


FROM CRISIS TO TRAGEDY?



In March 2011, *Africa Geographic* carried a devastating exposé of the poaching crisis gripping South Africa's rhino population. In the intervening months, which have brought no respite to the beleaguered mammals and those trying to protect them, its author, investigative journalist and regular columnist Ian Michler, has uncovered information that is even more disturbing. ►

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Towards the end of last year, a number of people from within the South African wildlife industry were arrested on charges relating to rhino poaching. After almost a year of bad news, this breakthrough gave the nation hope that the crisis could be curbed. However, barely six months later, the statistics show the situation to be worse, and there have been several developments that indicate this may be heading towards a conservation tragedy.

During this period, South African government agencies declared their alarm and concern over the illegal killing of rhinos. A number of cabinet ministers, as well as heads of various departments and national security agencies, have made significant pronouncements to this effect. As a result, rhino poaching has been declared a 'priority crime', placing it in the same category as other serious organised crimes.

It comes as a massive shock then to learn that despite this public show of support for anti-poaching efforts, behind the scenes politicians and administrators have drastically cut the funding allocations to all provincial environmental and conservation departments; in some instances by as much as 400 per cent.

Obviously, slashing budgets to this extent will have substantial implications, especially at the operational level where effectiveness and success rates are directly related to the amount of funding provided. All biodiversity conservation efforts will suffer, but with the anti-poaching

and security requirements for rhinos being some of the most pressing, there is particular concern for the species. The deployment of manpower on the ground, especially of experienced personnel, and the use of communications equipment and vehicles have been seriously curtailed, while access to more specialised equipment such as helicopters and tracking devices is now mostly out of the question. In the worst affected provinces, there is barely enough money to cover staff salaries for the year.

Tying the hands of a significant sector of law enforcement options is not a smart way to go about fighting a crucial battle against organised crime. It's logical then to expect arrest and conviction rates to be lower. And falling success rates impact directly on the frustration levels, morale and commitment of the people who are expected to deliver results.

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In 2010, 333 rhinos were illegally killed in South Africa, and of these, 107 were slaughtered on provincial properties. A further 82 were killed on private land, which generally falls under provincial authority. In other words, almost 57 per cent of last year's rhino poaching incidents fell under the jurisdiction of the provinces.

Given this breakdown, and the expressions of concern, why the squeeze on funding? Does the central government not trust the provincial authorities to do the job? Could it be that, despite its claims, the national government is actually unconcerned about poaching? Or have maladministration and wasteful practices over the years resulted in exorbitant budget deficits?

On this last point, it is worth noting that these cuts have taken place over the same period that an investigation into alleged tender irregularities and other malpractices to the value of R1-billion (almost US\$143-million) within the Ministry of Water and Environmental Affairs has been instituted. In the coming months, we can also expect the tourism and environmental departments of at least one province to be placed into administration because of massive financial problems.

Compounding the issue is that SANParks is no longer distributing monthly poaching statistics. Apparently, a directive has been issued that these must now go only to the South African Police, but they claim not to be getting them. Other sources mention a new integrated agency that is about to be tasked with solving the poaching crisis.

The situation smacks of confusion. Withholding vital information may serve to blinker some people, but it generally also indicates a wider malaise. Unofficial sources indicate that by early May, at least 145 animals, possibly as many as 160, had been poached. That is approximately one rhino killed illegally every 20 hours, which is worse than the 2010 statistics. Are we being kept in the dark because the facts are simply too shocking?

If no less concern is the role played by sectors of the game ranching and trophy hunting industries. During 2010, 166 white rhinos were shot by trophy hunters (figures for black rhinos were not available,

although only five permits can be issued per year). To date in 2011, 60 have been killed, with the North West Province accounting for more than 61 per cent of hunts. In other words, since the beginning of 2010, for every two rhinos lost to poachers, another has been shot by trophy hunters. If we all agree that the rate of loss from poaching has now reached crisis levels, why is the legal killing of both black and white rhinos still sanctioned? Surely every animal spared is crucial to securing the future of both species?

Making matters worse are the professional hunters and their clients who continue to use legal trophy hunts as a way of accessing horn for trading purposes. If ever evidence was needed to support this claim, consider the motivations behind what seems to be a new trend in the way hunts are paid for.

In an increasing number of incidents, the traditional basis of charging an upfront trophy fee plus daily rates no longer applies. Instead, the weight of the horn is now the primary consideration. Once the animal has been killed, usually under canned or 'put-and-take' conditions, the horn is removed and weighed, with the client being charged on a per kilogram basis. Once mounted and exported as a 'legal trophy', it is not

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hard to imagine how the horn is swiftly ripped from its backing and sold on the black market.

Unsurprisingly, an element of farce is reputed to have crept into the post-hunt phase, when the carcass is prepared for mounting. There are reports of operators and their support staff, driven by greed, trying to swop heavier horns for lighter ones without their clients' knowledge.

And now to the Far East, where peculiar beliefs about the horn's ability to reduce fever and cure cancer lie at the core of the problem. During the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa, a Chinese delegation is believed to have met various SANParks and other government officials in the

Kruger National Park. We don't know exactly what was discussed, but could this meeting have something to do with the fact that South Africa is now considering the sale of more than 40 live rhinos from the Kruger to China?

According to sources within TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, China has imported upwards of 140 rhinos from the country in the past decade, reputedly to be farmed for horn shavings. While it is likely that these animals came from private game ranches, many may well have originated from national stocks, as SANParks makes large annual sales to the private sector. Given this background and what we already know about Chinese motivations, the South African government will have much to answer for with regard to its responsibilities should direct sales materialise.

All these developments are disturbing because both government and the pro-use lobby continue to place the financial gain from dealing in rhinos above securing their conservation status. How many rhinos need to be killed or traded, both illegally and legally, before we recognise that these aspects, far from solving the problem, are actually fuelling it?

This is an international crisis and needs to be taken up at this level immediately. The South African government, rhino owners and the large international conservation agencies should be pressuring the likes of the UN and EU to get countries that provide markets for rhino horn committed to solutions. And these must be based on widespread education programmes that debunk the myths around its use. (A strategy based on convening conferences and summits in South Africa to debate the merits of dehorning animals or legalising the trade has nothing to offer.) To do this effectively, we need to know who is using rhino horn and why, and this requires extensive user-profile research. IUCN and CITES, where are you?

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LEFT With budget cuts affecting security measures, loopholes in the trophy hunting system and a market for horn that shows no signs of diminishing, South Africa's rhinos face a precarious future.

OPPOSITE Despite the lack of official statistics, reports of poaching incidents – and equally upsetting images – filter through on an almost daily basis.



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