

<https://theamericanscholar.org/south-africa-rhinos-under-the-gun/#.V58C-Dgko5s>

June 2016

[Letter From](#) - [Summer 2016](#)

South Africa: Rhinos Under the Gun

[Print](#)

Why the decline of megafauna is due to our direct persecution



Michael Jansen/Flickr

By Katarzyna Nowak

June 6, 2016

At first glance, the convenience stop on the road to Kruger National Park is like any other—a gas station, several fast-food chains, teeming restrooms. People bustle in and out, clutching sodas and unfolding snacks from a rainbow of colorful wrapping. But what protrudes from the fronts of some of the parked cars? A dozen or so are sporting shiny red horns affixed to their grilles. These are “rhinoses,” mass-produced plastic replicas of the iconic body part of real rhinoceroses. They narrow from base to tip in pointed self-defense of the cars and the people inside. This can be no country but South Africa.

The public is aware. The rhinoses, manufactured in recent years, are emblematic of the widespread illegal killing of the country’s flagship animal. Holding the vast majority of the world’s 30,000 or fewer rhinos, South Africa is the epicenter of poaching. One of the world’s last remaining giants, the rhino represents the megafauna—animals evolved over millions of

years that exceed 100 pounds and that once roamed Earth in huge numbers and broad diversity.

The rhinos that still exist are indisputably mega, weighing twice as much as an American bison. Of land mammals, they are second only to elephants in heft, and stand six feet at the shoulder. They can run through thick, thorny shrubbery—or bushveld—at more than 30 miles an hour. Incongruously, the rhino’s voice is not a bellow but a high-pitched mewl.

Like the grizzly bear in North America, the rhino is totemic in South Africa’s national consciousness. Over human history, we’ve coexisted with hundreds of such animals, but most have gone extinct, some because of our own arrows, traps, poisons, and bullets. From the hunted-to-extinction Steller’s sea cow to today’s fast-declining elephants, rhinos, bears, hippos, tigers, and lions, there are ever fewer megafauna as there are more of us, and as never before, their decline is due to our direct persecution.

We—two biologists—are making our way from our field site in the Soutpansberg Mountains to Kruger, one of Africa’s largest parks and the continent’s oldest, to spot rhinos. We are not alone. “It is pensioners’ holidays,” we are told at the park’s north entrance by an amused park employee. “But you are not eligible for pensioners’ discount.” I ponder whether the intimation is that we are not yet of age or that we are patently foreign.

South Africa has two kinds of rhinos, white and black. “The white rhino is no more white than the black rhino is black,” Richard Ellis, an American marine biologist with the American Museum of Natural History, wrote 10 years ago in his book *Tiger Bone & Rhino Horn: The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine*. Indeed, both are gray and hard for the novice eye to distinguish. What differs is the shape of their bodies and lips: the white rhino is a wide-lipped, slope-backed grazer and the black a hook-lipped and sunken-backed browser. Unlike what those plastic rhinoses would suggest, both species have two horns, not one.

Rhinos once roamed most of sub-Saharan Africa. My first spotting, of two of them, came from a long distance in the Ngorongoro Crater, the world’s largest volcanic caldera, in northern Tanzania. Here is one place where black rhinos (which can climb the steep walls to the crater rim but are ushered back for their own protection) escaped extinction as they disappeared nearly everywhere else in Tanzania because of heavy poaching in the 1970s and ’80s. Starting in the 1990s, rhinos were reintroduced to Tanzania—especially from South Africa—in wild-to-wild translocations.

Now, driving through Kruger, I imagine how, like the crater, this park should rank high on “protectability” by virtue of its Disneyesque fame. Yet since 2008, rhinos in South Africa have come under intensifying siege, victims of an unrelenting onslaught by poachers. The stolen horns of Africa’s rhinos, most of them slain in Kruger, have entered Asian markets, especially in Vietnam and China, where their illegality is contested, to be sold as medicine or art. South Africa is no longer a safe haven for wildlife—no longer a refuge or gene bank for the rest of the continent.

As was foretold by Kenya-based conservation biologist David Western in 1987, “elephants and rhinos belie the philosophy that saving the estate saves its tenants.” Rhinos today occupy only a few countries, with the majority existing in two national parks: white rhinos in Kruger,

black rhinos to the west in Namibia's Etosha. Namibia, despite decades of praise for protecting its rhinos, has lost some 115 of them to poaching since 2015.

Over the course of several days, via Kruger's impeccably paved roads and fenced tourist rest camps, we make our way toward south Kruger's mixed woodlands and thickets, where the rhinos are. We see: calm bull elephants, including one at a waterhole with a trunk so long it drags on the ground; several dramatic crossings of wide rivers by elephant cow-calf groups; clamorous families of olive baboons; a threesome of small antelopes called klipspringer; brown-headed parrots plucking red flowers from a weeping boer-bean; and a radio-collared lioness resting with her pride. Midway, we take in the magnificent bird's-eye view of the river below Olifants Rest Camp and reflect on how South Africa has all the right conservation ingredients: abundant conservation resources; large, famous parks that attract millions of tourists (foreigners and South Africans alike); a combination of approaches including state, private, and community-run reserves. What has gone wrong?

Are criminal gangs finding rhino horn an easy mark (low risk, high gain)? Are distant markets increasingly reaping Africa's natural wealth through new Asian business deals in Africa, and the cozy partnerships that result, including those at the highest diplomatic echelons? Or is it because the neighbors are poor?

"The poachers are Mozambicans," we hear a lot on our trip, and indeed Mozambique frames the eastern border of the park. Yet, according to a book we're carrying with us called *Killing for Profit*, the product of years of investigative work by South African journalist Julian Rademeyer, the killers are also "pseudo-hunters" from Vietnam and "proxy-hunters" from as far afield as the Czech Republic. They leave the rhino shooting to a professional hunter and then help leak the trophy horns onto the illegal market, where they fetch prices higher than gold. Some poachers are also South African.

"Our borders are overly porous," a South African colleague, zoologist Aliza le Roux, has said to me during our conservation debates. "And cash for your family speaks louder than compassion for another species. Can't change that calculation. It's inherent to our species. Darwin at work."

Major-General Johan Jooste, who commands the paramilitary antipoaching units in Kruger National Park, calls the east "the hostile boundary of Mozambique." Is rhino poaching then a crime of desperation or one of dissent? Either way, the real villains aren't the poor, and the walls and fences and militarized methods have hardly been the answer in South Africa.

We finally see white rhinos a couple of times on our trip to Kruger. One sighting is of a group (called a "crash") with calves, the other a pair lounging in the shade of a red bushwillow tree. They are not particularly skittish, not especially aware that they are being tracked by an assortment of humans: tourists, researchers, rangers, poachers. Soon they could be moved to undisclosed places in other countries. Relocation has become one of the proposals for saving them. An estimated 100 and as many as 250 will be moved out of South Africa to temporary safe havens in Botswana in an urgent effort to keep them alive. There's even talk of moving 80 to Australia, 20 per year over the next four years.

Other strategies have been added to the mix. A DNA library at the University of Pretoria is "fingerprinting" the horn of every living rhino. The horns are also being injected with pigmented poison that, if consumed, makes you sick. And most recently: synthetic horns. Not

one of these strategies has evaded controversy. The DNA library is expensive. The use of dyes that harm even illegal consumers is frowned upon. And when substitutes were tried before—such as the horns of water buffalo and saiga antelope during the 1970s and '80s, the poaching did not let up. And promoting saiga horn nearly resulted in the antelope's extinction.

But undeniably, the most controversial strategy of all, advanced for some time and now again, is legal trade. The argument goes that banning trade does not prevent the flow of “commodities” such as rhino horn and elephant ivory onto markets. “Let's ranch rhinos, shear or cut off their horns ‘safely’ in ways that don't compromise them as far as we can see, and give the markets what they want,” an independent South African economist tells me. His reasoning seems simple, but nonetheless flawed. Why would we satisfy the same consumer demand that international conservation organizations are trying hard to suppress through clever campaigning? Could consumption really be the answer if it has been the crux of the poaching problem? Hunting for horns has been and remains the main source of pressure on wild rhinos. Moreover, how would a legal rhino horn trade in one country help alleviate poverty across its border, or even at home?

A couple of years after visiting Kruger, and amid unabated rhino poaching, I am invited to Cape Town for a “Wildlife in Crisis” meeting. Meanwhile, in Kenya, at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the last male northern white rhino is guarded around the clock by armed rangers in camouflage. His name is Sudan, and if poachers kill him for his horn, that would spell the end for northern white rhinos. At 43 years of age, Sudan is elderly. Possibly too elderly to inseminate one of the world's two last remaining northern white rhino females, pass on his genes, and save the subspecies. Since April 2015, his photograph has circulated on the web, a tool that, I idealize, inoculates us against myopia.

A rhino's vision is myopic—the animal is nearsighted. But the acuteness of its other senses compensates for its poor vision. Rhino researchers extol its “soundscape”: a rhino can hear another individual coming 30 minutes before it arrives. Equally impressive is how it leaves its scent trails on communal dung piles and shrubbery, communicating its place in the social and sexual, as much as in the physical, spheres.

Before the meeting in Cape Town begins, I sit in on a session of South Africa's Parliament. It's a budget debate of the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). The office has recently elected a committee of inquiry to help decide whether trade in rhino horn could save the southern white rhino from extinction. I notice that the protrade independent economist I've previously spoken to is one of the committee's 22 members.

The parliamentary chamber is serious, dark and wooden. It echoes with people, including schoolkids—the next generation of decision makers. Will they see rhinos in the wild or only on the web?

For the first half-hour that Edna Molewa, the honorable minister of environmental affairs, speaks, we hear words like “bioprospecting” but not words like “biodiversity.” To bioprospect is to scout out “green gold,” plants and animals of commercial value.

“We need to improve the infrastructure of our national parks, to facilitate bioprospecting,” says the minister. This is in the spirit of the “green economy” and “job creation,” important buzzwords in the country's “new sustainable economy.” South Africa, one of 17 megadiverse

countries—those that together account for 70 percent of Earth’s biodiversity—is just one of many nations with recent bioprospecting legislation.

Yet here, too, in the bureaucratic arena, all paths lead to rhino poaching. (In 2015, 826 of the 1,305 rhinos poached across Africa—a record high—were killed in Kruger.)

Molewa pledges, “Rhinos won’t be poached to extinction. Not on our watch.” Members of the governing African National Congress (ANC) nod in approval.

Their promise is countered by a representative from the Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition: “No person would say we are winning the war against poaching. So many resources have been disbursed for this purpose—why are we no longer able to protect our rhinos?”

Some of those resources have come from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Dozens of NGOs focus on rhino conservation in South Africa. The DEA estimated “more than a hundred” in 2013, based on the registration of “rhino-related funders” (which span NGOs, nonprofits, other organizations, and private individuals). Among these are the International Rhino Foundation, WildAid, Peace Parks Foundation, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). WWF, the biggest and most prosperous, is helping establish the database of DNA markers to help make horns traceable. But users often grind horn into a fine powder, and it becomes untraceable once ingested.

In the chamber, we watch Terri Stander rise. At the time the shadow deputy minister of environmental affairs, she is notorious for her passion for rhinos. “Minister of Justice,” she says, “you have failed ... to curb the poaching of rhinos. ... Minister of Police, you have failed ... Minister of Transport ... Minister of Trade ...” And on it goes.

The hall erupts in uncomfortable chuckles. Molewa is forced to respond. She turns on Stander, accusing her of serving the NGO movement. And then the entire hall goes into an uproar. Are NGO interests incompatible with those of South Africans? Are contributions from NGOs to conservation and development, to local and national economies, to the green economy, without value?

The DA and Congress of the People (COPE) parties probe. “Perhaps, Minister, you should retract your accusation?” “That is a serious accusation, Minister.” “Do you really mean that, Honorable Minister?” “And anyway, Minister, what’s wrong with serving NGO interests?” And then, “Minister, are you benefiting from the slaughter of our rhinos?” The hall quiets. Then, the COPE representative who dared ask that last question is ordered to leave Parliament. She is ignored when she asks, “Chair, on what grounds—on the basis of what rules of Parliament—should I retract a question?”

The session ends with neither Molewa nor COPE withdrawing their allegations. And for all we know, they will all go off to a gala dinner together. “This,” I am told by a couple of regulars at parliamentary sessions, “is how it always is.”

Days later, in the midst of the Wildlife in Crisis meeting I have come to Cape Town for, South African environmental journalist and wildlife safari operator turned ardent

conservation advocate Ian Michler explains how a big challenge in South Africa remains the way many perceive rhino horn trade as a panacea without comprehending the risks: “They want to believe it’s a simple option: we can try it and if it doesn’t work, we revert to the way it was, but without recognizing or acknowledging the significant damage that such a process could have.”

The “they” to whom Michler refers includes a powerful lobby made up of private rhino breeders (who sustain some 25 percent of South Africa’s rhinos) and also professional hunters. These two groups are allied on the rhino horn trade issue. They have some strong spokespeople.

“South Africa could supply [the market with] 1,500 horns,” according to John Hanks, who is promoting trade, and also his new book, *Operation Lock and the War on Rhino Poaching*. Hanks, a zoologist who has spent much of his working life at WWF, epitomizes the South African protrade lobby, and he makes his case at the conference. Hanks believes reopening rhino horn trade would help alleviate poverty, but no precedent exists for communities benefiting from the rhino business. How much of the revenue from recent permitted trade (for example, hunting trophies or sales of live rhinos to overseas zoos) has been transferred to local communities? Nobody seems to know.

To save rhinos, investment in the millions of people who live along Kruger’s borders is a must. Molewa has named community ownership of rhinos among the long-term sustainability measures against poaching. Could South Africa have “rhino herdsman” akin to the Maasai “lion guardians” of Kenya? Some Maasai warriors have exchanged their long-held coming-of-age tradition of killing lions for protecting them. Human traditions can change.

Moshakge Molokwane, national secretary of People and Parks, asks, “Who has the right to kill wildlife? Is it the rich, for amusement? Is it the poor, out of defiance?”

Michler tells me that South Africa is beholden to old traditions rooted in Calvinism. “Post-apartheid, wildlife management in South Africa was left mostly to the old regime,” he says. “But that started changing in the early 2000s, when many were moved out of the national and provincial authorities. Linking with business and farming interests in the private sector, along with Calvinist thinking of primacy over all other animals and our history of private property rights, we have ended up having to deal with the complete commoditization of wildlife species. This interventionist and agricultural approach has in many respects hijacked the conservation debate and become a significant obstacle to landscape-scale biodiversity conservation in our country.”

Annette Hübschle, an expert on trafficking who is setting up an environmental security observatory at the University of Cape Town, expresses her concern about the deep divide between those who espouse and those who reject trade as a way of protecting threatened species. “This is a multifaceted issue, stretching back to how parks and conservation were conceived historically, creating insurmountable barriers between wild animals and local people.”

Hübschle, who grew up in Namibia, is reaching further back into South Africa’s past, a past of alienation of people from nature through political forces and segregation that have obscured the views and responsibilities of black South Africa. For Hübschle, the real

separation is deep-rooted and systemic and won't be bridged through privatization, militarization, or trade.

If the “new South Africa” preserves wild rhinos, it will have to be thanks to black environmental leaders.

In July 2015, Minister Molewa was taken to court by John Hume—the world's largest rhino farmer, whose rhino horn stockpile carries a black market value of three billion rand (more than \$200 million). In an unprecedented case, Hume and his confederate, Johan Kruger, sued the South African government on the grounds of its having overlooked technicalities when enacting a domestic moratorium on rhino horn trade back in 2009. To the surprise of many conservationists, including me, the judge ruled in their favor, and the moratorium was lifted in November 2015. Domestic rhino horn trade again became legal. Molewa is challenging the ruling and is confronting South Africa's powerful wildlife industry actors (some of whom are referred to as “the Boere Mafia”), who can seemingly overturn the law to defend their investments—rhinoceros ranches.

In April of this year, in line with the recommendation of the committee of inquiry, the South African government opted against proposing an international trade in rhino horns. But days later, a small kingdom bordered by South Africa on three sides proposed just that. Swaziland has only 73 rhinos, and recently exported elephants to U.S. zoos to make space for them. Its rhino keepers and trade proposers are entwined.

Nearly three years have passed since I saw rhinos in Kruger. I do not know whether I will see them there again. In a few months, a meeting will convene in Johannesburg to discuss the rhinos' fate, no doubt debating late into the night. The 43-year-old Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a multilateral environmental agreement signed by 182 parties charged with ensuring that trade does not impinge on the survival of the 35,000 wild species within its remit. The next conference of CITES signatories, at which member countries vote on each other's trade proposals, will meet in Sandton, “Africa's richest square mile,” from late September to early October. The Swazi proposal to trade rhino horn internationally may be among those voted on. It's the first time that CITES is meeting in Africa in 16 years. This year's conference logo: a rhino.

Katarzyna Nowak has lived and worked in Tanzania and South Africa. She has contributed original research on animal behavior and conservation to academic journals and books, as well as web articles about the wildlife trade for *National Geographic*.