

Laying the Policy and Strategic Foundations for Protecting the Rhinoceros' Population in South Africa (2010-2014)

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Abstract

Prior to 2008, the number of rhinoceroses (rhino) being poached in South Africa was relatively low. Between 1980 and 2007, on average, only nine rhinos were annually poached. However, in 2008, there was a dramatic increase in the number of rhinos killed by poachers (83) – considerably more than the 13 poached in 2007. In the 18 years since the first abnormally large annual increase in 2008, South Africa has lost thousands of rhinos to poachers. Despite efforts to combat and curb this poaching, the annual numbers of poached rhinos remain unacceptably high. Since 2008, South Africa has borne the brunt of the global rhino poaching depredations. The negative impact of rhino poaching has wider ramifications, not only on rural communities per se but also on the growth of game park tourism and the hospitality industry. To combat the rapidly rising number of rhinos poached after 2008, the government had to urgently develop a comprehensive national strategy to secure and protect the country's rhino population. This article traces the development of both policies and strategies, in particular for law enforcement and other government departments, including the South African National Parks (SANParks), in support of actions to combat, stem and reduce the numbers of rhinos poached in the country, and further secure and protect all rhino populations countrywide from the depredations and impact of the ravages of poaching.

Keywords: rhino poaching; combatting organised crime and transnational poaching syndicates; South African National Parks (SANParks)

Introduction

Prior to 2008, the poaching of rhinos had been higher in the rest of Africa than in South Africa. Excluding South Africa, the black rhino population in the 'rest of Africa' decreased by 96% between 1970 and the mid-1990s (Save the Rhino, 2025(b): np). In addition, South Africa, with a proud record of rhino conservation, had by the end of 2007 become home to 35% of Africa's Black Rhino and 93% of the continent's White Rhino populations in the wild (Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), 2010). So, it was then not coincidental that in 2008, the rhino poaching criminal syndicates turned their attention to South Africa's rhino population, which at the time, was home to the world's largest rhino population.

Table 1

Recorded numbers of rhinos poached and killed in South Africa: 2007-2025

Year	Total SA	Year	Total SA
2007 ¹	13	2017	1 028
2008	83	2018	769
2009	122	2019	594
2010	333	2020	394 ³
2011	448	2021	451
2012	668	2022	448
2013	1 004	2023	499
2014	1 215 ²	2024	420
2015	1 175	2025	352 ⁴
2016	1 054	Total: 2008-2025	11 057

¹ Note: The numbers of poached rhino in South Africa before 2008 were: 2000 (7); 2001 (6); 2002 (25); 2003 (22); 2004 (10); 2005 (13); 2006 (24); and 2007 (13) (DEA, 2010 p. 3).

² To date, the highest total on record.

³ This reduction was partially ascribed to the COVID-19 Pandemic lockdowns and restrictions on travel and tourist entry into SANParks parks during 2020.

⁴ To date, the lowest total recorded since 2010.

Sources: Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA: 2007-2018) / Environment, Forestry & Fisheries (DEFF: 2019-2021) / Forestry, Fisheries & the Environment (DFFE) (2021-2026); Helping Rhinos, 2025: np; Serfontein, 2026: np.

The current estimates (released in September 2025)¹ of South Africa's rhino population put the total at 14,389 rhinos (2,307 black; 12,082 white). This represented 55% of the world's rhino population in the wild and 91% of the rhinos in Africa (International Rhino Foundation, 2025). Today, despite slight variations in annual figures, South Africa

¹ Note that in South Africa rhino census counting is done every two years with the most recent ones having been done in 2022 and 2024 (International Rhino Foundation, 2025).

remains the epicentre of the rhino poaching crisis, accounting for over 81% of all African rhino poaching incidents (International Rhino Foundation, 2025).

As Table 1 above indicates, the 2008 figure of 83 rhinos killed by poachers in South Africa was, at the time, termed ‘horrific’ but certainly did not presage the forthcoming poaching ‘*tsunami*’. Post-2008, the number of rhinos killed rose quickly and five years later (2012) totaled 688 but broke through the 1,000-annually barrier in 2013 and reached its highest level to date (1,215) in 2014 – at the time, the majority were being poached in the Kruger National Park (KNP). The total annual number of rhinos poached remained above the 1,000 mark for the years 2015-2017. Rhino poaching numbers only dropped below 1,000 in 2018 (769), and the 2019 figure stood at 594. The lowest number of animals killed annually since the 2014 high point was 394 in 2020. However, it rose again in the following years (with slight fluctuations): 2021: 451; 2022: 448; and a 10% increase in 2023 (499). However, in 2024, a 15% decrease was recorded with the total number poached standing at 420 (Global Conservation Force (GCF), 2026). However, most encouragingly, 2025 saw a 16% decline in poaching numbers, with a total of 352 killed during the year – the lowest number ever recorded for the years 2014-2025 (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), 2026).

Methodology

For this article, use was made of a ‘desktop’ research approach via a systematic collection of data/information sources (i.e. a ‘scoping’ exercise of available literature) as obtainable and accessible on the internet and in printed publications dealing with the focus on the topic of this article, namely: ‘The development of policies and strategies for protecting the rhinoceroses population in South Africa (2010-2014)’. By conducting a scoping exercise of the relevant body of literature that has not yet been extensively reviewed, the appropriate literature for the chosen field of research/specific topic focus was identified. The primary search terms focused on the following: ‘*policies and strategies for protecting and securing rhino populations in South Africa; Department of Environmental Affairs/Environment, Forestry & Fisheries/Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment; South African National Parks (SANParks); rhino management plan; combatting rhino poaching in South Africa*’; first singularly and then, secondly, in linked-meaning search term combinations. Initially, too many results were generated; thus, the ‘word string’ was refined. By using a phrase of search terms/words in quotation marks or a proper name, the information search was narrowed, and therefore a smaller number of more relevant results was retrieved. In essence, the implemented search strategy, with a suitable arrangement of search terms, resulted in the application of a so-called ‘snowball of information’ technique, with one information source often leading to another linked source and so on. The main search engines used were www.google.com and *Google Scholar*. Ancillary data/information sources included reports by international organisations and NGOs, such as the Peace Parks Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund, the IUCN, CITES, the International Rhino Foundation, Save the Rhino, and TRAFFIC, often leading to other, lesser-known entities involved in protecting the rhino population in South Africa.

Once the relevant and suitable literature (documentation) had been identified and collected, the research approach known as 'Document Analysis' was applied. This is a process that involves evaluating both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) documents to interpret them, gain an understanding of their meaning and develop a collated interpretive narrative of one's own using the information gleaned from examining the documents relevant to one's own research topic focus (see Bowen, 2009: 27-28). Accordingly, document analysis is a qualitative research method that systematically examines and reviews existing documents to interpret their meaning, identify patterns, understand the context for research questions, and provide background information on a study topic. In other words, it is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents that requires data/information to be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge through repeated review and interpretation of the studied/researched documents (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analytic procedure in document analysis entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising the data and information contained in documents. As such, "[d]ocuments of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (Merriam, 1988, p. 118). Furthermore, in document analysis, one can also apply so-called 'content analysis', which is the process of organising information into categories related to the central theme of a research study. According to Bowen (2009):

Document analysis, then, is not a matter of lining up a series of excerpts from printed material to convey whatever idea comes to the researcher's mind. Rather, it is a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed (Bowen, 2009, pp. 33-34).

Employing such a focused online literature review and then collating the information gleaned from all these sources enabled the information to be presented in a logical, sequential progression, following the topic focus of the title. An obvious limitation is that, when undertaking such secondary research, one relies on collective primary research data for analysis, the synthesis of collected and collated information, and the formulation of conclusions and recommendations derived from primary sources. However, a counterbalancing advantage in desktop research is the ability to combine and compare multiple information sources and to synthesise selected information to develop a coherent descriptive narrative amalgam on the topic focus, thereby providing a descriptive qualitative overview of the reviewed and analysed material.

Developing Policy and Strategies for Protecting Rhinos in South Africa from Poachers

The sudden surge in poaching numbers in 2008 (relative to the previous ten years' average of about 9 per year) galvanised the Government and the then Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) into action. With the increased number of rhino killings, the DEA set about developing a strategy to protect the rhino population more effectively. As a result, the DEA drafted the '*National Strategy for the Safety and Security of the Rhinoceros Population in South Africa*' (NSSSR). The development of this strategy was based on earlier policy documents, namely: (i) *A strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of wild*

populations of southern white rhino CERATOTHERIUM SIMUM SIMUM in South Africa (1999); and (ii) *Biodiversity Management Plan for the Black Rhinoceros (DICEROS BICORNIS) in South Africa 2011-2020* (draft submitted to DEA in early 2010). The former policy document had very early on recognised that a primary objective to secure and protect (specifically the endangered white) rhino in South Africa required a law enforcement strategy to: "...reduce the effects of poaching on [rhino] populations, and ensure the successful conviction and sentencing of rhino poachers and illegal traders" (Rhino Management Group (RMG), 1999). Rhino protection was also one of the six key components of the draft National Black Rhino Conservation Plan,² which stated, as a related objective for rhino protection, to:

... reduce illegal trade; be more vigilant and concentrate on early detection of potential poachers; increase law enforcement cooperation to curtail trafficking in rhino horn" (Emslie & Brooks, 1999, p. 38)

and to

... minimise illegal activity and losses of rhinos, through appropriate management action, improved legislation and sentences, cooperative intelligence, detection, effective investigation and prosecution, law enforcement and community support. (Knight, Balfour, & Emslie, 2013, p. 57)

These two documents outlined how law enforcement strategies to combat rhino poaching could be made far more effective by instituting certain measures to proactively prevent crime through the development and use of intelligence networks, combined with regular threat analyses in rhino areas, so that each area can develop its own customised rhino protection action plans. To achieve a greater number of successful prosecutions, the police should utilise specialist investigators and, in court, resort to expert witnesses (RMG, 1999). The latter document had proposed that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) be developed and implemented for crime scene investigation (CSI) – from incident tracking, reporting and investigation and instituting correct crime scene management with the emphasis on the importance of securing the 'chains of evidence' as collected on the scene to maximise the possibility of obtaining successful prosecutions (Knight et al, 2013, p. 38).

These recommendations (and numerous other ancillary recommendations) were incorporated into the 2010 *National Strategy for the Safety and Security of the Rhinoceros Population in South Africa* (NSSSR) with the caveat that they applied to "...all relevant law enforcement and conservation agencies as well as private land owners, non-government bodies and communities involved in the management of rhino populations" (DEA, 2010).

The 2010 NSSSR included the implementation of an immediate action plan (DEA's Rhino Anti-Poaching Action Plan) to combat poaching, a national co-ordination structure for law enforcement, and an integrated information management system. It also called for securing a shared commitment from government, private landowners, communities, and international stakeholders to implement proactive security measures. The new strategy to

² At the time (2009/2010) it was being revised by the RMG for the DEA but only formally gazetted as policy by the DEA in January 2013 (see DEA, 2013).

protect rhinos was approved by the Cabinet in August 2010 (DEA, 2015). However, it remained to be seen how effectively it would be implemented in practice over the ensuing years to combat rhino poaching. The NSSSR clearly set out, going forward, the objectives for the immediate implementation of a countrywide action plan to reduce and halt the rise in rhino poaching, as well as to combat the illegal trade in rhino horns. This is to be achieved by establishing a national coordination structure for information management to direct the response of all law enforcement agencies and to support the investigation of poaching activities, leading to the prosecution of arrested poachers. This is to be underpinned by an integrated and coordinated national information management system for all information related to rhino poaching, so that security-related decisions can be timeously actioned. The 2010 strategy document also proposed that the DEA establish a national, organised environmental crime investigation unit, but obviously in conjunction with the South African Police Service (SAPS), the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), and all other relevant stakeholders, such as SANParks and private game reserves (DEA, 2010). The DEA planned to realise this objective by adhering to:

... accepted and lawful criminal investigation procedures under the auspices of the Environmental Management Inspectorate (EMI) [also known colloquially as the 'Green Scorpions'] which recognize that the successful apprehension, prosecution and neutralization of poaching syndicates relies on support from the SAPS, NPA, including the Asset Forfeiture Unit, South African Revenue Services (SARS), a sensitized Judiciary with Courts specialized in environmental crime and on the effective recruitment and management of informer networks. (DEA, 2010, p. 6)

Integrated and planned measures instituted to combat rhino poaching

Immediately before and on the release of the 2010 NSSSR, the DEA was able to get the Government to institute a series of measures to support and assist in the fight against rhino poaching and the illegal rhino horn trade. The first of which was the institution on 13 February 2009 of a moratorium on national and international trade in rhino horn and its products (DEA, 2015).

Furthermore, at the Lead SA Rhino Summit held in August 2010, 37 representatives of organisations (inter alia SANParks; the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI) (colloquially known as the 'Hawks') of the SAPS; the DEA, Crimeline; and the Endangered Wildlife Trust) signed a Summit Resolution. This declaration led SANParks to set up a National Anti-poaching Committee on 28 August 2010. The Committee's primary objective was to monitor progress in the coordination among SANParks, government, police and security agencies, private game reserves and rhino owners, as well as other conservation and wildlife organisations, on rhino anti-poaching initiatives (SAPA, 2010; Momberg, 2010).

Four main initiatives to combat rhino poaching, as prioritised by the Committee, were called for, namely: (i) the setting up a national toll-free telephone number for the reporting of any countrywide rhino poaching activities; (ii) the coordination of the sharing of crime information/intelligence to the (soon-to-be setup) National Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit; (iii)

to raise funds to support specific anti-poaching initiatives; and (iv) to launch an awareness campaign about rhino poaching and the use of rhino horn (both locally and internationally) (SAPA, 2010; Momberg, 2010).

Soon after the August 2010 Summit, the National Wildlife Crime Reaction Unit (NWCURU) was established (October 2010); while in 2011 rhino poaching was declared a “national security threat”; (in the same year it was elevated as a priority crime to the National Joints Security Committee (NATJOINTS)); and in 2012 the DEA set up the National Wildlife Information Management Unit (DEA, 2015).

However, it was only in 2013 that a formal, coordinated strategy began to be implemented to address the escalating poaching crisis. This occurred with the release of the Rhino Issue Management (RIM) Report in January 2013 (DEA, 2013). The publication of the RIM report marked a critical point where a formal, coordinated strategy began to be implemented to address the intensifying rhino poaching crisis.

Allied to these developments was the Cabinet approval, in August 2014, of the policy document, the Integrated Strategic Management of Rhino (ISMR), which led to the placement of rhino poaching as a standing agenda point on the National Joints Committee (NATJOCOM) (a committee comprising senior members of SAPS, the State Security Agency (SSA) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). As a result, a Priority Committee on Wildlife Crime, with the main focus on rhino, was established with the primary aim of implementing and monitoring the joint action plan, with the priority rollout to take place in the Kruger National Park (KNP) (DEA, 2015).

At the same time (2014), the SAPS had released their [draft] National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking (NISCWT).³ This SAPS policy strategy document was the first of its kind in South Africa and had one primary goal: “to direct law enforcement structures in South Africa and empower them with the necessary means to reduce and prevent the increasing scourge of wildlife trafficking, in the country itself and abroad” (SAPS, 2017, p. 13). It postulated itself as a police-led, intelligence-informed plan with multi-agency support. It aimed to improve law enforcement’s capabilities to investigate and prosecute wildlife trafficking, increase the government’s capacity to detect and prevent it, and foster national and international cooperation (SAPS, 2017).

The drafting of the NISCWT became the primary law enforcement strategy to combat rhino poaching and the activities of organised transnational crime syndicates operating in the country. The strategy was to be implemented through an operational plan with five pillars, with a focus, besides the KNP as priority, on provinces most affected by rhino poaching, such as Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Limpopo, and, to a lesser extent, the Northwest Province (NW) (SAPS, 2017).

³ The development process of the NISCWT was an integrated Justice, Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) Cluster and in 2017 the JCPS Directors-General Committee approved the NISCWT and in May 2018 submitted to Cabinet for approval (SAPS, 2023: 4).

The practical steps to address rhino poaching and wildlife crime across the country were also outlined in the ISMR and closely aligned with the principles as set out in the (draft) NISCWT, both aiming to establish and implement an “integrated strategic framework for an intelligence-led, well-resourced, multidisciplinary and consolidated law enforcement approach to focus and direct law enforcement’s ability supported by the whole of government and society” (Minister Creecy, as cited in Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), 2020).

Steps Needed for Implementation and Operationalising the DEA’s Rhino Action Plan and the SAPS’ NISCWT Objectives

At the tactical and operational levels, it was recognised that it was imperative to enhance and amplify crime intelligence gathering, with its analysis coordinated by the SAPS as a prerequisite for successful field operations. This to be implemented through a significant increase in resources and skills, not only within the SAPS but also across other intelligence structures in government (SAPS, 2017, p. 22).

A first step for realising this was to: (i) merge all available intelligence information related to wildlife trafficking; and (ii) to create a consolidated poaching/trafficking intelligence database (with sub-sections on different species) with a secure access mechanism so that government departments (including provincial structures) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can input and share information. This would also facilitate the synchronisation of intelligence initiatives, with an end product being consolidated intelligence reports sent to relevant departments; and iii) finally, to provide effective operational support to all wildlife trafficking investigations and interventions underway in the SAPS (SAPS, 2017, p. 22).

To improve law enforcement capacity to investigate wildlife trafficking, the SAPS proposed to train (capacitate) and increase the number of specialist investigators dedicated to wildlife trafficking and poaching activities to address the entire illicit value chain of wildlife poaching/trafficking. This initiative is to be aligned with efforts to increase organisational capacity and skills on wildlife trafficking at the local level (precincts/police stations) (SAPS, 2017).

However, this would not be successful if the DEA and the Provincial Conservation Authorities (PCAs) (e.g., especially the major ones such as: Ezemvelo Wildlife in KwaZulu-Natal (Ezemvelo KZN); Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET); Mpumalanga Tourism and Park Agency (MTPA)) did not also support these SAPS initiatives and themselves increase the numbers and capacity of their Environmental Management Inspectors (EMIs) (i.e., park rangers assigned specifically to anti-poaching units) to proactively assist and enhance all operational support to the relevant roleplayers in the field (SAPS, 2017, p. 23).

Other NISCWT objectives for implementing anti-poaching actions included increasing efforts to conduct anti-corruption investigations linked to wildlife trafficking. There had occurred an increase in the levels of corruption linked to rhino poaching, which not only obstructed the government’s ability to prevent the poaching of rhino but had led to the

infiltration by organised crime networks (syndicates) within various levels of government departments, particularly those accountable for the detection, investigation and prevention of such trafficking in wildlife. By increasing anti-corruption investigation efforts, it was hoped that this would lead to an increase in the number of arrests of corrupt persons linked to wildlife trafficking, with those arrested receiving appropriate harsh sanctions (sentences, including the seizure and forfeiture of assets) linked to the impact and seriousness of rhino poaching as a crime (SAPS, 2017, p. 27).

An additional aim of the NISCWT was to enhance the government's ability to detect, investigate, and prevent illicit financial flows (e.g., financial gains from poaching, smuggling, money laundering, and tax evasion) linked to wildlife trafficking (including rhino horn), both domestically and internationally. These investigations are the purview of the Hawks with support from the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC)⁴ and SARS. In essence, this objective aimed to explicitly target the "profitability of wildlife trafficking ...to deter and disrupt the functioning of this form of criminal enterprise" (SAPS, 2017, p. 24).

To further assist the SAPS in these investigative endeavours, the NISCWT outlined the immediate need to establish a specialised forensic laboratory with the relevant capacity to investigate ballistics and human and wildlife deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), thereby improving the identification, investigation, and prosecution of rhino poaching and horn trafficking criminal syndicates. To achieve this aim, SAPS to develop SOPs for the effective and efficient operational collection of DNA at all incidents of wildlife trafficking (including poaching incidents). These include the collection, dissemination and database management of all DNA linked to wildlife trafficking (SAPS, 2017, p. 24).

As an adjunct to the crime intelligence and DNA databases the SAPS would be required to establish a new separate priority crime category for wildlife trafficking cases (including all relevant cases relating to statutory and common law crimes linked to wildlife trafficking) in the SAPS National Crime Statistics Database – since none such category existed in the Crime Code List – with the DEA to continue their monitoring of deaths of all wildlife categories as part of their conservation management responsibilities (SAPS, 2017, p. 25).

As an end goal for the successful detection, arrest and prosecution of poaching and trafficking suspects, the NISCWT also called for the establishment of a dedicated specialised court for the prioritised and focused prosecution of wildlife poachers and traffickers to speed up their sentencing procedures outside of the often-long-drawn-out procedures in other courts (SAPS, 2017, p. 25).

A final aim of the NISCWT was for the SAPS to extend efforts to boost cooperation and collaboration with NGOs and private security services contracted to numerous private game reserves countrywide, particularly in the primary poaching provinces of Limpopo,

⁴ The FIC is South Africa's financial intelligence unit, mandated, inter alia, to assist in identifying the proceeds of crime.

Mpumalanga, Northwest and KwaZulu-Natal. These structures were to be requested to additionally assist the SAPS by providing support in the following manner, namely by:

[a]cting as a conduit to assist in the provision of relevant information on trafficking activities and syndicates and/or individuals involved in illegal activity related to wildlife trafficking; [a]ssisting through access to local communities where poaching/smuggling occurs, linked to environmental education or other community-based activities; [providing] specialised skills to assist with training and skills development of relevant government entities; [and]...specialised investigative, analysis and detection equipment, e.g. software and hardware. (SAPS, 2017, pp. 25-26)

All the above objectives aimed to enhance the Government's capabilities to detect, investigate, prosecute, and prevent wildlife trafficking in South Africa (with the post-2010 primary focus on rhino poaching).

Some Concluding Remarks

By 2014, the NISCWT had clearly recognised the threat posed by the burgeoning rhino poaching crisis (and its many law enforcement challenges) but by declaring it a national security issue the Government hoped to address the twin threats (poaching of rhino and trafficking in rhino horn) posed by the focused targeting by international wildlife trafficking syndicates on rhino, and to address this issue by means of an interrelated and linked conservation and law enforcement approach. Accordingly, much depended, in the ensuing years, on the effective implementation of the NISCWT in conjunction with the ISMR, both of which aimed to strengthen the law enforcement aspects of the approved multidisciplinary approach.

By the end of 2014, the year the number of rhinos poached in South Africa reached the, to date, highest total on record (1,215), the Government was hopeful that the foundational policy and strategies that had been developed in the preceding five years for protecting rhino in South Africa, were in place for the practical implementation and operationalising of law enforcement actions, and for these to become increasingly more effective in combatting poaching of rhino. However, as it turned out, it took another five years (2014-2018) for the annual number of rhinos poached to drop below the 1,000 mark (which had first been breached in 2013). In the ensuing seven years (2019-2025), there was a definite and noticeable downward trajectory of the number of rhinos poached in South Africa, reaching, in 2025, the lowest total recorded (352) since 2010 (see Table 1: Recorded numbers of rhinos poached and killed in South Africa: 2007-2025).

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