



RHINOS ON A KNIFE EDGE



AN EMS FOUNDATION REPORT

No.3 in the *WHERE HAVE ALL THE RHINOS GONE?* SERIES

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DISCLAIMER

The facts and the analysis presented herein are sustained in documents, interviews exposed in the mass media and in judicial records. In the case of the names mentioned, quoted or referenced with the exception of those specifically mentioned, quoted or referenced in the text as definitely condemned, the presumption of innocence, in observance of individual rights is always preserved.

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INTRODUCTION

The EMS Foundation is a South African–based independent philanthropic and advocacy organisation working at the intersection of social justice, environmental justice and wildlife protection. Our core purpose is to challenge systems of exploitation that harm wild animals, people, and ecosystems, and to promote ethical alternatives. The Foundation positions animal protection not as a luxury concern, but as integral to justice, dignity, and ecological survival.

There are [approximately](#) 2300 – 2500 rhinos living in South African state owned national parks managed by South African National Parks (SANParks). Due to intensive illegal killing, particularly in the Kruger National Park, their numbers have declined significantly.

The lives of these last few remaining rhino remain on a precarious knife edge due to the insatiable demand for rhino horn in China and southeast Asia, deeply entrenched corruption in South Africa, regulatory loopholes and the challenges of effective governance as a result of organised criminal networks that continue to infiltrate our justice system.

To further complicate matters, South Africa’s approach to saving the rhino species is, once again, mired in debate and [contradictory policies](#). After all these years there is still a discussion on the table about potentially legalizing the international export of rhino horn from South Africa versus the government’s plan to phase out intensive rhino farming. This lack of unified and consistent strategy creates uncertainty and potential loopholes.

South Africa’s intensively farmed rhino industry has increasingly mirrored the controversial captive-bred lion industry, characterized by high-intensity breeding, privatisation of wildlife and a focus on commercial exploitation such the horn trade and “canned hunting” rather than on protecting and conserving the rhino species. While the world’s largest rhino farm was recently acquired for rewilding purposes, the structural similarities between rhino farming and lion farming both driven by demand from Asian traditional medicine markets have raised significant ethical and ecological concerns.

Both the rhino and lion species are bred in confined, high-density, and intensively managed facilities, often resulting in animals that are habituated to humans and have low [genetic](#) diversity. In 2019 the South African government [reclassified](#) rhinos, along with lions as “farm livestock” by amending the Animal Improvement Act (Act No 62 of 1998). This reclassification was [successfully](#) challenged in the High Court of South Africa in 2023.

Like the lion bone trade, where carcasses are sold for traditional medicine, the rhino industry relies on harvesting horns from live, anesthetized rhinos, which are then stockpiled, waiting for legal, international trade, much like lion bones. The rhino industry also service the “canned” hunting industry, where animals are hunted in confined spaces with no chance of escape.

Both industries have been implicated in “pseudo-hunting” where fake hunters are used to acquire horns or body parts for export to Asian markets. As with then the legal lion bone trade, the

potential for “laundering” illegal rhino horns through a legal trade, or by mixing them with poached, non-farmed horns, is high.

Due to these similarities, and ethical concerns, the South African Cabinet approved plans to phase out the captive breeding of both lions and rhinos. Consequently, on the 2nd May 2021, Minister of Environment, Barbara Creecy, [released](#) the High Level Panel Report which reviewed policies, legislation and practises related to the management, breeding, hunting, trade and handling of elephant, lion, leopard and rhinoceros. Creecy made the following statement: *“Despite South Africa’s reputation as a global leader in conservation, there are still reported incidents and perceptions of irresponsible, unethical and unsustainable conservation practices in the management, breeding, hunting, trade and handling of elephant, lion, leopard and rhinoceros, especially in terms of animal welfare and well-being, that negatively affect the country’s conservation reputation and do not bode well for the country’s international standing and development objectives.”*

Perhaps some of the unethical and unsustainable conservation practices to which Minister Creecy referred included the rhino owners, breeders and trophy hunters who have been arrested over the past two decades for the contravention of various environmental laws.

This mini-reference report has been created as a useful summary to communicate some of the significant developments that have taken place since the publication of the last EMS Foundation rhino report in 2024.

The content of the EMS [Where Have All the Rhinos Gone](#), report published in December 2021, concentrated on a time period that will forever be marked by a magnitude of government corruption and the capture and destruction of the South African justice system. The information contained in the retrospective report confirmed the questionable official decisions that have been taken over the past two decades negatively effecting the protection and conservation of South Africa’s rhino. We provided explanations for the devastating loss of thousands of rhinos in South Africa, and we determined that the significant loss of rhinos are not only due to the illegal killing of rhinos, but that these unacceptable numbers are also the result of:

- (i) poor, problematic policy and management decisions;
- (ii) the direct involvement of some of South Africa’s professional trophy hunters, corrupt members of the South African Police Service, some rhino breeders, crooked veterinarians, and nature conservation officials; and
- (iii) a porous South African border control.

The Second EMS report in the *Where Have all the Rhinos Gone?* Series, [South Africa’s Rhino Horn Stockpiles: Intrinsic to Illegal Trade](#), was published in February 2024. This report provides evidence of how South Africa’s rhino horn stockpiles are driving illegal trade in rhino horn. Details of incidents where rhino breeders and their industry colleagues had, since the publication of the first report, been implicated in the illegal sale of hundreds of rhino horn, suspicious deaths of rhinos and found to be in the possession of unmarked rhino horn.

South Africa's pro-trade policy framework and its seemingly unwavering support for the questionable model of intensively breeding rhinos for horn production was brought into sharp focus despite the dramatic [implosion](#) of the rhino farming industry.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SOUTH AFRICA'S RHINO HORN TRADE POLICY

The Northern Cape High Court Ruling to Permit Limited International Export of Captive Rhino Harvested Horn

In late October 2025, a controversial Northern Cape High Court ruling permitted the limited international export of rhino horn from captive-bred rhinos so financial support for rhino conservation was met with significant international and local outrage.

In our view this judgement has sent out the mixed message of *the utilization of an almost extinct wildlife versus the conservation of such*.

[Article VII of the CITES convention](#) states that if an Appendix I species is "bred in captivity not for commercial purposes", exports can be authorized with a certificate instead of an export permit. A captive breeding certificate does not require the same preconditions that are at the heart of the treaty's protections, effectively allowing the exporter to circumvent the CITES rules for species listed on Appendix I or Appendix II. For years, private rhino owners in South Africa have tried to exploit this exemption. The South African government has rejected all such applications to date.

In 2023 Hendrick Wicus Diedericks filed an application against the MEC for Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (Northern Cape) and the Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment ([Case No. 295/2023](#)) in an attempt to compel the government to issue captive breeding certificates under the CITES Article VII(5) exemption so that he could export rhino horn commercially after his applications for export using captive breeding certificates were repeatedly denied. Assisting him in the application is Derek Lewitton.

According to court documents Diedericks sought permission to export rhino horn to Laos, China, Vietnam, Japan, Mongolia, Canada, and the US. The judge ruled in favour of the applicant(s) and based his [ruling](#) on three points:

- South Africa did not explicitly notify the CITES Secretariat about its stricter domestic measures and therefore they cannot be applied;
- South Africa directly incorporated CITES into its domestic laws it must implement Article VII(5) even though there is no mention of it in South Africa's domestic legislation;
- The rhinos on Diedericks's property were bred for conservation purposes and not commercial purposes.

The Judgement has been studied by a number of concerned conservation organisations. The [Environmental Investigation Agency](#) (EIA), for instance, [believes](#), for that there appears to be a fundamental misunderstanding of international law in general, and CITES in particular: "There is no requirement enshrined in the CITES convention text that compels a Party to notify the

Secretariat of stricter domestic measures. A Party can certainly choose to do so voluntarily, but even if it does not, the stricter domestic measure still applies as part of the country's national legislation. Moreover, according to past correspondence between the CITES Secretariat and the South African government that was reproduced in the judges' ruling, the Secretariat was aware that South Africa does not implement Article VII(5)."

The EMS Foundation agrees and questions the judge's reasoning that, although Diedricks wants to export the rhino horn for commercial purposes, he "does not seek to make a commercial profit out of this trade in white rhino horn" because he states that "the proceeds of such sales will be ploughed back into conservation of the rhino."

We argue that there are no guarantees that the proceeds from sales of exported rhino horn will be put towards rhino conservation, and the very definition of what constitutes legitimate rhino conservation is contested in the conservation community in South Africa and abroad.

Hendrik Wicus Diedericks, the applicant, is the owner of [Rockwood Private Game Reserve](#). Rockwood is known for its [intensive](#) breeding of rhino and is situated in the Northern Cape Province in South Africa. The Rockwood Private Reserve intensive rhino breeding [model](#) is apparently [funded](#) by hunting. *"Our thriving population in excess 350 Southern White Rhinos is a testament to our highly successful and progressive approach to conservation. We hunt with purpose, to leave a legacy of conservation. When you "Hunt for Change", you're providing an invaluable financial contribution to conservation and the livelihood of our people; ensuring a purposeful adventure matched only by the thrill of the chase. Our ultimate goal is to witness a flourishing and safe rhino population, unshackled from the severe threat of extinction. The proceeds from your safari safeguards the future of one of the world's most endangered species: The Southern White Rhino. At Game Trackers Africa - Rockwood Conservation, we don't breed to hunt; we hunt to protect. Selective rhino hunting provides the financial means to care for the entire population".*

According to the court documents, Rockwood, is a registered Captive Breeding Operation under South Africa's National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act (NEMBA), this does not, to our understanding, automatically mean that Rockwood's rhinos meet the CITES definition of 'bred in captivity', and it is far from clear whether the rhinos were bred for commercial purposes.

The [CITES Resolution Conf. 12.10](#), 'bred for commercial purposes' refers to "any specimen of an animal bred to obtain economic benefit, whether in cash or otherwise, where the purpose is directed toward sale, exchange or provision of a service or any other form of economic use or benefit."

Does the CITES definition apply to Rockwood's rhinos?

Rockwood allows trophy hunting of its white rhinos, trophy hunts are not offered free of charge, it could potentially be argued that breeding rhinos for hunting would be breeding the animals for economic benefit and/or the provision of a service.

Rockwood dehorn their rhino to deter poachers from targeting their rhino. The removed horn is registered and stockpiled.

Whether breeding rhinos for trophy hunting and stockpiling rhino horn is for commercial purposes *in the context of CITES* is ultimately a decision for the CITES Management Authority of South Africa and the CITES Standing Committee.

It has been noted by the [EIA](#) that here have been at least [ten attempts to overturn the the international ban on rhino horn trade](#) from countries hoping to profit off commercial exports while downplaying the very real risks that unleashing trade would have on wild rhino populations including the [most recent attempt](#) at the 20th CITES Conference of the Parties meeting held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, at the end of 2025. The international community has rejected all proposals to amend the CITES appendix listings for rhinos to allow for international rhino horn trade.

An [article](#) in The Citizen, on the 31st October 2025, confirmed that, according to DFFE media liaison Thobile Zulu-Molobi, the department would apply for leave to appeal. According to the [Daily Maverick](#), “the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) confirmed on 30 January that it had lodged an application for leave to appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein against the entire Kimberley High Court judgment and court order”. Thobile Zulu-Molobi, media liaison for DFFE confirmed that “the department notes the High Court judgement and will apply for leave to appeal”. The leave to appeal was [dated](#) 11th November 2025, just two days before Minister Dion George was removed from office. According to the same article, tis appeal will likely suspend the High Court's order pending the finalisation of the legal process.

[Derek Lewitton an Outspoken Advocate for the Advancement of the International Rhino Horn Trade](#)

Derek Lewitton provided expert testimony in support of the aforementioned Northern Cape High Court application to compel the South African government issuance of export certificates under CITES exemptions.

[Derek Lewitton](#) is, according to the Black Rhino Conservation Trust website, the author of several papers redefining the options for the legal trade in rhino horn and has served in a voluntary capacity as the legal advisor and Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) expert for the [IWMC World Conservation Trust](#). “The IWMC is an independent non-profit organization that promotes the sustainable use of wildlife and works within international forums such as CITES to advocate for its approach to conservation. The IWMC which publicly opposes animal rights campaigns, was founded in 1994 by Eugene Lapointe who served as the Secretary General of CITES.”

The IWMC World Conservation Trust was [listed](#) as a potential financial donor to CITES for special projects and activities. Eugene Lapointe is frequently [published](#) on the Sustainable Use Coalition of Southern Africa (SuCO) website.

Derek Lewitton is an advocate for the legalization of the international rhino horn trade, he is also the director of a business registered in the United Kingdom called Ceras House Ltd. which is listed as selling agricultural raw materials, livestock, textile raw materials and semi-finished goods.

In December 2023, the same year in which the legal application was launched, Derek Lewitton was [arrested](#). His arrest followed a raid by the South African Police Services Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI) unit for wildlife trafficking. He was charged on multiple counts under the Limpopo Environmental Management Act and for possession of unlicensed firearms, on a rhino breeding farm in Gravelotte in Limpopo Province, owned by [rhino breeder Piet Warren](#).

[Maurice Crespi](#) of the Johannesburg firm Schindlers Attorneys, confirmed at the time of his arrest that Derek Lewitton did not own the property, but “is actively pursuing the goal of owning the farm and has secured an option to purchase it. Currently, the farm and its owner benefit from Mr Lewitton’s efforts to minimise the number of rhinos that fall victim to poaching.”

Derek Lewitton [maintains](#) that the massive costs of caring for and protecting rhinos, coupled with being unable to sell horn have decimated his wealth. Lewitton was [released on bail](#) by the Namakgale Magistrate’s Court in Limpopo on the 10th January 2024, after he was charged with the possession of 17 rhino horns and 16 ‘unlawful’ firearms and ammunition. Dereck Lewitton has always maintained his innocence.

The National Prosecuting Authority however insists the Derek Lewitton’s case is not closed. NPA spokesperson Mashudu Malabi [said](#) the charges were only “provisionally withdrawn” and could be reinstated once police finalise investigations.

CITES CoP20 International Rhino Horn Trade Policy 2025

On the eve of the Northern Cape High Court judgement, on the 30th October 2025, DFFE reaffirmed that [South Africa](#) remains fully committed to the international ban on the commercial trade of ivory and rhino horn. “Our policy is guided by science, ethics and global cooperation, not by commercial interest.” The former Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Dr Drion George, said: South Africa will not support any move to reopen the ivory or rhino horn trade. Our duty is to protect our wildlife, not to profit from their destruction.”

There are 185 member country of CITES who are known as Parties who have agreed to abide by what is decided at CITES meetings. CITES is held its 20th Conference of the Parties meeting in Samarkand in Uzbekistan from the 24th November until the 5th December 2025. On the table for discussion and deliberation are [51 proposals](#) and 146 working documents.

In an attempt to rescind existing international trade bans [Namibia](#) proposed that CITES changed the status of its southern white rhinoceros to allow the commercial trade in their horns and Namibia asked CITES for permission to sell off 4.6 tonnes of stockpiled rhino horn.

This proposal was made despite the fact that if successful it would be catastrophic for the remaining wild populations of rhino in Namibia, South Africa and other parts of Africa and Asia.

Both Namibia and South Africa continue to experience high levels of rhino poaching. Governments from around the world have agreed that trade in stockpiled rhino horn, from government and private landowners, should remain prohibited. The EIA argue that Namibia's [proposals are reckless](#) give the huge weight of evidence that legal rhino horn in the past has primarily served to stimulate the demand which inevitably leads to more poaching and trafficking of illegal wildlife products. Any attempt to reopen rhino horn trade would hand traffickers exactly what they want a convenient cover to launder illegal horn. Approving these changes would have placed rhino across Africa and Asia in [grave danger](#).

Anti-Rhino Horn Trade Advocate Minister Dion George Removed from Office

It has been widely reported that Dion George's, anti-rhino trade stance and related conservation views were a [primary factor](#), if not the direct cause, for his recent controversial removal as South Africa's Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment. Officially, the reason given by the Democratic Alliance (DA) leader, John Steenhuisen, was "underperformance" and the need for all DA ministers within the Government of National Unity (GNU) to work to an agreed agenda. However, sources indicate that George's public opposition to the commercial trade in rhino horn and ivory and his push to shut down the captive lion breeding industry directly contradicted the official South African government's long-standing policy, which supports the possibility of regulated trade under favourable conditions.

George openly rejected the Cabinet-approved policy at a summit in Brazil in November 2025, triggering a significant political fallout. He had implemented policies aligned with a ["conservation-first"](#) approach, including setting the lion bone export quota at zero and declining to issue certain trophy hunting quotas, which put him at odds with powerful wildlife-breeding and hunting lobbies.

His DA replacement, Minister Willie Aucamp, is publicly aligned with the "sustainable use" coalition and the wildlife-ranching industry, leading to [accusations](#) that the department has been "captured" by commercial interests.

While George's public defiance accelerated his exit, his removal ultimately stemmed from a combination of DA leadership dissatisfaction and internal pressure to ensure alignment with the broader Government of National Unity agenda. The incident has sparked a major [controversy](#) with conservation groups arguing that George's removal was a politically motivated manoeuvre that could harm South Africa's wildlife.

INTERCEPTION OF ILLEGAL RHINO HORN FROM SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa Continues to be the Epicentre of the Rhino Poaching and Trafficking Crisis

According to a Wildlife Justice Commission intelligence [report](#), South Africa continues to be the epicentre of the crisis: it is reported that South Africa is home to 54% of the global rhino population and that South Africa accounted for 82% of rhinos poached across African range states in 2024. The report confirms that rhino poaching displacement data illustrates the adaptability of criminal

groups operating in South Africa. For instance, in the first six months of 2024, KwaZulu Natal Province accounted for around twice as many rhino poaching incidents compared to the Kruger National Park by 2025, the trend appears to have reversed, with the Kruger National Park accounting for the majority of recorded cases, showing how networks shift operations in response to enforcement, the networks are highly adaptable and sophisticated.

The report also confirms that the volume of significant seizures of rhino horn has more than tripled compared to 2024, though still below 2021–2022 levels. This suggests networks could be regaining confidence, investing in larger consignments, and taking greater risks. Two seizures this year weighed over 30 kg each whereas there were no seizures exceeding 30 kg in 2023 and 2024. This may be an early indicator of renewed confidence in logistics and an increasing appetite for financial risk.

Of interest is that Mozambique and Angola are key exit points for rhino horn leaving Africa. Air passenger and cargo routes remain the dominant transport methods. Vietnam, China, and Lao PDR are key entry points into Asia, with Thailand emerging as a new transit point, and Qatar and the United Arab Emirates continuing as key transit hubs. Intelligence collected during Wildlife Justice Commission investigations suggests that syndicates, particularly Vietnamese and Chinese, are demonstrating greater caution and sophistication, adapting concealment techniques and exploiting corruption vulnerabilities.

[Singapore Intercepts Largest Illegal Shipment of Rhino Horn from South Africa](#)

On the 8th November 2025, a week after the High Court rhino horn trade judgement in the Northern Cape, Singapore authorities [intercepted](#) a large shipment of 35.7 kg of illegally trafficked white rhino horns, originating from South Africa. This seizure [illustrates](#) that the illegal trade in rhino horn remains active, well organised and responsive to market opportunities.

To date this is the largest interception of illegal rhino horn to Singapore. The illegal shipment was hidden in the cargo and declared as furniture fittings at Changi Airport, destined for Laos. The relatively smooth, flat-cut surface at the base of the horns in the images provided by authorities at this interception suggests that the horns were obtained from legal dehorning procedures in other words legally harvested horn. Even after decades of international prohibition, criminal networks continue to move substantial quantities of horn across continents. The persistence of this trade indicates that the underlying drivers high demand, entrenched syndicates and extraordinary profit margins remain fully intact.

[Rhino Horns and Big Cat Body Parts at Kempton Park Storage Facility in Johannesburg](#)

The HAWKS Wildlife Trafficking Section, working with multiple law enforcement agencies arrested two Nigerian men following intelligence about rhinos horns being smuggled from South Africa through Singapore to Laos.

Authorities seized 17 rhinos horns weighing 55.4kg along with lion and tiger bones, claws and a skull weighing 26.2kg. According to [media reports](#), the consignment was intercepted and was

returned to the sender from Singapore. [Authorities](#) launched an investigation after a suspicious consignment originally dispatched to Singapore was identified and return to its sender in South Africa. Once the shipment was flagged, investigators traced it to a storage facility in Kempton Park. Armed with a warrant, an integrated team comprising the HAWKS, SOCI Vaal Rand, Counter Intelligence, Border Management Authority, SARS/Customs and other agencies searched the storage facility on the 1st December 2025. The search revealed four boxes linked to the consignment.

SIGNIFICANT CONVICTIONS FOR THE ILLEGAL KILLING OF RHINO

The illegal killing of rhino is part of large, transnational organized crime, often involving money laundering, illegal firearms, and corruption at various levels.

There have been significant convictions in 2025 which confirm that internal corruption exists within our national parks. Rangers have intimate knowledge of park layouts, patrol routes, and anti-poaching tactics, making them valuable assets for poaching syndicates. These convictions are seen as crucial for deterring other corrupt officials and sending a strong message that such illegal activities will not be tolerated within conservation efforts.

[South African National Parks \(SANParks\)](#) and the [National Prosecuting Authority \(NPA\)](#) actively pursue these cases, aiming to dismantle the networks that enable rhino poaching.

Project Blood Orange

[Project Blood Orange](#) is the name given to an integrated investigation into a rhino-horn trafficking syndicate that was operating out of Mpumalanga Province that led to the arrest of 16 suspects for money laundering and financial crimes. The prosecution has charged the suspects with racketeering, corruption, biodiversity charges relating to the poaching of rhinos and the trading in their horns, defeating the ends of justice, as well as tax conspiracy, and money laundering charges.

In April 2022 following a two year investigation, two field rangers from the Kruger National Park were arrested for money laundering and financial crimes. The investigation [revealed](#) significant deposits of funds, totally over R1million in one instance which the suspects acknowledged were for providing information on rhino whereabouts. This was followed with the arrest of a further 11 suspects in three provinces over a two day period in December 2022 all of whom were part of the same syndicate and all of whom were arrested with money laundering and financial crimes charges.

[According](#) to Johan Jooste, National Section Commander, Serious Organised Crime: Wildlife Trafficking DPCI: “the project was very successful in identifying and investigating money laundering and corruption, which resulted in the arrest of two Kruger National Park Rangers and following these arrests, for a period of 155 days there were zero incursions noted in the area.

Latest statistics of rhino poaching further indicated that following the arrests, rhino poaching declined by 40% in the Kruger National Park in 2022 and a further 49% in 2023.”

After an intensive multi-year investigation that tracked illicit financial flows to expose a complex criminal network an individual was successfully prosecuted for their role in the illegal wildlife trade linked to serious financial offences. Led by the South African Police Services Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations a multi-disciplinary team of South African law enforcement agencies working with KPMG South Africa financially supported by non-profit organisation [Save the Rhino International](#).

On the 15th January 2025, the Middelburg Regional Court sentenced Francis Kipampa, a Democratic Republic of Congo national, to 18 years imprisonment with the sentence being suspended for 8 years on the condition that he does not commit the same crimes in the next five years. Kipampa was arrested with fifteen other people by the HAWKS during the investigation of Project Blood Orange. According to a statement from the [South African Police Services](#), he pleaded guilty to all charges for his involvement with money laundering linked to the illegal rhino trade. Former Minister [Dion George](#) was disheartened by the fact that reports indicate that Francis Kipampa bribed Kruger National Park rangers in exchange for information “these few bad apple rangers and locals will not taint the great work done by many dedicated rangers we have working our parks.”

Two Former Field Rangers Sentenced For Rhino Poaching-Related Offences

On the 12th September 2025, a statement from the [National Prosecuting Authority](#) confirmed that the Skukuza Regional Court sentenced two former field rangers, Freedom Mabilani and Tshifiwa Ramunashi, to 14 years’ direct imprisonment each for rhino poaching-related offences. They were convicted on charges of conspiracy to commit a crime and the killing of a rhino.

On 3 May 2018, the accused were deployed to patrol the Houtboschrand section of the Kruger National Park when tourists reported hearing gunshots. When questioned, the accused falsely claimed that they had fired at an elephant that was attacking them. Management requested GPS coordinates of the shooting, which led to an investigation.

A rhino carcass and cartridge cases were later discovered three kilometres away from where the accused claimed the incident occurred. The accused were arrested and released on bail under strict conditions. In court, they pleaded not guilty and denied involvement.

However, State Prosecutor Mgiba presented overwhelming evidence, including Testimony from senior rangers who investigated the incident, GPS data placing the accused at the crime scene, Ballistics evidence linking cartridge cases to the accused’s firearm and DNA evidence on the accused’s clothing matching the rhino carcass. The court dismissed the accused’s version of events and accepted the state’s case. Each of the accused received 4 years’ direct imprisonment for conspiracy to commit a crime, and 10 years’ imprisonment for killing a rhino. The court also declared both accused unfit to possess firearms.

RHINO BREEDERS AND HUNTERS ACCUSED OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES

“Rhino Baron” John Frederick Hume Arrested

John Hume, a South African private rhino owner and breeder, was a vocal advocate for the legalization of the domestic and international rhino horn trade. His argument was the same as Wicus Diedricks that a regulated legal market, based on "harvested" horns from live rhinos, would help fund conservation efforts and undercut the illegal poaching market. Hume maintained that the substantial costs of protecting his large number of farmed rhino, at one point the world's largest, with about 2,000 rhinos, could be covered by legal horn sales.

Hume's stance was highly controversial, with many conservationists arguing that a legal market would stimulate demand, confuse consumers, and provide cover for illegal horn to enter the trade. They pointed out that there is no evidence a legal trade would effectively suppress illegal trafficking and highlighted the risks of corruption in permitting systems.

He successfully challenged South Africa's 2009 moratorium on domestic rhino horn trade, which was lifted by the Constitutional Court in 2017. This allowed him to organize an online auction of his stockpiled horns. The auction was a dismal failure. His intensive rhino breeding business model failed to attract any buyers. There is simply no appetite for a legal trade in rhino horn outside of South Africa. His attempt at creating a legal trade in rhino horn was not successful and as a result his business model failed. John Hume's 2000 rhino were rescued by a non-profit conservation organisation.

In August 2025 it was reported that six suspects, five men and one woman handed themselves over to the HAWKS wildlife trafficking section in Sunnyside in Pretoria after which they appeared at the Pretoria Magistrates Court.

John Hume the former founder and owner of the Platinum Rhino Conservation Enterprise and five others were arrested in August 2025 and are facing 55 charges of multiple counts of racketeering, fraud, contravention of the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act (NEMBA), contravention of Riotous Assemblies Act, theft and money laundering. It is alleged that the accused operated an international rhino horn trafficking syndicate.

After a seven year investigation, the Wildlife Trafficking Section of the Serious Organised Crime Investigation Unit has dismantled a major transnational rhino horn trafficking network. According to a public statement issued by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, the syndicate is linked to a fraudulent scheme involving 964 rhino horns worth millions of rands, destined for illegal markets in Southeast Asia.

This complex investigation which was supported by the Enforcement unit of the Department and the National Prosecuting Authority alleged that the suspects defrauded the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment by securing permits under false pretences to buy and sell rhino horn domestically, while funnelling them into illegal international markets.

Under South African law domestic trade is permitted with valid DFFE issued permits in terms of NEMBA. International commercial trade in rhino horn is banned under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

One of the suspects, Clive Melville, who is the half-brother of John Hume's cousin, was previously arrested in 2019 in one of the [largest rhino horn seizures](#) in South Africa's history. He was charged with illegally transporting 167 rhino horns on John Hume's behalf.

[Alleged Rhino Poaching Kingpin Dawie Groenewald - Trophy Hunting Quota in Botswana Revoked](#)

Dawie Groenewald, an alleged rhino poaching kingpin and former police officer, has had numerous and ongoing brushes with the law spanning well over a decade primarily involving large-scale illegal hunting and rhino horn trafficking. His legal issues are extensive and have been characterized by numerous delays.

In January 2010, South African [Dawie Groenewald](#) was arrested by [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) special agents at the airport in Montgomery in the United States of America. He was indicted in February of the same year by a federal grand jury on charges of smuggling and violating the Lacey Act. He spent eight days in jail and almost two and half months in home incarceration at his brother's residence before being sentenced in the U.S. District Court in the Middle District of Alabama to time served and a \$30 000 criminal fine in connection with the importation of an unlawfully hunted leopard trophy into the United States.

He was also ordered to pay \$7500 in restitution to a US Hunter who cooperated with investigators after learning that he had unknowingly paid for and participated in an illegal safari in South Africa. US Service special agents worked with authorities in Limpopo Province, South Africa to collect evidence.

Dawie Groenewald is also part of one of the longest running and most notorious rhino related legal [cases](#) in South Africa. [Dawie Groenewald](#) and nine other people are facing more than 1600 charges related to racketeering, money laundering, the illegal hunting of rhino and dealing in rhino horn.

Nine months after his arrest in America, in September 2010, Dawie Groenewald and nine others were arrested and appeared in the Musina Magistrate's Court in Limpopo Province. The matter was transferred to the Northern Gauteng High Court and then after a number of postponements, and the Covid-19 pandemic which caused further delays, the matter transferred to the Limpopo High Court during October 2023.

Some of the [charges](#) were dropped after the Constitutional Court confirmed the lifting of South Africa's moratorium on the domestic trade in rhino horn. Current information indicates a [court date](#) is set for 9 February 2026 in the Limpopo Magistrates Court. However, only time will tell if this date will be honoured.

Dawie Groenewald was then [arrested](#) by INTERPOL in 2017 in Polokwane in Limpopo, when the agency executed a 2014 international warrant of arrest issued by the US, where Dawie Groenewald and his late brother Janneman Groenewald are wanted for deceiving American hunting clients into illegally killing rhinos at their farm Prachtig in Musina. The US Department of Justice was assisted by the Limpopo Endangered Species Unit and the Tactical Response Unit.

In December 2018 it was [reported](#) that 48 year old Janneman Groenewald died expectantly of a suspected heart attack. Dawie Groenewald was in Mozambique on holiday.

In 2021 Dawie Groenewald was [arrested](#) with Schalk Abraham Steyn for the illegal possession and transportation of 19 rhino horn. They [appeared](#) in the Nelspruit Magistrates Court and were released on bail of R50 000.00 each. The matter has been [postponed](#) numerous times and they are due to re appear in January 2026. “The attorneys were not ready to proceed with a pre-trial hearing. The advocate for the first accused was also not present in court. The attorney of the other accused submitted that they had filed representations to the Director of Public Prosecutions office.”

In July 2025 the Botswana media [reported](#) that a company allegedly linked to Dawie Groenewald has controversially been given a hunting quota in Botswana. Community members were reported to be up in arms after discovering that the District Commissioners office had recently approved a lucrative hunting quota to a company reportedly co-owned by Dawie Gronewald and a former Member of Parliament and Minister of Justice. *“We are deeply concerned and alarmed by your office’s decision to allocate the 2025/2026 hunting quota to the outgoing Board of Trustees, whose official term expired on the 17th June 2025, as stipulated in Clause 9.4 of the Constitution, which limits trustee’s terms to three years unless renewed through a constitutionally mandated AGM and community vote. We observe that this expired board is now actively engaging in hunting preparations without holding an Annual General Meeting and without any form of community engagement”*

In November 2024 Dawie Groenewald was allegedly granted a licence by the Tcheku Community Trust but this was, according to a media report, [revoked](#) after the backlash from local stakeholders. Tcheku board member Alex Semayemba told the media that *“Groenewald was given a license, then it was taken back because we were told he is a wildlife criminal” Groenewald reportedly signed the original agreement as a representative of DK Superior (Pty) Ltd.”*

[North West Province Official Arrested and Linked to Dawie Groenewald and Abraham Schalk Steyn](#)

North West Province Conservation Official Mxolisi Stephen Maqoboza was arrested and in October 2021 appeared in the Mmabatho Magistrates Court in the North West with his co-accused Motsamai Wells Masigo who was [described](#) by the authorities as a Mahikeng businessman and director of a security company. Masigo is a former policemen.

They were arrested in Mahikeng for their involvement in the illegal possession and selling of 19 rhino horns, the same horns that [Abraham Schalk Steyn and Dawie Groenewald](#) were arrested for on the 21st July 2021.

The National Director of Public Prosecution later centralised their case to be tried at a regional court in Mpumalanga with the other co-accused who had allegedly arranged for the storage of the horns in Mpumalanga and also allegedly met and negotiated prices for the sale of the rhino horns.

On the 9th October 2024 Mxolisi Stephen Maqoboza, Motsamai Wells Masigo, Abraham Schalk Steyn and Dawie Groenewald appeared in the Nelspruit Regional Court they are facing 8 counts linked to the dehorning of rhinos at a game farm in the Northern Cape and the transportation of their horns from there, through North West to Mpumalanga without the required permits. The case was [postponed](#) until January 2026 and has been [postponed again](#) until March 2026.

It was [reported](#) in 2024, that Mxolisi Stephen Maqoboza has been reinstated by the provincial Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism.

[Spokesperson](#) for the Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism, Jeremiah Matebesi says: “Mr Stephen Mxolisi Maqoboza was arrested in 2021 for the unlawful issuing of rhino horn permits. The Department then constituted an internal hearing which led to his dismissal. He then appealed the sanction of dismissal in terms of the public service coordinating bargaining council. He was successful in his appeal and was reinstated but with a demoting and final written warning.”

[According](#) to the SABC the Department remains mum on other brazen poaching-related cases involving Maqoboza that were centralised in Lichtenberg where he is implicated in alleged fraud and the illegal dehorning of five rhinos in 2018 whose [horns](#) later mysteriously [disappeared](#) with no trace.

Nardus Rossouw

On Wednesday 22nd September 2010, eleven suspects, including two veterinarians, a pilot, professional hunters and a game farmer appeared in the Musina Magistrate's court after being [arrested](#) by a joint task team comprising of members of the Directorate of Priority Crimes Investigation (HAWKS), the South African National Parks, the Environmental and Nature Conservation, Civil Aviation Authority and the National Prosecuting Authority. Nardus Rossouw, a professional hunter, was one of the accused. According to a report titled a [Report](#) titled *The Groenewald Criminal Network: Background, legislative loopholes and recommendations* Nardus Rossouw played a central role in this network.

In 2016 three men were arrested by the HAWKS during an organised sting operation. They were accused of allegedly trying to sell eighteen rhino horns. Nardus Rossouw and another were [arrested](#) for their involvement in the orchestration of the attempted sale of these rhino horns.

According to an October 2025 Report prepared, by the Illegal Wildlife Trade Task Force of the South African Anti-Money Laundering Integrated Task Force and entitled *Financial*

Flows and Key Indicators Associated with Illegal Wildlife Trade in South Africa – the 2025 Updated Perspective, Rossouw pleaded guilty on 14 of the charges which included: participation in the affairs of an enterprise (racketeering), selling of a rhino cow, dehorning a rhino bull, buying and selling two horns for R68 000,00, incitement to commit a crime and money laundering linked to the selling of the two horns. He was sentenced on the racketeering charges to three years correction supervision with a further 10 years imprisonment suspended. On counts 2 to 13 (the predicate crimes and the money laundering) he was fined R100 000,00 or three years imprisonment and with a further five years imprisonment suspended.

Hugo Ras Hunting from Behind Bars

Professional trophy hunter, [Hugo Ras](#) was arrested in 2014 with nine other people including his wife Trudie Ras, his brother Anton Ras and former South African Police Serviceman with the HAWKS, Willie Oosthuizen and attorney Joseph Wilkinson. They are facing more than 300 charges for rhino poaching crimes allegedly committed between June 200 and June 2012.

It was [reported](#) in July 2024, that two of the state witnesses due to testify against Hugo Ras have died. The case has also been delayed due to constitutional challenges to regulations underpinning the trade of rhino horn. Hugo Ras and Willem Andries van Jaarsveld are in prison however, serving sentences for fraud and theft. Mike Bolhuis, a private investigator, played a vitally important role in this arrest. In August 2024 Mike Bolhuis [published information](#) about Hugo Ras after an investigation was carried out which involved Hugo Ras selling hunting trips from the comfort of his prison cell.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At a keynote address delivered by former Minister for the Environment, Dr Dion George, at the launch of the [Rhino Renaissance Campaign](#) he confirmed that, in 2024, the total population of rhino in the South Africa's flagship game reserve the Kruger National Park is only 2000 rhino.

On the 10th February 2026, the new Minister of Environment, Willie Aucamp, [announced](#) a modest 16% decline in the illegal killing of rhino during 2025. However, importantly, the number of rhino illegally killed in South Africa's flagship national park, the Kruger National Park, doubled. There was a significant drop in the illegal killing of rhino in the Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park in KwaZulu Natal.

The EMS Foundation believes that addressing the systemic governance and corruption challenges within law enforcement in South Africa must be considered a critical component of a comprehensive strategy needed to protect the remaining rhino population. The illegal killing of rhino is not primarily driven by opportunistic individuals but by sophisticated transnational organised crime syndicates that operate across borders, primarily to meet demand in Southeast Asia. The efforts to combat organised crime are significantly compromised by widespread corruption within South African state institutions, including law enforcement, the criminal justice system and the national parks management.

Widespread criminality in the criminal justice system in South Africa has been confirmed by the appointment of a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference and Corruption also known as the Madlanga Commission, announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in July 2025.

The commission is tasked with investigating the veracity and extent of allegations that criminal syndicates have infiltrated law enforcement, intelligence and associated institutions such the South African Police Service, the National Prosecuting Authority and the Judiciary. The commission was established in response to explosive claims made by KwaZulu Natal Police Commissioner Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi.

To date the hearings have revealed a complex web of alleged corruption and political manipulation. There are legitimate witness safety concerns after a witness who had testified about the Ekurhuleni Metro Police Department was shot and killed in December 2025. This highlights the severity of the issues being investigated.

Another example of a highly motivated assassination with relevance to the EMS Foundation previous rhino reports, was the killing of Dumisani Gwala, touted as being a rhino poaching kingpin, who was gunned down in his home in Manguzi in Northern KwaZulu Natal on Thursday 4th December 2025. According to a 2024 investigative journalism television programme, [Carte Blanche](#), there is no official recorded evidence of Dumisani Gwala ever being involved in rhino poaching activities. He was arrested after being entrapped by the police on the 18th December 2014 with rhino horn which they “borrowed” from the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife rhino horn stockpile and apparently have not returned, During the trap Dumisani Gwala resisted arrest and was shot numerous times. The shooting was captured on official police video. In July 2023, after nine years he was exonerated of all charges in the Mtubatuba Magistrates Court except those of resisting arrest. The state was unable to prove that there was any credible evidence to suggest that he was involved with or dealing in rhino horn. At the time of his assassination he was one of numerous witnesses involved in a civil lawsuit and in the process of suing the Minister of the South African Police, the Minister of Justice and the head of National Prosecuting Authority for damages relating to his shooting and wrongful arrest.

It is very concerning that despite high levels of corruption, South Africa continues to stockpile rhino horn while other countries, such as Kenya and India, have destroyed their rhino horn stockpiles to send a clear message against the trade, further indicating a lack of international appetite for commercialization.

At the recent CITES CoP20 conference in November/December 2025, proposals by Southern African nations like Namibia and South Africa to reopen legal international trade in rhino horn have been repeatedly and decisively rejected by the majority of member nations. These rejections signal a strong unwillingness to reverse decades of conservation policy.