



Media & News

Archives	▶
Media Releases	
Speeches	
Press Kit	

Media Release: Rhino poaching interventions and SA's position to the 16th CITES COP

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[Back to all news](#)

Cabinet met yesterday to discuss interventions to combat rhino poaching, and recommendations emanating from the national consultation process to facilitate a common understanding of key issues concerning the protection and sustainable conservation of the South African rhino population.

Cabinet also provided the South African delegation with a mandate for negotiations taking place during the upcoming CITES COP in Thailand.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) aims to ensure that international trade in listed species of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival in the wild. The Conference of Parties meets every three years to consider amendments to the Appendices; to make recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the Convention; and to assess the implementation of the Convention. More than 70 proposals to amend the Appendices will be considered at the 16th meeting of the Conference of Parties and more than 70 working documents relating to strategic matters, implementation and enforcement matters will be discussed. South Africa's position will be informed by, and based on, sustainable use principles with the long term conservation of species as the overall objective. Proposals that will ensure responsible utilization and conservation of the species concerned will be supported by South Africa

Important proposals to be considered by the CoP include, among other proposals to list certain shark species in the Appendices of the Convention (Oceanic whitetip shark, Hammerhead sharks and Porbeagle shark); a proposal by Kenya to place a zero export quota on the export of hunting trophies from South Africa and Swaziland, that will be opposed by both South Africa and Swaziland; and a proposed amendment to the annotation to the African elephant listing to place restrictions on the submission of proposals to trade in ivory by African elephant range States. Since all these proposals will be subject to negotiations during the CoP, South Africa's positions relating to these cannot be made available at this point in time.

South Africa will host and participate in side events during the CoP and three of these events will focus on rhino matters, i.e. rhino conservation, rhino safety and security and rhino economics or trade matters. This mirror the key thematic areas addressed during the national consultation process or Rhino Issues management (RIM) process. South Africa will also participate in the CITES and Livelihoods side event that will reflect on the role international trade plays in terms of livelihoods of communities and the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

With regard to the national consultation process relating to rhino conservation, I presented the key recommendations emanating from the report to Cabinet. The final report was submitted to the Department in January 2013 and a preliminary assessment has been done relating to the feasibility to implement these recommendations. The Cabinet was provided with an overview of the four thematic areas that emerged during the RIM process: funding, rhino conservation, safety and security, and commerce (trade). Members of Cabinet were also provided with a preliminary assessment of the feasibility to implement the recommendations, and further actions required to implement these.

With regards to Funding; the recommendation to develop and implement a funding model for the conservation of the South African rhino population is supported. The establishment of a National Rhino Fund will be discussed by the Department of Environmental Affairs and the National Treasury with the focus on the mechanisms of establishing such a fund. This will be accompanied by a nationally coordinated fund raising strategy.

At the core of the challenges facing South Africa in terms of rhino are safety and security aspects. The implementation of proposed interventions will assist in comprehensively addressing these. The National Strategy for the Safety and Security of Rhinoceros Populations in South Africa will be reviewed to address emerging issues; the number and capability of field rangers will be improved; the involvement of community members living adjacent to protected areas will be promoted; and the use of new technologies are being explored and piloted. The feasibility of dehorning all black rhino and key white rhino populations is however questioned, due to various challenges and concerns relating to costs, risks to the rhino, potential biological and social impact, logistics to undertake an extensive dehorning exercise, and considering that the horn grows back, the impact (financial and biological) of repeat dehorning. The dehorning study commissioned by the Department of Environmental Affairs found that dehorning is only a deterrent and only a viable option for small populations where other security interventions are in place.

In terms of securing the long term conservation of rhinos, the implementation of the Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for black rhino published in the government gazette on 25 January 2013 and the development of the draft framework for the biodiversity management plan for white rhino will play a crucial role. These plans include long term conservation objectives, with range expansion as an integral part of the long term conservation strategy for rhino.

The recommendations in the RIM report relating to the commercial farming of rhino will be discussed in more detail with Members of the Executive Council responsible for the conservation of biodiversity in the respective provinces, due to the broader and complex implications relating to the commercial farming of rhino, including concerns relating to genetic management and impact on range expansion.

With regard to the recommendations relating to proposed international trade; as stated before, this can only be done if the current international prohibitions are removed through agreement of CITES Parties, a potential trade partner has been identified and discussions have been initiated to determine the viability, especially considering that consumer states have trade prohibitions in place that will have to be repealed.

The discussions to be initiated at COP16 will provide South Africa with more information relating to the views of CITES Parties; specific concerns that South Africa will have to address, and information that will be required for Parties to make a decision relating to the question of international rhino horn trade. Based on this information, South Africa will be able to make an informed decisions relating to this importance matter and prepare appropriately.

All efforts to protect the country's rhino population are not just aimed at protecting a species from extinction, but also securing and conserving all South Africa's natural resources. The fact that the criminal syndicates involved in rhino poaching also undertake other crimes means that this current situation can be considered a national security risk. It is therefore imperative that the national response be comprehensive as it threatens not only the sustainable development path of the country but also the heritage of future generations.

By this week 128 rhino had been poached in South Africa since the beginning of the year. The Kruger National Park continues to be the hardest hit, having lost 92 rhino in the past two months. Twelve rhino have been poached in North West, 12 in KwaZulu-Natal and eight in Limpopo.

Of the 46 people arrested in connection with rhino poaching this year, three were couriers. A total of 24 alleged poachers have been arrested in the Kruger National Park, nine in Limpopo, eight in North West and one each in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.

We also note with interest that among the measures introduced to combat this ongoing scourge of rhino poaching has been the elevation of rhino poaching to a priority crime by the National Joint Operations Centre (NATJOINTS), which is coordinated by the Directorate of Priority Crimes Investigations.

The SANDF has deployed soldiers in the Kruger National Park to assist with border security, and additional rangers have been trained in anti-poaching methods in the Park. The soldiers presently patrolling the Kruger National Park will be obtaining more powers to be of greater assistance in anti-poaching efforts. SANParks has also received additional funding from the National Treasury to increase security in the Kruger National Park.

Cabinet also noted that the North West, Limpopo and KZN provinces are significantly affected by the killing of rhinos

Cabinet emphasized the need to invest in technology (unmanned equipment) whilst increasing the ground coverage and area integrity by personnel.

The amendments to the Norms and Standards for the marking of rhino and rhino horn are being successfully implemented, and Cabinet emphasized the need to implement a centralised permitting system for the hunting of rhino to ensure stricter controls and the elimination of abuse of the permitting system by alleged crime syndicates.

Greater cooperation is being sought from communities living adjacent to protected areas housing rhino, with field rangers being employed from some of the impoverished villages. It is hoped that through interaction with communities, intelligence that could contribute to the arrest and conviction of alleged poachers, couriers and syndicate bosses would result. It is through collaboration with stakeholders that sustainable conservation of the rhino population in South Africa will succeed.

We have continued bilateral engagements with neighbouring states, including Mozambique, as well as identified consumer states. This recently resulted in the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to increase collaboration on biodiversity and conservation matters. During the CITES 16th Conference of Parties in Thailand from March 3 to 14, the Minister will engage with China, Thailand, the European Union, the United States and Southern African representatives on the issues of rhino conservation, rhino economics or international trade in rhino horn and possible legislative interventions.

Rhino poaching statistics:

SA	2010	2011	2012	2013
KNP (SANParks)	146	252	425	92
MNP (SANParks)	0	6	3	0
GP	15	9	1	0
LIM	52	74	59	8
MP	17	31	28	4
NW	57	21	77	12
EC	4	11	7	0
FS	3	4	0	0
KZN	38	34	66	12
WC	0	6	2	0
NC	1	0	0	0
TOTAL	333	448	668	128

Rhino poaching arrests statistics :

SA	2013	2012	2011	2010
KNP (SANParks)	24	73	82	67
MNP (SANParks)	0	0	0	0
Gauteng (GP)	3	26	16	10
Mpumalanga (MP)	1	66	73	16
Eastern Cape (EC)	0	0	2	7
Limpopo (LIM)	9	43	34	36
North West (NW)	8	32	21	2
Free State (FS)	0	6	0	0
KZN	1	20	4	25
Western Cape (WC)	0	0	0	2
Northern Cape (NC)	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	46	267	232	165

South Africans are urged to report incidents of poaching and tip-offs to the anonymous tip-off lines 0800 205 005, 08600 10111 or Crime-Line on 32211.

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