to the east, even though the Mozambican government reclassified poaching from a misdemeanour to a crime earlier this year.

The circumstances of the challenge – and its magnitude – become more apparent when viewed against the prevailing economic and social background. Two decades of civil conflict left Mozambique's conservation ethic in tatters. And despite impressive growth statistics, the country remains mired in poverty, ranking 184th out of 187 in the latest UN Human Development Index. These factors are exacerbated by bribery and corruption at every level, while the lack of a strong civil society sector means that the watchdog function so vital in most democracies is also absent.

It's little wonder then that a host of villages within the provinces of Gaza and Maputo have become havens for poachers. Chimangue, Machamba, Makandazulo B and Mavodze all show the fruits of their successes, while Massingir is believed to be the centre for up to six syndicates. The poachers operate in teams of three – a tracker, a shooter and a horn carrier – and each crew is paid about US\$4 500 per kilogram of horn.

Using the villages as bases, the teams make their way into KNP. The route they take depends on the latest information about the whereabouts of rhinos, which is typically

relayed by sources from within SANParks or by other poaching gangs leaving the park. Villagers also report on recent rhino tracks, and are paid the equivalent of about US\$1 800 if their information leads to a successful hit. Currently, two of the better-used routes are the 'Eight-mile walk', which involves a tramp of this distance from the village of Cubo, and the Honaune route, which starts right alongside the fence.

If there are concentrations of rhinos in the western and southern sectors of KNP, teams may be driven into South Africa via the Ressano Garcia/Komatipoort border post. Depending on the circumstances, they enter the park legally or illegally, but most often

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return to Mozambique on foot to avoid being caught in possession of horn while in South Africa.

Their weapons of choice are .458 or .375 rifles and, to avoid detection, these are usually kept out in the field or are handed from one team to the next when they change shifts. Another option is AK-47 rifles that, for a small fee, are 'borrowed' from Mozambican security personnel, particularly the *Força de Guarda Fronteira*, or border police. The teams often ambush the rhinos, laying a trail of Portuguese bread rolls to the base of a tree in which the shooter is waiting.

Even if arrests are made, a whole new set of challenges presents itself: anyone, from anti-poaching rangers through police and prison officials to prosecutors, may be corruptible. The first move made by whoever is apprehended is to offer money, the amount depending on who has been caught and by



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Rhinos and rifles, represented by the spoor of a black rhino and a cartridge found close by, are closely linked in Mozambique, the source of many of the poachers in the Kruger National Park.

whom. Poachers and horn carriers generally have between US\$1 500 and US\$2 000 on them and they will offer this to ordinary police officers and rangers, whereas people who come from Maputo to collect the horn carry up to US\$20 000 in case they are bust.

To put this into perspective, a game scout earns on average about US\$170 per month, a senior scout about US\$350 and a local prosecutor less than US\$1 000. As a result, prosecution levels are almost zero; rifles handed in to police may be returned to poachers within days; vehicles belonging to officials are often used to ferry poachers; and if administrators are seen to be doing their job, they are often moved to other regions or positions. In essence, for a fee, it is possible to escape capture at every level. Most of the horn passes through Massingir, usually at night, as this is the quickest route to Maputo, and the transfer of bounty between syndicate members takes place almost immediately.

All this makes tackling the Mozambican poachers on their own turf a tough challenge, but one that governments and their security agencies on both sides of the border will have to face.

