

**22 April 2016**

**To all media owners – for immediate release**

**Media statement: SOUTH AFRICA'S MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO SAVE THE REMAINING RHINO IN THE WORLD**

The South African government is not going to propose an end to the ban on international rhino-horn trade at the 67<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), to be held in Johannesburg in September 2016.

Minister Jeff Radebe claimed that government had accepted a recommendation from the Committee of Inquiry to maintain the status quo. “The recommendations endorse South Africa’s integrated strategic management approach to resolving the poaching of rhino and illegal trade in rhino,” he said.

However, many rhino owners feel that government’s position will be detrimental to the survival of the species and will only bolster illegal trade.

“The trade ban, which has been in place since 1977, has been a failure by any measure,” said Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners’ Association. “It has not saved the life of a single rhino and the only beneficiaries will be poachers and animal rights NGOs, who will be celebrating government’s failure to take a bold, decisive position for which they would have been congratulated in years to come. Government’s cowardly capitulation will have a detrimental effect on both private sector and rural conservation communities – and the ultimate price will be paid by the rhino itself.”

Private wildlife reserve owner and member of the RhinoAlive steering committee, Poon Liebenberg, said he believes that government’s decision was influenced more by political expediency than the welfare of the rhino. “Government probably believes that taking the easy route and not changing anything will keep NGOs and the international community quiet,” he said. “However, it has effectively written off rhinos in Kruger and most state and private reserves. Few people will continue to keep rhinos. Government’s self-serving decision plays into the hands of poaching syndicates as well as NGOs reliant on the rhino’s plight for lucrative fundraising. Poachers will now be stepping up their efforts in a bid to compete for the last remaining rhinos, while NGOs simultaneously step up their fundraising efforts. There is lots of money to be made. The final onslaught on the rhino has just begun. ”

Jane Wiltshire, project manager of the RhinoAlive Campaign, commented: “Thirty-eight years of a trade ban have yielded only the appalling and escalating poaching of rhino. This should not have surprised anyone who has studied the effects of bans; they cost exorbitant amounts of money to (unsuccessfully)

try to enforce, enrich illegal traders and generally alienate the population – especially, in this case, rural communities living adjacent to the national parks. We have deprived our parks of a large and sustainable source of funds from stockpiled horn and natural mortalities. In addition, private rhino owners who now own 33% of South Africa’s rhino and receive little help from NGOs and none from government will now rethink whether it is worthwhile to put their lives and those of their staff on the line to continue to own rhino. I am devastated that this decision might mean that future generations will only get the chance to see rhinos in areas so secured as to be zoo-like.”

Dr Brian Child, associate professor at the University of Florida in the US, who works on the economics and governance of wildlife in southern Africa, believes that the industry needs to tackle this decision in a bid to help both the rhino and communities that would benefit from legal trade. “South Africa has one of the most successful wildlife policies on the planet, based on private ownership and sustainable use,” he said. “Over the past number of decades, it has been proved that this approach works better than any other, and to take a decision that deals with rhinos differently is policy-incoherent. The demise of rhinos dates from the time they were taken out of the market, when hunting them was banned, and we know that the current approach is simply not working. The South African government has been bullied by international and local special interest groups and it should stand up for its rights and be confident in its own model, which is an excellent one.”

The vice-president of Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA), Dr Peter Oberem, said he was frustrated and angered by government’s announcement. “The only people who will be celebrating will be poachers and ill-informed, misguided animal rightists,” he said. “This will be the end of the rhino population as we know it. Game ranchers cannot possibly continue to foot the bill for the security of one third to one half of the world’s remaining rhino population.”

Current president of WRSA, Wiaan van der Linde, said: “We are going into a very dark night regarding rhino conservation in this country. Unfortunately, the steering committee tasked with reporting to government did not make a recommendation and left the Minister to make the call – but the message put out is that illegal trading is okay and legal trading is not. We have just supported poaching syndicates because horn is now going to get more expensive and living rhinos will be less expensive. Unfortunately, people with no vested interest in rhinos, who do not spend a cent on them, have got their way and it is a very sad day for South Africa’s conservation story. This is the worst day I have experienced since I started ranching – largely because we thought we had support but found that support is not in place. What is even sadder is the fact that government, which owns the majority of rhino in the world, stands to lose the most.”

Norman Adami, WRSA director and private wildlife reserve owner, said: “I find government’s decision totally illogical. The one solution that could possibly have saved the rhino has been rejected. Government does not appear to have concerned itself about its sovereignty over its own assets and has merely tried to second-guess self-serving animal rights groups. We have also missed an opportunity to stimulate economic growth and empowerment in the country. The threat to the species’ existence has now been heightened – South Africa, with around 90% of the remaining white rhino population world-wide, is the one country in the world in which the rhino has a chance for survival, but with poaching now

spreading wider within the country, government's decision is a victory for the poachers and illegal trade. Given the realities, the current (and quite frankly, any) proposed anti-poaching deterrence and protection approach that does not include legalised trade is like taking a knife to a gun-fight. The other ironic reality that government seems to have overlooked in its decision is that much of the decimation and elimination of the rhino through poaching, in the rest of Africa and the world, took place under the very same CITES trade ban.

Dr John Hanks, who has worked with international NGOs and government departments on rhino projects in Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, said that he was deeply disappointed by the government's decision when such strong and logical arguments had been presented for a legal trade in rhino horn. "There seems to be a lack of awareness that all of Africa's government-run protected areas are seriously under-funded and under-staffed, and unless there is a massive injection of new funding the scourge of rhino poaching will not stop," he said.

"In spite of trade bans, rhinos have gone extinct in the last 25 years from 20 African countries, and when coupled with the recent irresponsible decision by some countries to burn rhino horn stock piles, the price of rhino horn will go even higher and will undoubtedly stimulate an increase in poaching." He said that he was fully supportive of the legal trade option under strictly controlled conditions, as rhinos could then pay for their own protection without a single animal being killed and in the process free up funds for other high-priority conservation activities, such as the loss of pollinator species and human encroachment into water catchments in so many of the drier parts of the continent.

"What is particularly worrying is that the private rhino owners who are doing such an outstanding job to protect both black and white rhino will not have the benefit of a sustainable source of funding to support their efforts, and I fear that many will have no alternative but to abandon their vitally important commitment to rhino conservation," he said.

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