Where the Wild Things Are

The lust for rhino horns has fueled a poaching war across southern Africa. But who's really winning?

By Scott C. Johnson

SABI SANDS GAME RESERVE, SOUTH AFRICA — Conraad de Rosner steps into the shade of a large marula tree and stops. Signaling with his right hand, he whispers a low command—"*put*"—and Landa, a 4-year-old Weimaraner, and Anubis, a young German shepherd in training, obediently lie down, taking refuge from the African heat. De Rosner peers through the bushveld—swales of sandy granite below thick bushes of silver-leafed terminalia and round-leafed teak—toward an electric fence that rhinoceros poachers regularly try to breach. From the other side of the wire comes the sound of a chain saw and human voices. He leans into the noise and listens for a moment, holding his ears forward and monitoring the dogs' response to the nearby activity. The faraway men, it turns out, are just loggers. Satisfied, the conservationist cradles his elephant gun, a long, single-barreled Remington rifle that fires a 2-inch round, and moves off into the bush, the dogs bounding ahead.

South Africa is home to roughly 80 percent of the world's remaining rhinos, which number about 20,405 white rhinos and 5,055 black rhinos, according to conservation group Save the Rhino. But that population is in danger of imminent collapse due to a recent, dramatic increase in poaching. This is fueled by Asia's reinvigorated appetite for the animal's horn, prized for its alleged curative properties and mark of wealth; rampant corruption in South Africa; and soaring international prices on the black market. As a result, there is a multimillion-dollar global conservation war that stretches across southern Africa. And de Rosner is a mere foot soldier in the battle against these nighttime killers. "We do something—they adapt. They do something—we adapt," he says, squinting in the midday heat. "They're watching us as much as we're watching them."

De Rosner runs K9 Conservation, a company that exclusively targets the rhino poachers around the Singita Game Reserve, inside the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, a plot of private land that shares an open border with Kruger National Park. Nowhere in the world is the battle fiercer than in and around Kruger, 20,000 square kilometers of rough wilderness in the northeast corner of South Africa. About half the world's white rhinos are found here in this one park, while other subspecies are scattered in small pockets of Asia and East Africa or in private reserves, game farms, and zoos. And though not yet endangered, white rhinos are being poached so aggressively in South Africa today that most experts agree the species could face extinction in about 10 to 20 years if anti-poaching efforts don't succeed.

More than 1,000 animals were killed for their horns in 2013—that's about 4 percent of the population and roughly four times as many as those poached cumulatively between 1980 and 2007. This year, more than 400 had been brought down by June. Now, park rangers estimate, two to three rhino horns enter the black market each day. "The illegal wildlife trade is huge business," says Simon Morgan, director of Wildlife Act, a conservation NGO that works on protecting rhinos in South Africa. "But we are getting hammered on the rhino poaching. There are teams out there with radios and guns, and they're having hot contact on a daily basis. It's hectic."

De Rosner couldn't agree more. "Tourists come here and enjoy the beautiful bush and look at all the pretty animals," he says, "but what they don't know is that there is a full-blown insurgency going on here. This is a war to save a species from extinction."

To track rhinoceroses that have been poached in South Africa, ·

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veterinarians often notch the animals' ears and install microchips inside their horns.

FOR MILLIONS OF YEARS, HERDS OF RHINOS roamed across Africa. The San, the original inhabitants of South Africa, created elegant rock paintings and engravings depicting rhinos as far back as 25,000 years ago. But over the past century, rhino numbers have risen and fallen as wars, insurgencies, hunting, and poaching have all taken their toll. Black rhinos, which once inhabited large swaths of north and central Africa, are critically endangered, and one subspecies, the western black rhinoceros, went extinct in 2011.

In the late 1950s, poaching and hunting had reduced South Africa's rhino population to just 437 animals—all of which had been herded into one 72,000-acre site that was much too small to sustain an entire population. The number of white rhinos dipped into the low hundreds; these plodding, docile creatures roam in open spaces, which make them easy targets. But conservationist Ian Player set out to change that in the Umfolozi game reserve (now the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi) in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. His scheme was fairly straightforward: He shipped some rhinos abroad, including to the United States, and sent others to South Africa's own game farms, where they could mate all year in safe conditions. Against the odds, it worked. By the late-1960s, rhino numbers in South Africa had quadrupled to 1,800.

But in the 1970s and '80s, as insurgency and later civil war raged in Angola, soldiers got involved in the trade, decimating local rhino stocks again. And during the apartheid era, the South African National Defense Force was implicated in widespread poaching abuses. Farmers and game-park owners also took their share of the horns and sold them on the black market. Yet despite all this, about 14,000 rhinos populated the country in the early 2000s, and poaching seemed, more or less, to be under control.

All of this changed in 2003, when the South African government made a critical blunder: It allowed 10 legal rhino hunts to take place on private game farms throughout the country. As it happened, the hunting clientele was overwhelmingly Vietnamese. (The global economy was booming at that time, and Vietnam, like much of Asia, was experiencing the growth of its middle class; the horn that was said to cure all manner of ailments, from cholera to cancer, was the must-have luxury item of the day.) After the hunts, the South African government recorded the results and the subsequent export—11 trophies and horns, according to Julian Rademeyer, author of *Killing for Profit*, a book about the illegal rhino trade.

African horns increased in value, much like the continent's other natural resources, such as diamonds, coltan, and gold. Just a decade prior, a kilogram might have sold for a few thousand dollars. But now, 1 kilogram of the curving, magnificent horn, which, like the human fingernail, is made of a protein called keratin and which doctors say has no actual medicinal value, could fetch up to $100,000 on the international black market.

Thus, in 2008—when the global economy tanked, unleashing economic chaos into an already disorganized illegal market—poaching reached a crisis point. The wealthy set in Asia demanded it; they used the horn as a drug, much like cocaine, and the product became almost fetishized. And the poor in Africa supplied it; in places like Zimbabwe, where inflation and unemployment were high, the illegal trade became an attractive career option. Up until 2008, the population had continued to grow and few were ever killed—by the end of that year, 83 were dead.

Meanwhile, large international criminal syndicates began capitalizing on the economic desperation and increased desire for the horn by solidly staking their territory in parks and reserves throughout southern Africa. Consequently, the annual poaching figures have increased exponentially over the past six years. Experts argue

that the intensity of the current poaching spree is such that the rhinos' death rate will start eclipsing their birth rate as soon as next year—a critical juncture that would mark the beginning of species extinction if the killings continue unabated.

THE PROLIFERATION OF POACHING RINGS HAS made it that much harder for small farms and private game reserves to protect their herds. And at the ground level, where de Rosner and his dogs work, it can be downright dangerous. In early May 2014, in the very same park where Player took a stand half a century ago, rangers shot two poachers after a gun battle and retrieved a rifle, two horns, and an ax from the site. Within the first few months of the year, more than 30 rhinos, including four endangered black rhinos, were poached from the KwaZulu-Natal province alone. The poaching syndicates de Rosner is up against are sophisticated operations. And because the product has become so popular, crime groups that historically have trafficked in drugs, guns, or people have begun dabbling in wildlife too, bringing with them their own kind of expertise.

Like de Rosner, the syndicates use high-powered hunting rifles that can drop a rhino from several hundred yards. De Rosner claims he has seen anecdotal reports that the groups have started developing munitions that can pierce the body armor that many military anti-poaching units wear, though there's no evidence of this so far. Poachers have informants and spies, both in the villages that border the parks and deep within the private reserves and public national parks themselves. And if the poachers seem skilled in the art of war, it's because they are. Many come from Mozambique, where they were trained in guerrilla tactics as soldiers during the civil war that pitted the Marxist-Leninist Frelimo political party against the anti-communist Renamo, which for years received military assistance and training from South Africa's apartheid government.

Poachers will sometimes walk backward to throw rangers off track or put wool socks over their shoes, which erases the imprint in the sand. Many fences in the area are equipped with alarms, and it's not uncommon for poachers to set off one deliberately just to measure the response time of anti-poaching units. De Rosner even once found a makeshift ladder that was used to scale the fences. And because the borders between South Africa and Mozambique are porous at best, poachers often cross into the reserves and camp for days at a time before returning home. At other times they stage surgical strikes, moving in and out in a matter of hours. Paid about $5,000 to make the kill, the shooter is often a poor man from a nearby village in Mozambique. But not always. Two Afrikaner farmers were recently arrested in a poaching incident—a reminder that the trade continues to attract people from all across the economic spectrum. There are suppliers, informants, resellers, and smugglers as well; it is a huge and growing network of organized crime.

"It's like a chess game out here," de Rosner says, as he hops down from his Land Cruiser to check out the faded imprint of a rhino track, a rounded depression in the red dirt about the size of a salad plate with a few toe marks outside. The smudge was nearly imperceptible to me, but de Rosner discerned the animal's direction and the track's freshness—it was at least a day old. Poachers, he said, could be watching. The mere presence of a rhino meant that he was on heightened alert.

From the poacher's perspective, the risk is proportionate to the financial reward. Over Easter weekend in 2014, in a hugely embarrassing spectacle for the South African government, a criminal syndicate laid siege to a warehouse managed by the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency and stole dozens of rhino horns, worth an estimated $16 million on the black market. Poachers have also taken to Facebook and Instagram, boasting about their conquests and posting pictures of huge wads of cash—often U.S. dollars. Intelligence operatives from Game Reserves United, an alliance of parks on Kruger's western border, monitor social media like Facebook and WhatsApp to track the lower-level poachers' links to people already suspected of being organized crime bosses in Mozambique and even Vietnam. "They use Facebook as a brag page," said one of the operatives, who spoke on the condition that her name be withheld for safety reasons.

Using informants and geotracking apps, the operatives are able to watch the movements of some of the poachers. "They move between South Africa and Mozambique," she said. "You can see them going over the borders and coming back." Because poachers are often paid in dollars, intelligence agents have started tracking them through exchange bureaus, placing faces to names as they change their dollars into rand.

But nabbing them red-handed is

NANA GROSSE-WOODLEY/LAIF/REDUX

Just 1 kilogram of a rhino horn can sell for up to $100,000 on the international black market.

much more complicated. Kruger National Park abuts not only an international border but also a tribal one, and the connections between people and villages on both sides go way back. The park's establishment in 1926 divided some family groups physically, but didn't sever their ties completely. Now, nearly a century later, the poaching trade appears to have provided a means to reconnect. "At the end of the day, they're still family," the intelligence operative said.

Even when police manage to arrest a poacher who owns a cell phone, it's not much of a victory in terms of breaking down a ring. Not only are most poachers savvy enough to resist recording numbers in their phones, but many also throw their phones away after one call, the operative said. Meanwhile, the syndicates are multiplying by the day. South African National Parks officials estimate that several poaching groups operate within the borders of Kruger at any given moment. Groups will come together for two, maybe three, operations, then split, and form another group. Syndicates merge, divide, and re-form, all while maintaining a continuous rhythm of assault against the rhinos. "It's really difficult for us," the operative said.

Conservationists, in turn, have deployed an astonishingly creative array of countermeasures. In the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, for instance, rangers have started injecting an herbicide with indelible ink into the horns of living rhinos to contaminate the horns and, ideally, ruin any future potential use. They've posted signs on fence lines and entrances warning poachers. The dye isn't harmful to the rhinos, but consuming even small amounts of a poisoned horn would be injurious, if not lethal, to humans. (The government prohibited the inclusion of arsenic in the serum because if an arsenic-laden horn were linked to a death, the government could potentially be charged with premeditated murder, according to Mark Broodryk, Singita's chief ranger.) Like banks that use various dyes to mark legal tender, the poison also gives conservationists a leg up when it comes to tracking poached horns.

Another consistent problem, says Broodryk, is that the syndicates have successfully penetrated many parks and have inside sources who provide them with intelligence and, in some cases, assist in poaching efforts. It's the human factor: "People can be bought off, and everybody has their price," he says. "Some of the cases that have been investigated involve people right from the anti-poaching unit themselves, people you think are protecting these animals and people you think you can trust." Broodryk says he's confident in his own teams.

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Lately, an atmosphere of Cold War espionage has settled on some villages that abut the park. De Rosner, for instance, runs a network of informants who provide him with a steady stream of tips about poaching activities. One day during my visit, he received a call from a man whom he had caught poaching years before and who had spent some time in jail. Now the man wanted to know whether he could help de Rosner—he had information about a poacher, he claimed, but he was short on details.

"What's the guy's name?" de Rosner pressed him. "Get his name and call me back from a safe place. I don't want anyone overhearing you."

He hung up and shook his head.

"A lot of these guys just want money," he said, "and I will pay if the information is good. But you have to prove that it's good. And if you lie to me, I will find out."

Poachers, meanwhile, use intimidation tactics to cow locals into keeping quiet. A known poacher recently leveled a series of death threats at one of de Rosner's own rangers when the poacher discovered what the man did for a living, waving a gun in the ranger's face and shouting him down in front of his house. "The villagers are terrified," de Rosner says. "The poachers come in and intimidate and harass them."

TO BE CLEAR, THERE ARE HUGE GOVERNMENT resources already in place to combat the problem. Not only has South Africa deployed both Army and Special Forces soldiers—equipped with night-vision goggles and assault rifles—to Kruger, but it uses drones in some areas to survey the bushveld and scan for signs of poaching. Helicopters are on call 24 hours a day to respond to poaching incidents. Several game reserves have hired private security contractors—some good, some less so—to help patrol their borders. It's difficult to find a conservation NGO in the world that hasn't devoted some measure of its time and money to the cause of rhino conservation. There are rhino ambassadors, iPhone apps, and scores of anti-poaching teams.

"If you look at the influx of donations and support and the number of job creations for South Africa, it is mind-blowing," says Morgan, of Wildlife Act, "but everybody turns a blind eye to the other side."

That "other side" is a confounding lack of legal enforcement, coupled with widespread corruption within many of the very institutions that are meant to be protecting rhinos. Rangers say that for prosecutors to even have a case, a witness must find a poacher with a gun—and the bullets must be traced back to a downed rhino. Whereas Botswana has a "shoot on sight" policy for rangers who spot poachers, South African rangers are not allowed to fire unless fired upon, which poachers rarely do because they know that they can simply drop their weapons and run.

In the past six years of carnage in South Africa, few poachers have been sentenced to prison. Between 2010 and mid-2012, for example, some 573 people were arrested; the country's success rate is about one arrest for every two rhinos killed. Yet between 2011 and 2012 only 28 poachers were convicted. And though some high-profile cases do emerge—a

A poached rhino lies dead at Shingalana private game reserve in South Africa, after being killed for its horns.

Thai national was recently given a 40-year sentence for poaching in South Africa—most people get off with little more than a fine for trespassing or illegal possession of a firearm, which only involves a few weeks of jail time. Higher-ups in the syndicates will usually bail out low-level shooters, who then often disappear. To top it off, the South African government still allows, albeit in a limited capacity, permits for hunting rhinos; that is to say, each year a few selected individuals from countries not associated with poaching syndicates are given licenses to legitimately hunt rhinos.

And for all the efforts to combat illegal poaching, legal loopholes still allow cunning crime bosses or even government officials to skirt the prohibitions that do exist. For example, in 2008 a Vietnamese diplomat was caught on film taking possession of rhino horns in front of the embassy in Pretoria. De Rosner has no comment on these events. "All of that is way above me," he says. "All we can do is be out here, every night, every day, making sure they don't take another one on our watch."

One possible, but very contentious, solution that has been floated would be to legalize the trade in horns. Proponents say it would strip the horns of their luxury value and allow farmers to peacefully cultivate and sell the product in a regulated environment. Opponents counter that it would be tantamount to admitting defeat against the poachers and say there's little evidence it would diminish poaching. South Africa may make a decision on legalization as early as 2016.

Over the years, there have been some efforts to curtail demand. In 1993, China enacted a series of stiff penalties on the importation, sale, and possession of the horn. But those efforts have been difficult to enforce and have yet to bear fruit. Today, some people are being more creative with their approaches. Activists in Vietnam, like Thu Minh, one of the country's most famous singers, have been pushing for education programs that would help strip the horn of its misplaced mystique.

ON A COOL AUTUMN EVENING, DE ROSNER AND two members of his anti-poaching team sat around a tiny campfire on one edge of the Singita reserve eating *boerewors* and smoking cigarettes. The makeshift camp is what de Rosner calls a "listening post," a strategic spot from which his team can monitor the fence lines and be ready to spring into action. It wasn't too far from here, in late 2013, that a rhino was shot, its horn stripped, and the body left to rot. Apart from that, however, the presence of de Rosner's canine unit in Singita has been successful. Just weeks after that incident, de Rosner and his group responded to a call of a poacher sighting. When they arrived, the dogs immediately picked up the poachers' scent, and de Rosner's team laid an ambush in the dark using night-vision goggles. Two poachers walked straight into it, and de Rosner's crew nabbed both of them without firing a shot. Intelligence officers interrogated the men and ultimately arrested another more senior figure in a local poaching syndicate. All three South Africans are now in jail.

De Rosner attributed his success to the dogs. "We're a pack," he says. "I am just as much a part of the pack as they are." De Rosner and his girlfriend, Catherine Corrett, a 28-year-old Londoner, live with the dogs and train them for multiple tasks. The Weimaraner, for instance, a 300-year-old German hunting breed with silvery skin and long, floppy ears, tracks people and animals. De Rosner's lead hound, Landa, which means "the one who finds the tracks" in the local dialect, knows to sniff for rhinos, while the German shepherds, like Anubis, a huge inky-black beast named after the Egyptian lord of the underworld, are tasked with protection and chasing maneuvers. Both breeds can sniff for spent cartridges and injured people or animals. Whereas regular rangers can track during the day only, while the parks are open, de Rosner's group often takes the dogs out at night, on foot, for hours on end to keep tabs on poachers. He's aided by thermal night-vision goggles and infrared camera technology, but it's the dogs that tell him where to go.

As de Rosner and his team watched the fire at the listening post, the bushveld hummed with the sound of unknown animals. There was no moon—ideal for poachers who want to use the cover of darkness. Peter Wearn, one of de Rosner's colleagues, occasionally shined a flashlight into the darkness to check for predators. "You never know," he said. "One minute you're sitting here, and the next minute you look up and six lions are right there, staring back at you."

"Or people," de Rosner said. "That's what scares me the most out here. It's not the animals. It's people." ◆

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