

## The South African Situation

South Africa is viewed as the primary custodian of Africa's rhinos. With 18,796 white rhinos and 1,916 black rhinos as of last estimates at the end of 2010, this represents approximately 93% and 40% of the total white and black rhino populations respectively. In recent years poaching levels have soared, and the current crisis is creating debates worldwide about the best way to tackle illegal poaching.

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**T**he unwavering commitment shown towards rhinoceros conservation and diligent investment in protection and monitoring meant that South Africa largely escaped the first terrifying wave of rhino poaching that occurred throughout the rest of Africa prior to the mid-1990s. The recovery of the white rhino population from somewhere between 20 and 50 individuals in KwaZulu-Natal in the early 1900s to the current global population of over 20,000 animals is one of the great conservation success stories and perhaps partly explains the deep emotional attachment and pride that many South Africans feel for their rhinos.

One of the acknowledged reasons for South Africa's past rhino conservation success has been the strong alliance between private and public sector players. Indeed, approximately 20–25% of rhinos in South Africa are now privately owned, a larger number than currently persists in the majority of former rhino range

states. A significant incentive for private ownership of rhinos has been the potential for income generation via trophy hunting. Sport hunting of white rhino started in 1968 at a time there were only 1,800 animals and has continued with an average of approximately 50 animals hunted per year ever since. Traditionally, white rhino trophy hunts have been sold primarily to international hunting clients from the United States and Europe for roughly £20,000 each.

number of hunters from Asia taking part in trophy hunts of white rhino, or 'pseudo-hunting' as it has become known. As white rhinos in South Africa were placed on the Appendix II listing of CITES in 1994 with special exemption for sport hunting, export of hunting trophies remained a legal mechanism for the international movement of rhino horn. It has been noted that these hunters were generally unskilled and inexperienced and prepared to shoot even young female rhinos as long as they came away with a horn.

Secondly, there have been a spate of thefts and armed robberies of rhino horns from stockpiles on game reserves and museums throughout South Africa and this crime has also shown a dramatic rise in Europe and the US. Since 2007, at least 65 horns have been stolen in South Africa and around 50 internationally.

### Rhino poaching

However, the most disturbing trend has been the horrific increase in poaching of rhinos in South Africa. Prior to 2006, illegal killing of rhinos was being maintained at consistently low levels. Since 2008, rhino poaching in South Africa has skyrocketed year on year, culminating in a total of 448 rhinos killed in 2011. (See Figure 1, left.)

The face of rhino poaching has also changed, with trusted wildlife industry professionals adding to the ranks of the more traditional poaching demographic. Unfortunately, there is no indication that the rhino poaching crisis is coming under control, as rhino deaths continue apace despite the government responses to combat poaching, including the deployment of Army personnel along the border between Kruger National Park and Mozambique.

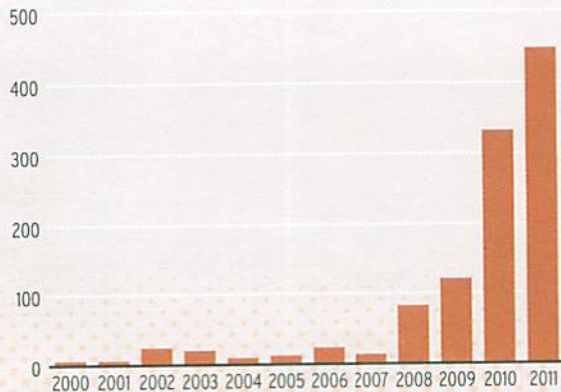
### Response

The South African Department of Environmental Affairs has made several legislative changes in response to the threats to rhinos. In July 2008, a National Moratorium was placed on rhino horn



White rhinos in South Africa account for 93% of the global population

**Figure 1**  
Number of rhinos lost to poaching in South Africa 2000–2011



### Sources of rhino horn

However, from the mid-2000s something changed relating to the demand for rhino horn from Asia, which has placed rhinos throughout Africa increasingly under attack. In South Africa, rhino horn has been sourced in at least three ways. One of the first indicators of this change was the increasing



sales to try and prevent domestic sales of rhino horn from entering the illegal international market. Stricter regulations on the marking of rhino horn and on trophy hunting of white rhinos were introduced in 2009 to try and clamp down on leakage of rhino horn from South Africa and draft amendments to combat identified loopholes were produced in September 2011.

South African citizens and private owners of rhinos are also developing a range of increasingly innovative approaches to make rhinos less attractive to poachers, including dehorning as well as newer ideas such as introducing dye or even poison into rhino horns. However, these methods have limited applicability and huge cost implications for utilization on the largest and most important populations for conservation. Furthermore, the sad death of a white rhino during the demonstration of the horn dyeing technique at the Rhino and Lion Park in Johannesburg in January 2012 highlights the risks inherent in any activities requiring immobilization.

There is a huge groundswell of public concern and support to combat rhino poaching in South Africa. However, with over 150 organizations now actively involved in their own efforts to address this problem, there is concern over lack of integration and duplication of effort, when what is needed is a strategic response.

#### What next?

In January 2012, the Portfolio Committee on Water and Environmental Affairs called a Parliamentary Hearing in Cape Town to discuss rhino poaching. The meeting was attended by a range of government and provincial representatives as well as NGOs and concerned individuals. There were several common threads, including the need for better communication and collaboration between government departments and improved permitting and database systems for live rhinos and rhino horn stockpiles. Although there have been a number of recent breakthroughs, there is also a need for increased number of arrests, prosecutions and stiffer sentencing, preferably mandatory imprisonment for rhino crimes. Many of the participants expressed concerns about capacity shortages and constraints to achieve the above and combat the poaching threat. However, the issue of whether to legalise international trade in rhino horn took centre stage.

Some were against any form of sustainable utilization of wildlife, including sale of any rhinos by National Parks, and called for all rhino horn stockpiles to be destroyed or proposed the donation of rhino horn stockpiles in South Africa to Asia. Others, including the private sector but also state representatives such as EKZNW, wanted the government to push for the opening of international trade in rhino horn. The debate about whether legalizing international trade in rhino horn could be part of the solution to rhino poaching in South Africa is growing in intensity and becoming increasingly emotional and polarized between strong pro- and anti-factions. Whether the South Africa government will decide that it can convince the international community at CITES and submit a proposal for legal trade for the next Conference of the Parties in Bangkok in March 2013 remains to be seen. However, such debates should not detract from what is the most immediate issue at hand – stemming the increasing tide of illegal killing of rhinos in the world.

STEVE AND ANN TOON

