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Ruling on rhino horn sales could unlock millions for conservation... and maybe end poaching

news24
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A dehorned Southern white rhino in a Western Cape game farm.

Kike Calvo/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

A landmark ruling has affirmed that crucial sections of an international convention allowing the sale of endangered species bred for conservation do apply to South Africa.

This could open the door for the legal sale of rhino horn, unlocking millions for conservation.

Opposition to the ruling is expected, even from conservation organisations themselves.

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A landmark ruling has affirmed that crucial sections of an international convention allowing the sale of endangered species bred for conservation do apply to South Africa.

Whether the government will now approve the export of rhino horn by conservationists, will become clear within a week.

The Northern Cape High Court in Kimberley ruled on Friday that the government must process Backwood Conservation's application for the export of white rhino

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The case was brought by Rockwood owner Wicus Diedericks after Northern Cape Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform MEC Mase Manpole denied his application for permits to export rhino horn in April 2023. The national minister of forestry, fisheries, and the environment, currently the DA's Dion George, was the second respondent in the case.

The MEC argued that specific articles of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) do not apply to South Africa – but in his ruling, Judge Pule Tlaetsi rubbishes this argument.

Cites was incorporated into domestic law in 2004, along with the Convention on Biodiversity. The articles relevant to the case make provision for the sale of endangered species or their products, provided that the animals were bred in captivity for conservation or other non-commercial purposes. Trade in wild endangered species, or trade solely for commercial gain, is strictly prohibited.

Diedericks told News24, if approved, permits to sell rhino horn could unlock millions of rands that could support rhino conservation.

On the black market, rhino horn is estimated to reach between \$10 000 and \$15 000 per kilogram; between 500 and 1 000 rhinos are killed annually in all of Africa for their horns. A horn weighs approximately 3kg to 5kg. An estimated 2 500kg to 5 000kg of horn is poached annually, meaning the illegal trade could be worth between \$25 million and \$75 million.

According to the court documents, Diedericks “wants to offset the cost of maintaining and protecting these animals from poaching by harvesting and then selling the horn of living animals who were born in captivity, in a sustainable manner which is not harmful to any such living animal... The applicant does not seek to make a commercial profit out of this trade in white rhino horn. The proceeds of such sales will be ploughed back into conservation of the rhino.”



A southern white rhino and newborn calf in the Dublin Zoo.

Artur Widak/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

It costs Rockwood about R20 million annually “to feed, protect and propagate” the about 430 southern white rhinos in its care. “The applicant contends that he is

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conservation, and uplift rural communities across South Africa”.

Rhino horn is made up of keratin, a dead tissue like hair and nails, that can be harvested without harming the animal. It grows back naturally, making it a renewable resource. Conservationists have for many years trimmed the horns regularly to prevent the animals from being killed or injured by poachers.

A stockpile of these trimmed horns is building up, said Diedericks: “Meanwhile, poaching continues to devastate rhino populations. Despite 50 years of Cites restrictions, Africa’s rhinos have been decimated...”

“This ruling unlocks millions in foreign revenue, supports community-led conservation, and shifts profits from poachers to protectors... This is more than a legal win – it’s a lifeline for rhinos and a bold step toward 21st-century conservation.”

Diedericks told News24 he still expects significant pushback against the legalisation of rhino horn sales.

Not only is bribery of people in authority by poachers rife, some nongovernmental organisations fear losing funding. Many organisations have latched on to the emotive issue of rhino conservation, but not all the money reaches genuine conservation efforts – rather, it is used for marketing campaigns and salaries.

Wildlife Ranching SA has congratulated Diedericks, saying on its [website](#): “This landmark judgment marks a significant milestone for the wildlife sector, affirming the right to the sustainable use and regulated trade of rhino horn. It represents a crucial step forward for conservation, the protection of private property rights, and the responsible management of South Africa’s natural resources.

“We share in the excitement this decision brings and recognise its potential to reshape the future of conservation-bred wildlife.”

Rockwood proposes strict international oversight, biometric tracking, and certified horn origin systems for the legal trade to ensure transparency and accountability. “The goal is not to commodify rhinos, but to create a system where conservation pays for itself.”

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