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To reduce rhino poaching — by a lot — cut off their horns, study says

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Poaching has decimated rhino populations across Africa, but a [new study](#) finds that dehorning the animals, or surgically removing their horns, drastically reduces poaching.

The study focused on 11 reserves in the Greater Kruger ecosystem that sprawls across the border of South Africa and Mozambique. Poachers killed nearly 2,000 rhinos here, 6.5% of the reserves' population, from 2017-2023, reducing populations of both black (*Diceros bicornis*) and white (*Ceratotherium simum*) rhinos, according to Tim Kuiper, study lead and conservation scientist at Nelson Mandela University.

Poachers target rhinos for their keratin horns, [incorrectly believed in traditional Asian medicine to hold medicinal properties](#). To deter poachers, many African reserves have [tried dehorning](#), a procedure where veterinarians tranquilize rhinos and saw off their horns, leaving only a stump behind.

In eight of the 11 reserves the study examined, park authorities and researchers (some involved in the study) have dehorned rhinos in batches since 2017. This allowed the researchers to compare the impact of dehorning on poaching rates over time, against the three reserves where rhinos weren't dehorned, and against conventional measures implemented prior to dehorning.

The study found a 78% reduction in poaching rates in the parks after dehorning — and it was cost-effective, too.

From 2017-2023, the reserves spent \$74 million on antipoaching measures, including rangers, tracking dogs, cameras, better fences and access control. But dehorning accounted for just 1.2% of the budget, the study found. "So, it's very clear that our study demonstrated massive declines in poaching in response to dehorning," Kuiper told Mongabay by email, adding that some dehorned rhinos are nevertheless still hunted for the remaining stump.

Conventional antipoaching methods led to the arrest of more than 700 poachers, but didn't significantly reduce poaching. Kuiper said it was surprising that reserves with more dogs, helicopters and cameras didn't have less poaching overall. He added that systemic problems like insider information and poor law enforcement likely compromised these approaches.

Philip Muruthi, conservation scientist at the NGO African Wildlife Foundation, who wasn't involved with the study, told Mongabay the paper adds valuable understanding about threatened wildlife, but said rhino conservation should be more holistic, involving all stakeholders, including local communities, and addressing root causes like local poverty and corruption that drive poaching.

Jasper Eikelboom, a wildlife researcher at Wageningen University, Netherlands, not involved in the study, said more research is needed to reveal the underlying cause of local reductions in poaching of dehorned rhinos.

"To do this, the poaching rates of other reserves in southern Africa at the same moment in time need to be considered as well, to contrast potential displacements of poacher activity with reductions in poaching due to reduced rewards," he told Mongabay by email. "Before this is known, it still remains to be seen what will happen with rhino poaching rates if all rhinos in southern Africa are dehorned."