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Rhino breeder John Hume accused of horn trafficking, arrested in South Africa

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John Hume, a [controversial rhino breeder](#) and former owner of the world's largest rhino breeding farm, was [arrested](#) in South Africa on Aug. 19 for alleged involvement in a rhino horn trafficking syndicate. The arrest follows a seven-year-long investigation by South African authorities.

Hume, along with five others, faces 55 charges on multiple counts of racketeering, fraud, theft, money laundering, and defrauding the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), the country's wildlife authority, by obtaining fraudulent permits.

Authorities allege that between 2017 and 2024, the six accused operated an international rhino horn trafficking syndicate. They obtained permits to trade rhino horns locally but used them to illegally sell the horn abroad, to Southeast Asia.

The international trade in rhino horn has been banned since 1977 under CITES, the global wildlife trade convention. However, domestic trade has been allowed in South Africa since 2017. The recent arrests demonstrate the potential [pitfalls](#) of the widely [debated](#) and [controversial](#) topic of legalizing the rhino horn trade that [conservationists](#) have warned about.

Their fraudulent scheme, authorities allege, is estimated to involve 964 rhino horns valued at 250 million rand (\$14.1 million).

Hume started his breeding farm in South Africa in the early 2000s with a herd of nearly 200 southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*), the largest and most numerous rhino in the world. South Africa banned the domestic rhino horn trade in 2009. Hume, with other rhino owners, challenged it and got it [reversed in 2017](#). That same year, he held an online auction of 264 horns to [supposedly fund](#) his rhino captive-breeding operation.

In 2023, the NGO African Parks [purchased](#) Hume's Platinum Rhino Conservation Enterprise and [planned to rewild](#) its 2,000 rhinos. However, it didn't buy Hume's stockpile of rhino horns (amassed through regular dehorning of the herd). It's unclear what happened to the horns — whether Hume still owns them or sold them — according to U.K.-based conservation NGO [Save the Rhino International](#).

Dion George, South Africa's DFFE minister, [hailed](#) the [investigation](#) as a “powerful demonstration of South Africa’s resolve to protect its natural heritage.” He added that South Africa “will bring the full force of its laws against those who plunder our wildlife.”

“These arrests mark a critical juncture in tackling the organised crime networks driving illegal rhino horn trade and highlight the challenges in regulating horn trade,” [said](#) Cathy Dean of Save the Rhino International.

“Horn stockpile leakage of this magnitude raises serious concerns about South Africa’s current systems to monitor stockpiles, issue permits and detect trafficked contraband at their ports of exit,” Nina Fascione, executive director of U.S.-based NGO International Rhino Foundation, said in an emailed statement, adding South Africa must focus on securing its stockpiles and shutting down illegal trade channels.

All [six accused have been granted bail](#); the next court hearing is scheduled for December.

Banner image: of Southern white rhinos. Image by Jim Tan for Mongabay.