

The Rhino Wars – a comprehensive overview of the situation and the solutions

2013 may be the critical turning point for the survival of the remaining rhinos on earth. These are the few that have managed to escape the onslaught of poaching in South Africa. The rhino murders are now possibly resulting in more deaths than calves being born. Have we reached a tipping point to their survival, what is the true situation and what are the solutions?

The official death toll for rhinos killed in poaching incidents in 2012 was 668, including an estimated 30 critically endangered black rhinos. This figure was up from 448 in 2011, of which 19 were black rhino. This equates to almost two rhinos killed every day for 365 days. By the 25th May 2013, the death toll had already reached 350, with most of the animals dying gruesome deaths.

Many solutions have been put forward to curb rhino poaching, but none have been successful.

When people ask me why I am called the extreme conservationist, I simply say that our Earth is ill and that illness has been caused by human greed, consumption and ignorance. The plight of our rhino is symbolic of this. Our planet is extremely stressed...extreme times call for extreme measures. The current rhino wars are a stark and horrific example of our greed, consumption and ignorance. When it comes to looking at solutions to end this atrocity, I believe there is no single solution.

A more integrated approach should be adopted with fewer egos putting personal agendas. A multipronged approach is needed for such a multifaceted problem to be addressed and remedied. There are over 400 'help save the rhino' initiatives globally at present, many are ethical and well intentioned but many are fraudulent. These unethical people prey on human emotions to elicit funds, which generally make money for the illegal entity and not for the rhinos. The general well-meaning individual has become confused and is uncertain as to where they can help. Fatigue is rife. It is high time that we stop talking about what we should be doing, and rather action whatever we can to

stop the rhino wars. And there is so much we still can do. I think it was Dante who wrote, ‘the hottest place in hell is reserved for those who do nothing in times of crisis’.

In this crisis, it is important to hear all sides and then make *informed* choices as to where one can be an asset and be proactive in a way that makes the biggest, most productive contribution. Half-knowledge and emotional reactivity can be very counter-productive in times where a lot of people are trying to do the same thing differently. We must try to solve this as part of a greater team, where each of us has a contribution to make. This also sometimes means to step aside, listen, and consider with an open mind.

I have seen many butchered rhino carcasses. I have watched, in shock and anguish, as two rhinos tried to stand up, their faces hacked to pieces as the M99 drug used by the poachers, wore off. I have cried many times, embarrassed for my species.

As a passionate and committed conservationist, I have spent many years exploring the potential solutions to saving this iconic species from extinction.

People speak of ‘poisoning the horn’, of ‘legalizing trade in rhino horn,’ of ‘winning the war’ against the poachers, of ‘education’, and it goes on. I have been at the forefront of this war. From watching rangers have to euthanise calves because there was no hope for them, to seeing a bull lying drowned in a dam from his wounds, to a poacher pleading for his life.

Equally, I have watched a different war, an unintentional war, a war where people lobby their position, defiantly deaf to the opinions of others. I have seen fierce and vicious competition and jockeying for position between different rhino conservation organizations. Each individual organization deems their approach as the only viable solution, and large amounts of time and resources are spent on promoting this solution in the media. Money gets poured into that potential solution, thereby diluting the funding perhaps spent more constructively and effectively in a combined approach or a combination of approaches. Military history documents many victories that have been won due to the principal of ‘divide and conquer’. Unfortunately, in the case of the rhino,

we are divided and conquered of our own accord, whilst the poachers and crime syndicates are winning the rhino war.

We must respect differences and *unite* if we are going to save these magnificent gentle giants. If we are going to win the war, we need to remove sentiment, as difficult as this might be, and understand the dynamics of conservation.

At present, many aspects of rhino conservation still rely on external funding, while others are policy dependent. A good rule to remember, however, is that any long-term solution must be ecologically and economically sustainable in a way that it is based on renewable resources and eventually funds itself without continued external input.

Here, I broadly share my understanding of the potential solutions and how we can all become true Earth ambassadors and embrace our **DOT** (Do One Thing) campaign to ensure we win the rhino wars.

1. Dehorning rhino in large reserves such as Kruger National Park (KNP)

The KNP is a massive 2 million hectares. I do not believe it is feasible to de-horn rhino in the KNP en masse for a number of reasons: 1) Just to track the animals, never mind dart them, in a Park the size of Israel, often in dense vegetation, would be a very costly exercise. I believe the money could be put to better use. 2) Tourists come to the Park to see the Big 5, not the Big 4 ½. 3) Poachers are often active at night. Seeing a rhino in dim light will not necessarily stop them killing the animal. Even if they notice the horn is missing, they will most likely kill it to retrieve the little horn that remains. It is also speculated that the poachers may kill the animal so as not to track it again.

Having said this, it may be a consideration to dehorn rhino in certain strategic areas (such as Stolzneck, where people live on the Parks boundary). This may have the desired deterrent effect, forcing the poachers to move deeper into the Park where they can be more easily detected and caught.

2. Dehorning rhino in smaller reserves

Most private rhino owners currently dehorn their rhino. Whilst costly, they are faced with little alternative, as not only are their animals at great risk but also are their owners. Private rhino owners are hence dis-incentivised to own rhino.

Owning wildlife is costly. The old cliché, 'if it pays, it stays' is appropriate here. The monetary value of a rhino is declining as the risk of protecting them rises. I believe that unless game owners are financially incentivized to own rhino, there is little hope for their survival on private land.

3. Taking the fight to the poachers

The KNP has approximately 10, 000 rhinos, or 48% of the national total. The Park is almost 2 million hectares in extent, or 20, 000 square kilometers, with a 400km porous border with Mozambique. This is where most of the poaching is taking place. It is the epicenter of the rhino wars. 72% of all rhino poached in 2011 were in the KNP. A similar figure was posted for 2012, and already as at 25th May 2013, of the 350 rhino poached in South Africa, 242 have been in the KNP. That is already 69% for this year. **I believe, with the current escalation, we will see well over 900 of these iconic animals butchered before the end of 2013.** I sincerely hope I am wrong.

KNP (and other reserves) have decided that the best way to stop rhino poaching is to take the fight to the poachers, changing the previously reactive doctrine to being proactive. They have increased their ground forces significantly and introduced intense clandestine paramilitary training where rangers are put through stringent courses preparing them to be able to spend extended periods in the bush day and night. Recently, General Johan Jooste (Retired) has accepted the top position in the KNP rhino war. An asset, I believe.

Instead of waiting for the poachers to strike again, rangers are seeking them out more successfully than before. Of the 60 arrests made in South Africa as at the end of March, 36 were in the KNP. There is an increased night vision capability for rangers on the ground, automatic weapons, intelligence gathering, UAV's (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) able to detect poachers with infra red and thermal-imaging capability, military intervention and more. These rangers are at war with the poachers and they are committed to ensuring our rhino are protected.

I feel strongly that our rangers, the foot soldiers most at risk of death in a confrontation with heavily armed poachers, should be financially incentivized. I am in the process of negotiating such an initiative.

A field ranger is not highly paid. To expect him to risk his life to save a rhino when he has a family to feed is a big ask. I know many field rangers and can personally attest to their dedication and commitment in the line of duty. But some will clearly be open to temptation to collude with the enemy. Simple GPS co-ordinates from a cell phone, giving the location of a rhino to a poacher, may secure a significant sum of money for a struggling family.

These rangers deserve to be acknowledged. A financial incentive, media recognition and possibly a medal, could go a long way in raising the bar of taking the war to the poachers.

Having said this, statistics show us that whilst a noticeable increase in arrests has occurred in the KNP as a result of the heightened war effort, the poaching is still increasing. This is because the risk:reward ratio changes. A subsistence farmer in Mozambique, eking a living to barely survive, is greatly incentivized to earn anything between R10,000 and R20, 000 by poaching a rhino. Some poaching groups entering the KNP have earned as much as R100, 000. When the risk of arrest or dying increases because of greater counter-poaching operations in the KNP, the price to kill the animal simply goes up.

There are more willing poachers than there are rhino, and when you can't feed your family you will take great risks, especially when the financial rewards are so high. Having said this, it is not just about poor opportunistic farmers. It is

important to note, the criminal elements driving the rhino killings are highly organized crime syndicates who will stop at nothing to fuel this hideous illegal trade.

The war continues and, certainly in the KNP, we have to throw everything we can into the arsenal if we intend winning.

4. Educating the end users of rhino horn

The largest demand for rhino horn is for traditional medicine in Asian countries such as Laos, Vietnam and China.

Between 2002 and 2007, an average of 19 rhino were poached annually. Lucrative permitted hunting encouraged private reserves to invest in keeping and breeding rhino, thereby guaranteeing their future. Further, revenue stayed in the country. In June 2008, a moratorium was promulgated which imposed new regulations on the issuing of hunting permits for rhino. By the end of that year 83 rhinos had been poached. This figure rose to 122 in 2009, grew to 333 in 2010, escalated to 448 in 2011 and reached a staggering 668 in 2012. It appeared that 'less trade' by way of legal hunting permits simply pushed the trade underground. Less trade equaled more poaching.

A trophy hunter may legally hunt one rhino per annum. Unfortunately, there is a loophole, as there is no centralized permitting office and permits are issued per province. This means that a hunter can apply for a permit in nine provinces, with no record of having already obtained a permit in another province. So, theoretically, a hunter could kill nine rhinos within a twelve-month period. A centralized permitting system is long overdue, as without it, corruption will continue.

The new moratorium simply meant that some hunting outfitters would create pseudo-hunts. This entailed using foreign nationals. The best reported were the Vietnamese sex workers who posed as the permitted hunters.

In 2012, there was a clamp down on pseudo-hunting after a number of arrests were made. Yet still the poaching climbed, more than doubling the figure in two years.

In 2008, it was also reported that a Vietnamese government official's wife declared that rhino horn has cured her from cancer. This, while actually being an urban legend, could also have spiked the demand for rhino horn.

Although I believe in the importance of education and public information campaigns explaining that rhino horn has no nutritional or medicinal value, I do not believe that this will have any effect on even curbing the onslaught on our rhino before the last animal has dropped. Why do I make such a bold statement?

I have visited China on numerous occasions and spoken with various educated people there. One such person was a Chinese professor in traditional Chinese medicine at Beijing University. She stated that the Chinese people have practiced traditional medicine for thousands of years and that whilst there may well be no proven medicinal value, if someone believed otherwise, they would take the 'medicine' anyway. The placebo effect cannot be understated. I have watched parents with their child buying live scorpions on skewers, dipping them in oil and eating them. Sea horses, also alive, and many other animals and insects, because they believe they work as a cure for a multitude of ailments. Tradition is not something easily changed. There are an estimated 25, 000 rhino left. There are 1.4 billion Chinese. If as little as 1% use rhino horn, that is 13.5 million people. Do the math. And I am only using China as an example here.

Another issue is that the Vietnamese *nouveau riche* will pay high prices for rhino horn. They probably know it has no medicinal value, or perhaps they believe it

does; as I have heard they say it is a great hangover cure. Either way, I don't think they care. It is status that they are purchasing. They've used cocaine and heroin, now something more valuable than gold is on offer to display their status. The wealthy young generation are dubbed the 'Ferrari Syndrome' and have little or no concern for conservation.

Education, while a definite long-term solution will not produce an immediate result, and results are what we need most at this point to save our rhino from extinction.

There is however, another area where education is necessary. We need a thorough understanding of the 'demand' side of rhino horn; who is buying, is it being stock piled, how much is being used and how often? This is critically important to implement any demand reduction measures, and to guide strategy if there is to be trade in rhino horn in the future.

5. Poisoning the horn

The Lion and Rhino Park near Krugersdorp took a bold step and introduced an ectoparasiticide in 2010. This potential solution had apparently been researched for a considerable period. The rhino is anaesthetized and the horn is then treated with the formula by infusing it into the base of the rhino's horn. A pressure capsule allows the formula to permeate upwards through the fibers of the horn, effectively 'spoiling' the horn. The ectoparasiticide is claimed to have adverse effects on a human that ingests the horn, such as stomach problems and severe headaches, yet apparently no negative effects on the rhino itself or any other wildlife that might come into contact with it.

Infusing the horns with ectoparasiticides, coupled with an indelible dye, might go some way to helping achieve the goal of protecting rhinos in South Africa from poaching in the short term, but it is a costly exercise.

Treating the horn costs between R8, 000 and R12, 000 per rhino, this is dependent on the numbers treated, terrain, the use of helicopters, etc. The treatment lasts about four years, after which re-administration is necessary. For reserves with small numbers of rhino, I believe this may be a good interim measure until such time as we explore other more effective long-term solutions to win the rhino wars. We must also consider that this approach reduces the potential future supply of rhino horn to the market as the horn is 'contaminated'. This could push up the black market price of horn, which may lead to even greater poaching pressure.

It is worth noting, that whilst this deterrent may be effective, the poacher will most likely target another non-treated animal. This is the nature of greed. To the best of my knowledge, no scientifically accepted clinical tests are in evidence.

6. Legalizing trade in rhino horn

In 1977 CITES placed a ban on 'trade in rhino horn'. History has taught us many times that no ban has ever been a solution; it simply fuels the criminal financial system. Through extensive research, it appears that if we are to protect the species, legalizing trade seems to be the only sustainable solution.

"Keeping rhino has become extremely costly," says Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners Association.

"Our rhino are worth more dead than alive. It is costly to de-horn the animals, but we need to if we are to keep them safe", he stresses. Pelham has also said that, "the actions of the anti trade lobby are actively *aiding* and *abetting* the poaching syndicates by ensuring there is no legal trade, thus keeping the black market open for the criminals to continue to exploit and profit by stripping South Africa's national reserves and the private rhino owners (of the animals and their horns),

who have invested over R1billion of their assets, all this with zero regard to animal welfare or international conservation.”

Michael Eustace, a respected environmental economist and asset manager, makes some sense of it all in an article published in 2012: “CITES (Convention for the International Trade in Endangered Species), is made up of 175 parties, or countries, banned international trade in rhino horn in 1977. While well intentioned, the ban has been a miserable failure. All it did was to push the trade underground where it has thrived and made money for criminals. In the process it has impoverished parks, where the money rightfully belongs.

Southern Africa could supply the market with 676 horns a year from natural deaths alone. There are also stocks of 5, 000 horns collected over many years. Southern Africa could easily supply the market with 940 horns a year and increase this by 40 horns a year from the increment of natural deaths, provided poaching was controlled. It would be 19 years before existing stocks were exhausted.

In addition, private farmers in South Africa could provide the equivalent of 1, 000 horns, or 4, 000kg a year, by cropping their horns. The horn re-grows at the rate of 0,8kg a year. The cropping process appears not to harm the animal provided about a third of the horn at the base is left behind when it is cut, which is the normal practice. In theory, Southern Africa could provide the market with 1, 940 horns a year, or more than twice the current demand.

This greatly increased supply could be achieved without the need for the killing of one rhino.

To trade internationally, CITES needs to approve a change in the rules, and for that to happen, 66% of the 175 member countries, or 116 countries, need to vote in favor of the change. The argument in favor of trade is compelling but CITES can be driven more by political game playing than logic. The wildlife donor agencies that attend the meetings have their own agendas and often shape the debate. The next meeting is due in March 2013 and a proposal needs to be

made six months before then. South Africa, being the owner of 80% of Africa's rhinos, is the obvious choice to make the proposal.

SANParks has asked the Department of Environmental Affairs to put the proposal to the next meeting, and SADC Rhino Management Group has asked for the same action."

It is important to note, that since the ban by CITES in 1977, 65, 000 rhinos have been butchered. Some authorities put the number closer to 100, 000.

I attended the last CITES / COP16 meeting in March 2013 in Bangkok. Our Minister of Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa said, "With the work we've done in South Africa, I do believe we need to start looking at legalizing trade as one of the measures that needs to be applied to deal with the scourge of rhino poaching." Minister Molewa also stated, "It's about supply and demand, it's economics 101".

I interviewed Grace Ge Gabriel, IFAW (International Fund for Animal Welfare) Asia Regional Director, who was attending her sixth CITES / COP meeting. She stated, "CITES is supposed to be a conservation convention regulating trade, but it has become a trade convention regulating conservation. It has been hijacked by commercial interest".

The next CITES / COP17 will be held in Cape Town in 2016. We must lobby hard for the ban to be lifted!

Many people believe that if the market is flooded with rhino horn, it will only create a bigger market because of cheaper prices. If trade is legalized, it needs to be controlled and regulated. This is a financial problem and requires a financial solution. It was Dr Anton Rupert that stated, "Conservation without money is conversation".

All rhino horn traded would need to have DNA samples filed in Dr Cindy Harper's RhoDIS system at the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory, University of Pretoria. This will allow authorities to certify the origin of traded horn as being supplied from a legitimate source, much like the Kimberly process used in the diamond industry.

I strongly feel that, once the correct model for trade is in place, we should at least test the market with small volumes of natural mortality horn sitting in our vaults.

We need to learn from the mistakes that were made by the once off selling of stockpiles of elephant tusks. The buyers, China and Japan, colluded and kept the price low. They are now selling off those very stockpiles at huge profits. We need to be able to sell horn off at low volumes and add the value in *Africa*. This will ensure that the bulk of the income generated stays in the range countries so that it can be re-invested into rhino conservation, revenue for the countries as well as create jobs.

Nobody wants to see a rhino without its horn, but it is a far better option than seeing more rhino dead. I will never forget being at Kariega Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape, watching a rhino cow and bull trying to stand, their faces hacked to pieces from pangas. There is a public road running through the reserve. Through the fence, on the other side of the road, were two de-horned bull rhinos grazing peacefully, oblivious to what had just happened. When people debate the issue of de-horning, I simply recall that horrific scene and know, if I was a rhino, which side of the road I would like to have been on!

It is important to gather as much knowledge as possible before making biased statements. I for one was initially anti-trade. Educating myself and listening to all parties concerned has changed my mind. One can de-horn a rhino 10 to 12 times in its 40year life span, with little or no effect on the animal. In fact, if a bull wants to mount a female or there is jockeying for territory between two bulls, the stump

ensures minimal injury during jousting, whereas the horns can cause serious damage.

Furthermore, legalizing trade would bring billions of rands into the country, which could go back into conservation. The criminal syndicates are literally stealing billions from South Africa. If one considers that the current price of rhino horn is between \$50 and \$60, 000 per kilogram (more than gold!), how much money could go back into conservation and, as importantly, employment? Imagine rural farmers being able to legally benefit from farming rhino and compare the land use versus income he currently receives from say cattle or goats. He would protect the very animal he was thinking of poaching with his own life.

7. Conservation and hunting

Many people argue against trade in wildlife, feeling rather that wildlife should only be there to be admired by tourists. Again, the facts speak volumes. Tourism, or eco-tourism as it is popularly referred to, brings in only a small proportion of conservation revenue. A private 5 star game reserve conducted a survey in which it allows hunting as well as tourism in separate parts of the reserve. When a hunter from the USA shoots a rhino, he usually shoots a post-reproductive cow or old bull. This fetches a price of approximately \$85, 000. To make this money from the tourism sector requires in the region of 18, 000 bed nights.

I personally do not hunt and cannot understand how someone can derive fascination and joy from killing an animal. I do believe however, that if it is to relieve suffering, or to maintain an ecosystem's balance, humane culling is necessary. I must take sentiment out of my thinking and understand that the hunting industry brings approximately R8 billion into the South African economy annually. Furthermore, according to Adri Kitshoff, CEO of the Professional Hunters Association of South Africa, approximately R7million goes directly towards conservation projects, such as the South African Wildlife College.

Professor Wouter Van Hoven, Director for Wildlife Management at the University of Pretoria, shared some interesting facts with me: “In 1965, after colonialists decimated Africa’s game, the total number of wildlife remaining was estimated at 500, 000.”

“Trophy hunting was the kick-start to the private sector’s interest in conservation, namely game ranching. Since 1965 the numbers increased to the 20, 000, 000 estimated today. That’s a 40 times increase. Hunting and trophy hunting can be singled out as the biggest single contributor to the abundance of wildlife in South Africa today,” explains Van Hoven.

“The number of many scarce and rare species increased because of their value for hunters and thus enjoyed special protection and care. If rhinos are available for sustainable use by means of trophy hunting, and more importantly, rhino horn commercial production without having to sacrifice any animals, their numbers will increase because many game ranchers will enter the rhino ranching market and invest in their protection. Now the poachers and smugglers have exclusivity on the product thanks to CITES. We must change this,” he says.

Pelham Jones adds, “When one considers that approximately 0.5% of the rhino population, or around 100 animals, have been hunted annually by legitimate 'Trophy Hunters' bringing some R90 million back into conservation. The animals hunted were at the end of their lives and no longer reproductive. This sustainable utilization is one of only three economic pillars supporting 'Rhino Economics', the other two being a tourism value and an ownership value which is associated with asset and population growth. This is now under threat.”

This makes sense to me. We farm crocodile, springbok and ostrich. They are killed for our consumption. If rhinos are farmed, they don't have to be killed and will be worth more alive than dead.

8. Destroy the Syndicates

One other key to solving the rhino crime situation is for Government to invest heavily in destroying crime syndicates, as this will benefit the country as a whole. The rhino syndicates are linked to other illegal activities (theft, murder, weapons, drugs, human trafficking etc.). The money invested from central government will be one of the best investments we can make in conjunction with strong law enforcement. This is just another way to look at reducing demand and ultimately introducing responsible trade that can benefit the range countries holistically.

In conclusion, think multiple solutions

There is no such thing as a single solution to end rhino poaching; there will have to be a raft of tools that form a successful strategy. It is crucial that everyone in the fight against rhino poaching becomes informed and remains committed in order to create a better future for the species. The solutions given might not be how we want it, but rather how it should be in order for our rhino to survive.

In writing this article I am simply attempting to paint a broad overview of the rhino crisis and offer simple and effective ways to stop the slaughter of this iconic species. One thing I do know is that more of the same is not going to save our rhino. We need a paradigm shift in our current failed rhino conservation strategy. Also, let us stop pointing fingers at consumer states and rather make them part of the solution, than accuse them of being the problem. Let us fight the good fight together.

Furthermore, it is extremely important to know where your money is going when donating to various rhino causes. Because this is such a prominent topic, there will

always be people who will use this tragedy for their own benefit. It is important to know where your money is going to be used so that it directly benefits rhino conservation. When making the decision to donate, make sure that the cause you are donating to is a credible one and has a proven track record.

Remember, making decisions based purely on emotions may be doing more harm than good. Make informed decisions and be an asset in helping win the rhino wars. It was Elie Wiesel who said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim”. Do One Thing (DOT) to make a difference, and get involved in the fight to save our rhino.

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