



SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

# DEADLY TRADE

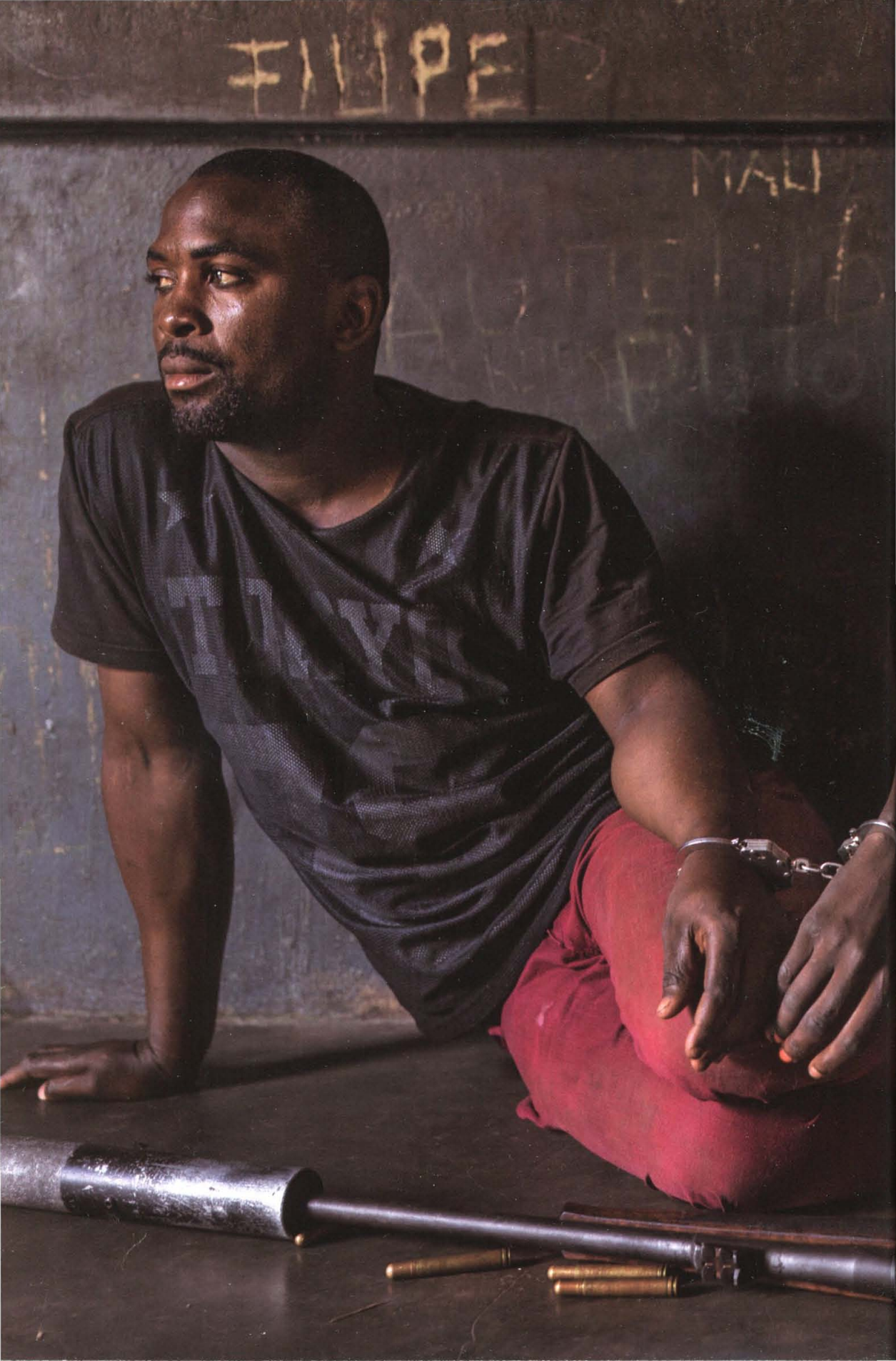
Inside the dark world  
of the rhino horn business —  
and how a pair of South  
Africans could undermine  
the future of the animals





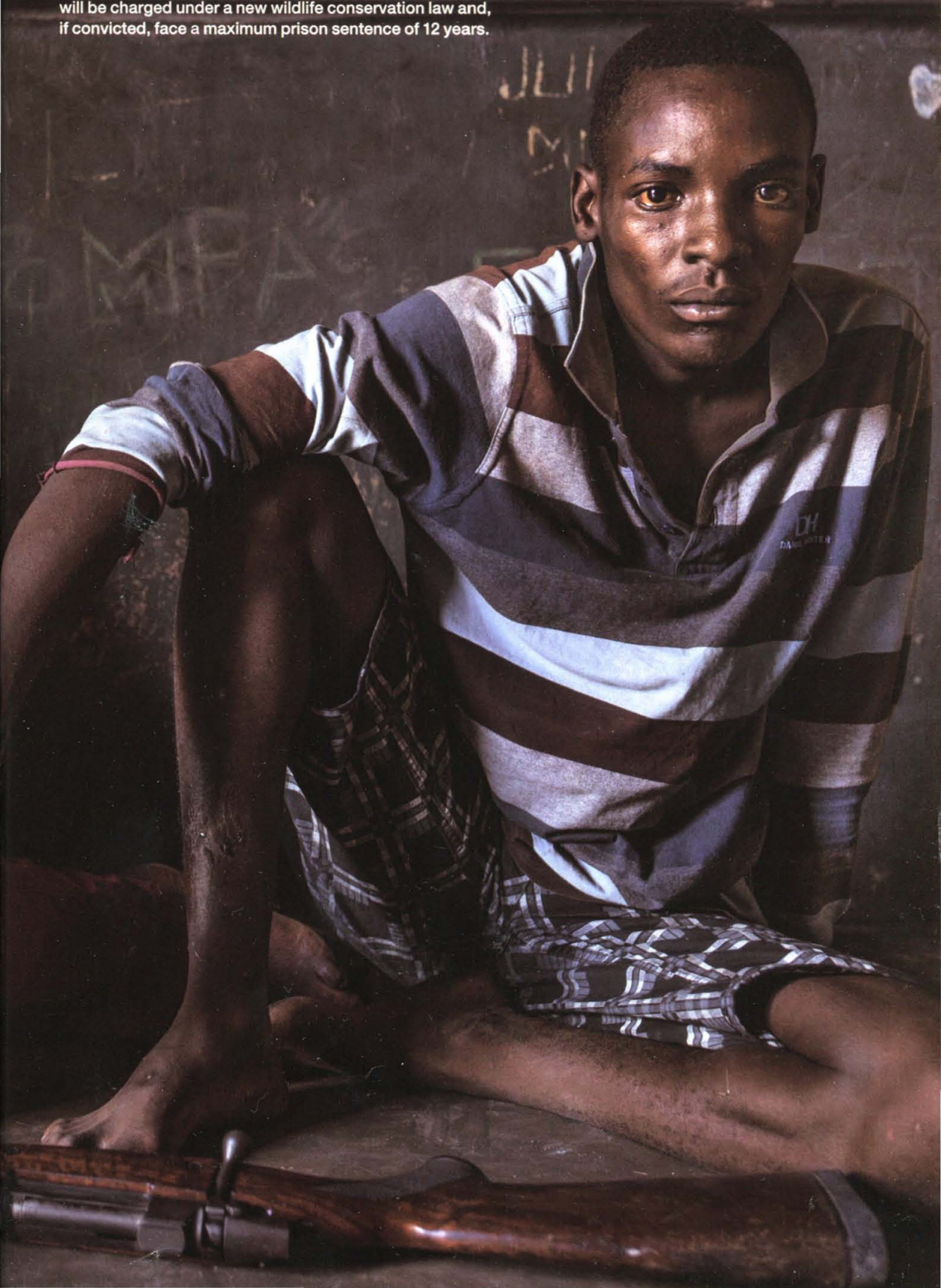
Poachers killed this black rhinoceros for its horn with high-caliber bullets at a water hole in South Africa's Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park. They entered the park illegally, likely from a nearby village, and are thought to have used a silenced hunting rifle. Black rhinos number only about 5,000 today.







Mozambican authorities say these men confessed to intending to poach a rhino in South Africa's Kruger National Park. They will be charged under a new wildlife conservation law and, if convicted, face a maximum prison sentence of 12 years.











A security team member (displaying his “antipoaching unit” tattoo) holds a rhino’s horn at the ranch of John Hume—the world’s top rhino farmer—in Klerksdorp, South Africa. The horns of Hume’s 1,300 rhinos are trimmed every 20 months or so and grow back. He stores them in hopes of a legalized trade, which he says will reduce poaching, a claim many conservationists reject.

South African game rancher Dawie Groenewald faces 1,739 charges related to rhino horn trafficking and rhino poaching. In addition, the United States is seeking to extradite him and his brother. A lawsuit Groenewald is financing that challenges his country's ban on the sale of rhino horn has put his criminal case on hold.

BY BRYAN CHRISTY

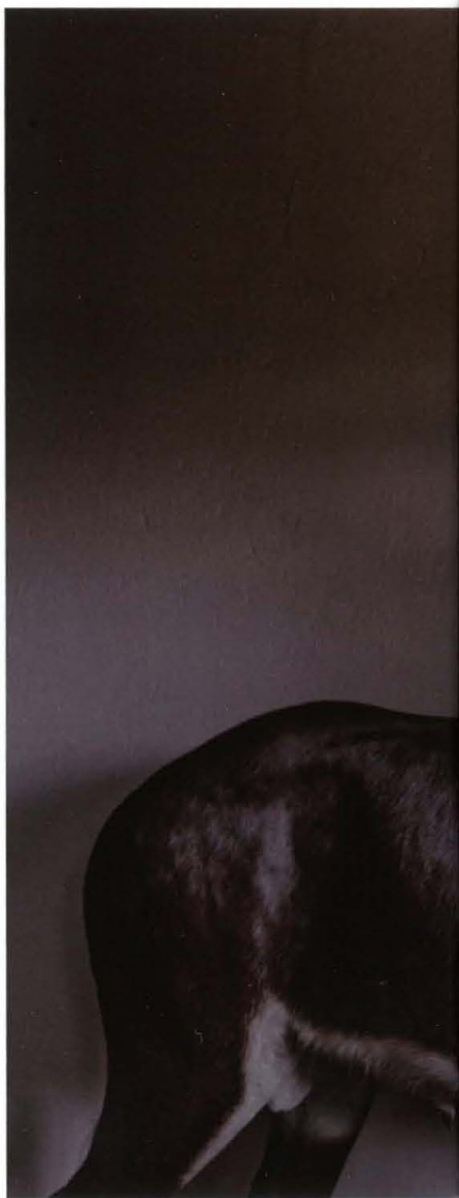
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT STIRTON

**I**t was a five-hour drive from South Africa's Kruger National Park, home of the world's largest wild rhinoceros population, to Polokwane, home of the world's most wanted man when it comes to rhino horn trafficking: a millionaire safari operator and ex-policeman named Dawie Groenewald.

To meet Groenewald, photographer Brent Stirton and I sped in two cars through gorgeous, winding mountain ranges. But then night fell, and in the darkness outside the city someone had poured tar down the center line of the highway and set it ablaze. It appeared to be another protest rooted in the racial and economic tensions that continue to flare in South Africa more than two decades after the end of apartheid. We wove around the fire only to come upon a traffic jam and a makeshift roadblock a mile later. In the middle of the

road what looked like a sofa was on fire, the flames shooting 10 feet into the air. Large rocks blocked all four lanes. Brent got out of his car and moved rocks too big to drive over, while I watched for an ambush. We picked our way through the gantlet as unseen people hurled stones from beyond the shoulder.

We stayed the night at a dank roadside hotel, then waited, in accordance with Groenewald's instructions, at a gas station for his man, Leon van der Merwe, to meet us. We followed him for 20 minutes along an expanse of immaculately







fenced property until we reached two stone pillars with a gate that slid open electronically. Standing in the driveway, hands on his hips, was Dawie Groenewald.

Today Groenewald, who has been called the “butcher of Prachtig” for what he allegedly did to rhinos on his hunting property of that name (*prachtig* is Dutch for “beautiful”), and 10 co-defendants face 1,872 counts in a South African indictment. The “Groenewald Gang,” as South Africa’s press has dubbed them, are charged variously with illegally killing rhinos, illegally

dehorning rhinos, trading in rhino horn, racketeering, money laundering, and related crimes. In the United States, Groenewald and his brother, Janneman, have been indicted for tricking nearly a dozen American hunting clients into illegally killing rhinos at Prachtig, and U.S. authorities have requested their extradition. In the Czech Republic investigators linked Groenewald to a rhino horn-trafficking syndicate after discovering that horns shipped to Vietnam came from rhinos shot by Czech hunters at Prachtig. Groenewald denies knowing the



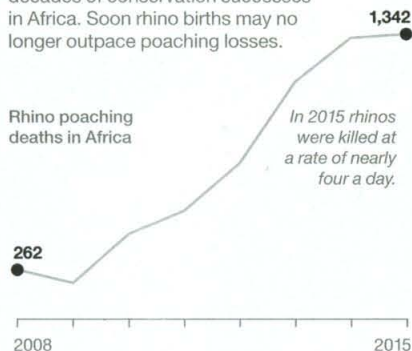
## Tracing the Horn Trade

The international sale of rhino horn—a popular yet ineffective medicine and hangover cure in Vietnam and China—has been banned since 1977. Soaring demand in these countries, where it's considered a status symbol, caused a rapid rise in prices. As law enforcement battles the trade, increasingly organized traffickers nimbly shift their supply routes of poached or stolen horn.

### Poaching on the rise

Demand for horn is undermining two decades of conservation successes in Africa. Soon rhino births may no longer outpace poaching losses.

Rhino poaching deaths in Africa



purpose of these hunts. He was once banned from hunting in Zimbabwe and has been expelled from the Professional Hunters' Association of South Africa.

This is the story of Dawie Groenewald, an accused rhino horn trafficker, and John Hume, the owner of the world's largest rhino farm—two men who know each other well and share a common goal: to end the South African and international bans on trading and selling rhino horn. Groenewald has agreed to see Brent and me at a time when he is in a high-stakes legal battle that could land him in prison for decades or create an opening for the legal sale of rhino horn in South Africa—an opening that could help pave the way to a legal global trade, which opponents say could doom rhinos.

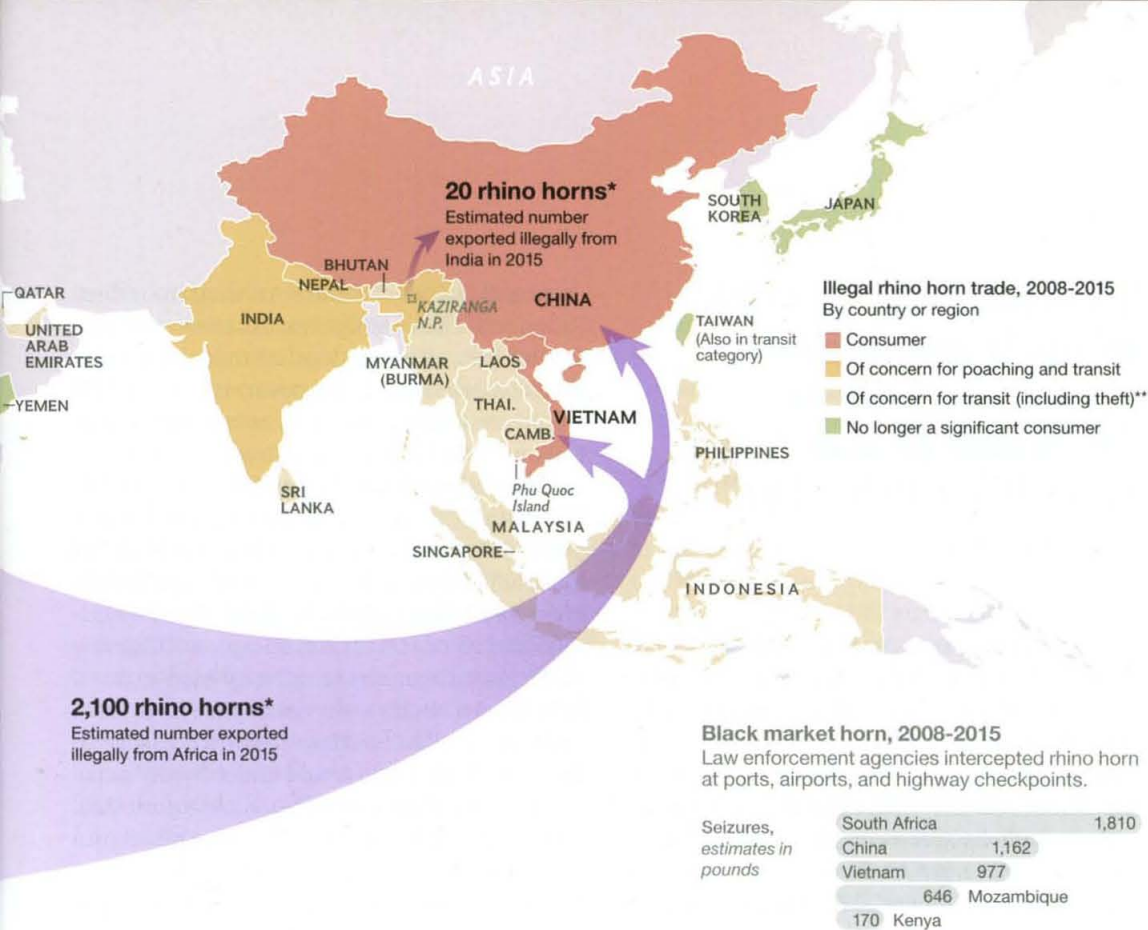
### THE RHINO CRISIS

South Africa is home to nearly 70 percent of the 29,500 rhinos left on Earth, down from several hundred thousand in Africa before the 1800s, when the European imprint on the land intensified. They're spread across two continents and

five species: the white rhino, with some 20,400 remaining; the black, with 5,250; the greater one-horned; the Sumatran; and the Javan. According to South Africa's Private Rhino Owners Association, 6,200 of the country's rhinos are in private hands and are used commercially for photographic safaris, legal hunting, horn production, and breeding.

The horn of a rhinoceros is the world's most valuable appendage in an exotic marketplace that values nature's oddities, such as elephant ivory, tiger penis, and giraffe tail. Unlike the horns of many species, including cattle, rhino horn is not made of bone. It is made of keratin, a protein also found in our hair and fingernails, and if you trim a rhino's horn, it grows back. Although selling rhino horn is illegal, in South Africa if you have a permit, you can cut off a rhino's horn. Every year or two South African rhino farmers tranquilize their animals with darts, cut as much as four pounds of horn from each rhino, and store it all in bank vaults and other secure locations, hoping for a day when it's legal to sell horn.





Meanwhile a booming illegal trade supplies mostly Vietnam and China, where rhino horn is often ground to a powder and ingested as a treatment for everything from cancer to sea snake bites and hangovers. Inspired by years of erroneous reporting by Western media, people have recently also been using rhino horn as an aphrodisiac. On the black market in South Africa, the horn of the white rhino sells for up to \$3,000 a pound, according to Groenewald, but on Asian black markets it wholesales for five to 10 times that, and retail prices can go up astronomically from there. A single bull rhino carrying 22 pounds of horn might buy a new life for a Mozambican poacher who slips over the border into Kruger National Park with an AK-47, but that poacher himself is likely to be exploited by the men who supplied his weapon. That poacher also may be shot by authorities, as were 500 Mozambican poachers in Kruger from 2010 to 2015.

Rhino poaching has reached disastrous proportions during the past decade. In 2007 South Africa reported losing just 13 rhinos. In

2008 it was 83. Last year it was 1,175. In Kruger, home to some 9,000 rhinos, poachers kill on average two to three every day. The killing isn't limited to Africa. In April poachers shot a greater one-horned rhino with AK-47s in India's Kaziranga National Park hours after the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge had visited the park to promote conservation. Rhinos don't roar when they're injured. They keel. A shot mother will cry in pain, sometimes inadvertently causing her frightened baby to return to her. Poachers will sever a baby's spine with a machete to save a bullet, then take its horn too.

For those on the front line, protecting rhinos is no longer a conservation challenge: "It's a war," says Xolani Nicholas Funda, chief ranger at Kruger, where most of the world's rhino poaching takes place. "That's our frustration. The rhino war—it's like drugs. It involves lots of cash and bribery. The whole justice system is really a frustration. We're losing cases" in court. "We're surrounded by police stations we don't even recognize as police stations because they're working with the poachers."

\*ESTIMATE BASED ON THE ROUGHLY 80 PERCENT OF HORNS THAT EVENTUALLY APPEAR ON THE MARKET (DATA PROVIDED BY ESMOND MARTIN AND LUCY VIGNE) \*\*NOT SHOWN: CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES †AS OF 2009, RHINOS ARE EXTINCT HERE.



## **“The rhino war—it’s like drugs. It involves lots of cash and bribery. The whole justice system is really a frustration.”**

*Xolani Funda, chief Kruger ranger*

### **BATTLE IN JOHANNESBURG**

In 1977 the international trade in rhino horn was banned by parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the treaty governing the global wildlife trade. But the ban applies only to trade between countries, and it has an exception that horn traffickers have turned to their advantage: Under CITES it is legal to export the horn—or trophy—from a white rhino shot with a permit on a sport hunt. Beginning in 2003 Vietnamese rhino horn traffickers began signing up with South African hunting outfitters to kill rhinos for their horns, and later a Laos-based syndicate even hired prostitutes to act as pseudo hunters. These syndicates were selling horn on the black market back home.

In response to the rapacious hunting, South Africa tightened its hunting rules, limiting hunters to one rhino a year, requiring a government official to witness hunts, and denying permits to hunters from Vietnam. The horn of every hunted rhino had to be microchipped and its DNA signature recorded in the Rhino DNA Index System at the University of Pretoria’s Veterinary Genetics Laboratory.

Despite all that, rhino horn trafficking continued. There was another soft spot in the international rhino horn ban that CITES couldn’t address: Selling rhino horn within South Africa was legal. But then in 2008 Marthinus van Schalkwyk, minister of environmental affairs and tourism, announced a moratorium on that policy in order “to curb the increase in the illegal trade in rhino horns” and “hopefully discourage poaching.” In February 2009 the ban

on domestic sales of rhino horn went into effect. Groenewald has a simple explanation as to why South Africa refuses to legalize rhino horn sales: “Somewhere along in the government,” he tells me, “there must be high rollers involved in this. You understand what I’m saying?”

Both Groenewald and John Hume say breeding rhinos for the purpose of harvesting and then legally selling their horns will reduce poaching. But Allison Thomson, director of Outraged South African Citizens Against Poaching, a leading anti-legalization organization, disagrees. “Our law enforcement agencies are already hard-pressed to deal with nearly a thousand arrests in 2015 and a mere 61 convictions. Added pressure to monitor a legal trade would undoubtedly make enforcement near impossible, allowing criminal syndicates once more to traffic more horns into the illegal international market.”

The controversy over rhino horn is coming to a head just as South Africa is hosting the triennial meeting of CITES in Johannesburg in September. In 1997 South Africa had proposed lifting the CITES ban on the international rhino horn trade, touting its legal system as up to the task of ensuring a controlled trade that “will depress black market prices and activity.” But that effort failed.

History has shown that removing a trade ban without adequate controls on crime and corruption can be disastrous. In 2007 CITES parties suspended an international ban on trading elephant ivory and authorized four countries—Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe—to sell 115 tons to China and Japan. The sale, which took place the next year, was designed to flood Asia’s ivory markets and drive out illegal traders. Instead it signaled that ivory markets were open again, fueling unprecedented elephant poaching across Africa—more than 30,000 elephants a year between 2010 and 2012 alone—that continues today.

“It’s no accident that rhino horn and ivory prices increased around the time CITES started talking about legalizing ivory,” says America’s top wildlife law officer, Chief William Woody of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

There has been speculation that South Africa,



with a nudge from its ranching industry, might again propose removing the CITES ban on the international rhino horn trade—despite the awkwardness of the meeting’s host country proposing such a controversial plan. “We have done all in our power [to stop poaching], and doing the same thing every day isn’t working,” South Africa’s environmental affairs minister, Edna Molewa, told the *Mail & Guardian* during the CITES meeting in Bangkok in 2013. Instead South Africa announced in May that it would not propose lifting the ban, citing the need for evidence that trade would help free-roaming rhinos, expand rhino ranges, and address corruption and challenges in other range states. But then Swaziland, a tiny country with fewer than a hundred rhinos that is locked almost entirely within South Africa, put forward a proposal to lift the ban.

#### CARNAGE AT PRACHTIG

Dawie Groenewald ushers us to a long dining table in front of an enormous stone fireplace in the main lodge of his exotic game-breeding ranch. Called Mataka, this is the smaller of his two properties—1,853 acres and 125 miles south of Prachtig. Outside he has two shiny helicopters, a stable of Arabian horses, and acres of high-priced, exotic game he’s going to show me later, including rhinos. Inside are two great rooms filled with black leather sofas and taxidermy.

He sits down at the table, and his servant, Andrew, brings him a plate of lamb knuckles—*skop*, he explains, making a chopping motion with his left hand at his right forearm. Brent and I opt for a bowl of dried beef called biltong and a couple of Cokes.

Groenewald started Mataka in 2012, two years after his arrest, but he didn’t end hunting operations at Prachtig. He established a new business, Wild Africa Hunting Safaris, that replaced the original one, Out of Africa Adventurous Safaris. “I had [an American] politician two years ago; he doesn’t even know it’s my place,” he says with obvious delight. Groenewald is clearly confident of his chances in court in South Africa and the U.S. And he has reason to be: The criminal case against him in South

Africa has been frozen by a civil lawsuit filed by a game farmer named Johan Krüger, who lives nearby. The lawsuit challenges as unconstitutional South Africa’s ban on the trade of rhino horn, as well as most of the other rhino-related crimes that Groenewald is accused of.

“Johan Krüger,” Groenewald tells me, is “on the papers.” But Krüger, who is not implicated in any crimes Groenewald is charged with, is not the true plaintiff, Groenewald says, and is not the one paying the legal bills. “It’s me,” he adds emphatically. Krüger did not respond to *National Geographic*’s efforts to contact him, but there is reason to believe Groenewald. He and Krüger have been in the buffalo business together; they hunt together; Krüger’s photograph has appeared in Groenewald’s hunting brochures; and Krüger’s lawyer is also Groenewald’s lawyer.

The charges against Groenewald in South Africa are rooted in a September 2010 raid on Prachtig by South Africa’s Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, an elite police unit known as the Hawks. Markus Hofmeyr, manager of veterinary services for South African National Parks, which runs Kruger National Park, was part of a team of forensic specialists brought in that day to tranquilize Groenewald’s rhinos and collect tissue and blood samples. His team located 29 live rhinos and darted 26 of them.

Hofmeyr submitted a sworn affidavit that described what he saw at Prachtig: “All the rhino we darted had their horns removed previously, some right down to the growing point. The horns on some rhino were clearly cut off with a chain saw or the likes.” Cutting a horn too close to its growing point can cause bleeding and, veterinarians say, can be painful. Hofmeyr speculated that some horns had been removed “by inserting a knife and separating the attachment area of the horn from the base of the skull or applying a large force and tearing the horn from the base.”

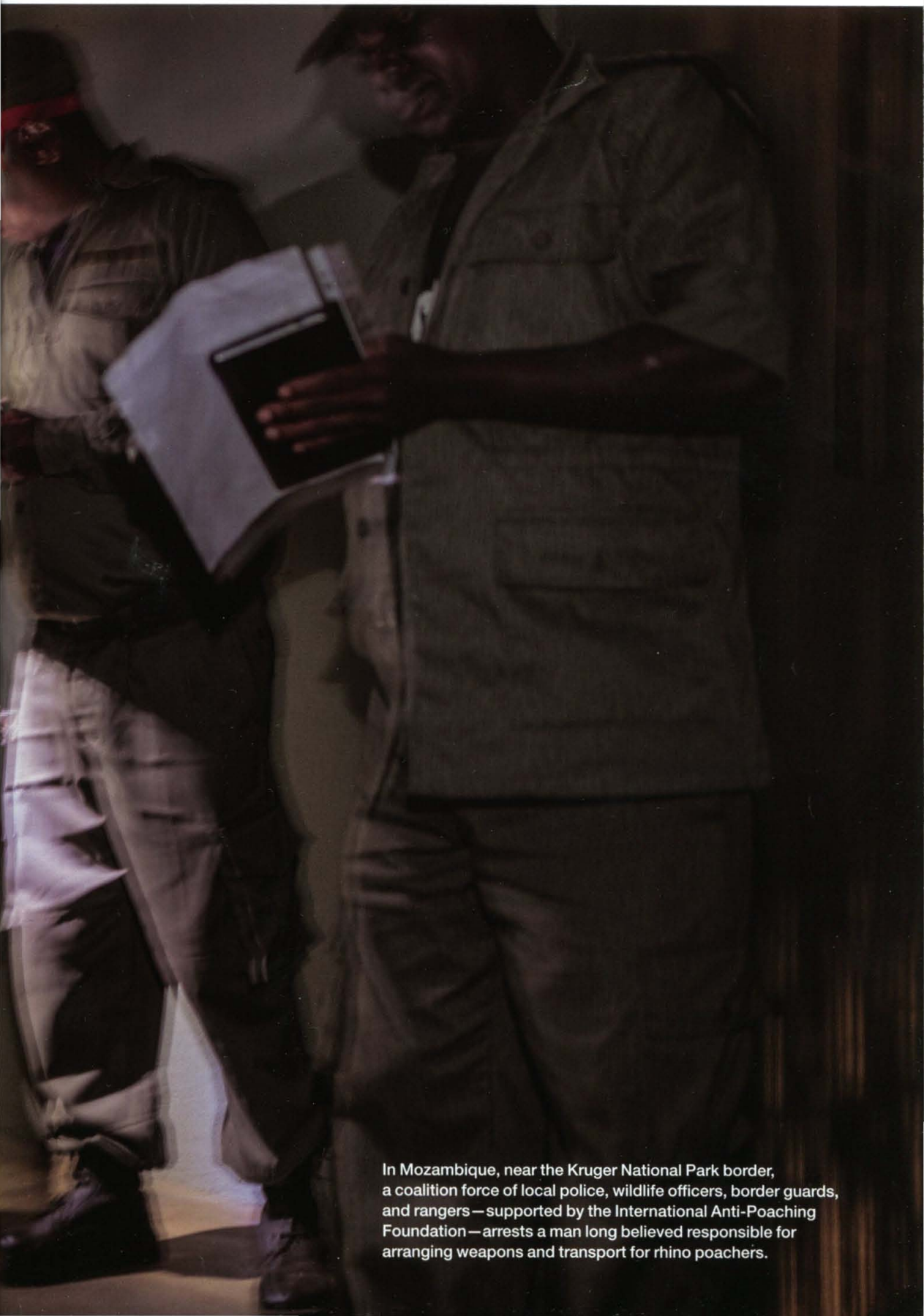
According to Groenewald, the Chinese “don’t like dehorned pieces,” so he cuts his rhinos’ horns down to just three inches from the skull.

Investigators also discovered several locations at Prachtig with the remains of burned rhino carcasses and skulls. Nineteen skulls were found, all









In Mozambique, near the Kruger National Park border, a coalition force of local police, wildlife officers, border guards, and rangers — supported by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation — arrests a man long believed responsible for arranging weapons and transport for rhino poachers.









Veterinarian Johan Marais prepares to try out a novel treatment—rubber bands used in human surgery—to close a gaping hole in this female rhino's face made in May 2015 by poachers hacking out her horn. Marais says that Hope—seen here a year later—will survive the attack. “She’s done extremely well,” he says. “She’s got this inherent feistiness.”



Lulah's mother was killed by poachers in Kruger National Park. She now lives at Care for Wild Africa, a sanctuary in Mpumalanga Province specializing in rhinos. Staff member Dorota Ladosz lives with her full-time and comforts her after surgery to repair wounds inflicted by hyenas before her rescue.

with their horns cut off. Six years later Hofmeyr is still haunted by the scene. "The thing that was most traumatic for me was seeing that pit with the dead rhinos in it," he tells me. "It's very likely he's going to get off the hook. That's an indictment of how sick our systems are."

Hofmeyr is sick about something more personal. He recognized rhinos on Groenewald's property as animals he'd helped capture in Kruger National Park. "[Groenewald] offered the best prices and there was no [criminal] conviction, so according to our tender laws we couldn't not sell to him." Selling wildlife to the private sector is one way the park has paid for special conservation projects, he says, and even though some rhinos are sold to safari outfitters to be hunted, they also have a chance to breed, increasing numbers overall. Indeed, breeding for big game hunting is widely credited with helping white rhinos come back from near extinction at the turn of the 20th century.

"It takes a long time to recover, takes a long time to trust people again," Hofmeyr says. "You think, Am I a part of this? I caught that animal, and I put it in that box." Hofmeyr focuses on the bigger picture—animals he's helped relocate to other destinations. "I would say 75 percent of them are still alive, and breeding. That, to me, ultimately is what makes it easier to accept these things."

Groenewald, who bought over 30 rhinos from Kruger, says the park charged him by the length of each adult bull's horn. "They *wanted* people to hunt them," he tells me.

Of the rhinos that wound up dead at Prachtig, Groenewald sold 39 carcasses to a local butcher.

He is clear about who is buying South Africa's rhino horns. With two index fingers he pulls back the corners of his eyes and says, "The people called me all the time. Because they want some horn. Some horn. Some horn. They don't get it from me? They'll get it from somebody else."

"Chinese guys or Vietnamese guys?" Brent asks.



"Both," Groenewald says. "If their eyes are like this, they in it."

#### OPERATION CRASH

In June 2011 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received an email from Col. Johan Jooste of South Africa's Hawks requesting help interviewing several Americans who had hunted rhinos with Groenewald in South Africa. David Hubbard, agent in charge of the FWS's San Antonio, Texas, office, was given the assignment.

Hubbard knew Groenewald. Hubbard had





assisted in his arrest for shipping a stuffed leopard to the U.S. that had been shot in South Africa without a hunting permit. Groenewald's client, a plumber from Texas named Glenn Davey, had killed the leopard in 2006. But Groenewald hadn't had a leopard-hunting permit for that year, and according to his plea agreement his name appeared on a 2008 permit application instead. FWS agents arrested Groenewald in January 2010, when he happened to be visiting his brother, Janneman, who ran their hunting company's U.S. sales operations from

Autaugaville, Alabama. (Janneman has since returned to South Africa.) Groenewald pleaded guilty, was sentenced to time served (eight days), was ordered to refund his client \$7,500, and was fined \$30,000.

"How can they charge me for a leopard that was shot on my place?" Groenewald says, still seething. "I didn't steal it. I didn't shoot it on another guy's farm. It's mine."

The leopard was killed legally in 2008, he tells me, even though on page 13 of his 2006-07 company brochure there is a photograph of the



## To Groenewald, you're not a poacher if you kill what's yours. For him, what is legal comes down to one question: When is a rhino mine?

Texas plumber holding the very same leopard.

Five years later, in 2011, Hubbard believed Groenewald was trafficking in wildlife again. Nearly a dozen American men who had gone on hunting adventures with Groenewald's company told Hubbard a similar story: They hadn't intended to hunt rhinos, but on their arrival at Prachtig, Groenewald had told them about a "problem" rhino that needed to be put down. Groenewald charged them an average of \$10,000—a fraction of the going rate for a legal rhino hunt. The Americans were allowed to photograph their kills, but rhino photos were all they were allowed to take home. Groenewald kept the horns.

Hubbard opened his own case, Operation Preposterous, which was rolled into Operation Crash (a group of rhinos is a crash), a multistate rhino horn-trafficking investigation launched by the FWS in 2011. Still active, Operation Crash is one of the agency's most successful investigations, connecting antique dealers, auction houses, a gang of Irish thieves known as the Rathkeale Rovers, a former associate in Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel, and others to rhino horn trafficking in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Africa. As of July 2016, Operation Crash had resulted in the conviction of 30 people, 405 months of prison time, and \$75 million in seized property.

Unlike most targets of Operation Crash, who trafficked old or antique horn, the Groenewald brothers are accused of killing rhinos. The U.S. Department of Justice charged the brothers with conducting 11 rhino hunts illegal under South African law, in violation of the U.S. Lacey Act, which makes it a crime to violate any U.S.

or foreign conservation law. On April 4, 2015, the department contacted South African authorities requesting their extradition. "Getting them extradited back to the U.S. is a high priority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," Chief Woody says.

But Groenewald appears to have stalled the Americans' case against him too. "At first we had great cooperation from South Africa," Hubbard says, recalling early communications with South African prosecutors to prepare for extradition. Then, he says, for some reason official communication between the South African government and the U.S. Department of Justice slowed. Among the reasons for delay, Hubbard speculates, is the Krüger lawsuit. (Citing "matters pending in court," South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority declined *National Geographic's* request for an interview.) The lawsuit also appears to have stalled the prosecution of Groenewald's longtime associate Hugo Ras, a luxury safari operator and accused rhino killer, whose hunting clients have included Eric Trump and Donald Trump, Jr., sons of U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump. Ras is accused of heading a 10-person rhino-poaching and horn-trafficking syndicate that killed rhinos using dart guns and lethal levels of etorphine hydrochloride, also known as M99, a regulated opioid that is up to 80,000 times more powerful than morphine.

### 'BUFFALO IS MY ANIMAL'

I climb into Groenewald's shining Toyota Hilux 4x4 pickup truck, with its bank of modified halogen headlights and luxury padded seat in the bed for viewing wildlife, and we go for a tour of his breeding estate.

South African game ranchers breed most anything a safari client will pay to hunt. In 2013 a buffalo named Mystery was sold to an investor group led by Johann Rupert, who controls the world's second largest luxury-goods conglomerate, Compagnie Financière Richemont SA, for a record \$4.1 million. In 2014 Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa sold three white-flanked impalas as breeding stock for \$2.5 million, and this year an investor paid \$2.8 million for a quarter



share in a buffalo named Horizon, putting its value at \$11.2 million.

Groenewald raises buffalo, impalas, rhinos, sable antelope, and wildebeests, along with Arabian horses. His antelope live with white PVC pipes on the tips of their massive, elegantly curved horns to protect them for market. He also breeds designer animals—highly desired genetic variants such as golden wildebeests, saddleback impalas, and black impalas—animals carrying recessive genes that result in unusual colors. It's a practice that puts wild populations at risk, according to the African Professional Hunters Association, which considers "color-variant hunting" unethical.

The buffalo is among the most dangerous mammals in Africa, but Groenewald drives his truck easily among his. "Buffalo is my animal," he says fondly. He clicks a button and another fence gate slides open. We approach a group of trophy-size bulls. "This one here is worth about six million rand"—\$400,000. Another is worth \$675,000. Instead of charging, the big males scamper about like happy sheep.

Groenewald's focus on the animals' worth was a reminder of what had taken me so long to understand: To Groenewald and many other South Africans, you're not a poacher if you kill what's yours. This idea is rooted in the country's pro-game ranching laws, which make wildlife the property of anyone who can fence it off. "Everybody knows I'm not a poacher," Groenewald tells me. "I believe that an animal like a rhino should be mine. I can do with that what I want, like any other animal—like a kudu or a buffalo. If I buy that animal, it belongs to me. If you want to shoot the rhino, it's my rhino; it's on my farm. If I want you to shoot it, you can shoot it."

For Groenewald what is legal comes down to a single question: When is a rhino mine?

## THE RHINO KING

John Hume owns more rhinos than anyone in the world. He's been breeding them since 1995, and today he has 1,300. An unlucky number, he tells me, as he takes a seat at his desk in the home office of his rhino ranch in Klerksdorp, a hundred miles southwest of Johannesburg. He'd like at least one more for luck, and he's checking his computer to see if he's had another birth.

I've heard you quoted as saying you'd buy rhinos from the devil if it would save them, I tell him.

"Well, if you look at my rhino lists, you'll see we have plenty of DGs," he replies. "Probably over a hundred rhino here come from Dawie Groenewald. I don't deny that. I have nothing to hide, and a lot of those rhino would have been dead today." (Hume has not been implicated in any of Groenewald's alleged crimes.)

Hume owns about a fifth of South Africa's privately held rhinos. Part of what makes the rhino special, Hume says, is that it is so "user friendly." This is a cattle ranch, he says. "You couldn't keep elephants here." Each week his staff tranquilizes 10 to 15 rhinos, assists them as they stumble around, trims their horns, gives them reviving shots, and sends the horns by armed guard to a secure facility. His rhinos each produce up to 4.4 pounds of horn a year, and the horns are cut every 20 months or so. He's been doing this for years and estimates he's amassed five tons of horn, which he hopes one day to sell legally for more than \$4,500 a pound: about \$45 million.

Although selling rhino horn is illegal, making money off live rhinos isn't, and Hume has been working to export live rhinos to Vietnam. Last fall he entered negotiations to sell up to a hundred rhinos to a company in Vietnam called Vinpearl, owned by Pham Nhat Vuong, Vietnam's wealthiest man. It's legal for a South



**Bryan Christy** is chief correspondent of the National Geographic Society's Special Investigations Unit and a Society fellow. He starred in the National Geographic Channel's Emmy-nominated film *Warlords of Ivory*.

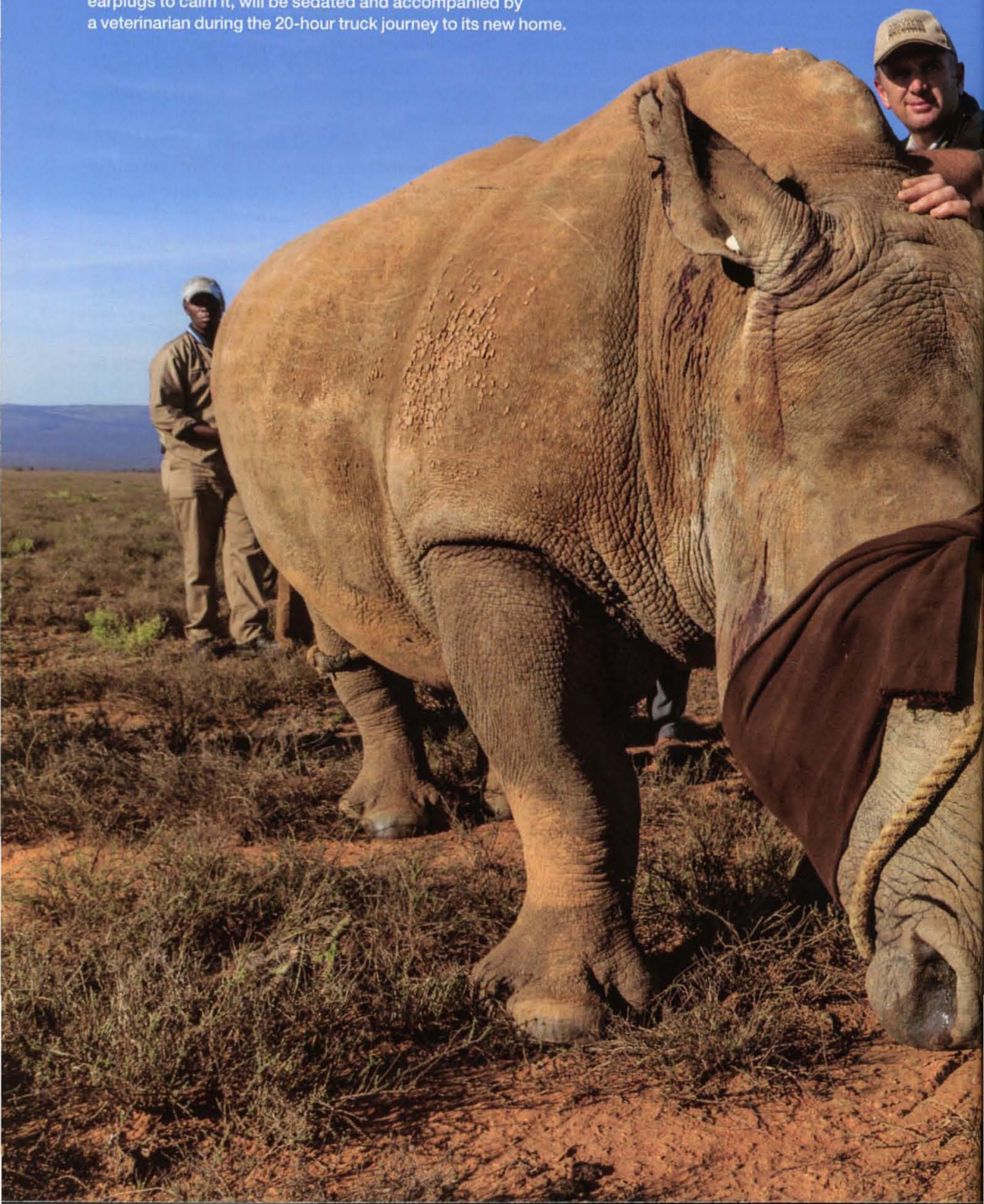


BYBA SEPIITKOVA

**Brent Stirton** was named Wildlife Photojournalist of the Year for "Rhino Wars," in the March 2012 issue. He won again for "Tracking Ivory," partnering with Bryan Christy. This is their third wildlife investigation together.



A game rancher near Port Elizabeth who couldn't afford the high cost of protecting his rhinos from poachers sold this one to a more secure operation. The rhino, blindfolded and wearing earplugs to calm it, will be sedated and accompanied by a veterinarian during the 20-hour truck journey to its new home.









These rhinos at a feeding site on John Hume's ranch have recently had their horns trimmed. Unlike elephant ivory, rhino horn grows back when cut properly. Hume estimates that he has five tons in storage, which could bring him some \$45 million.









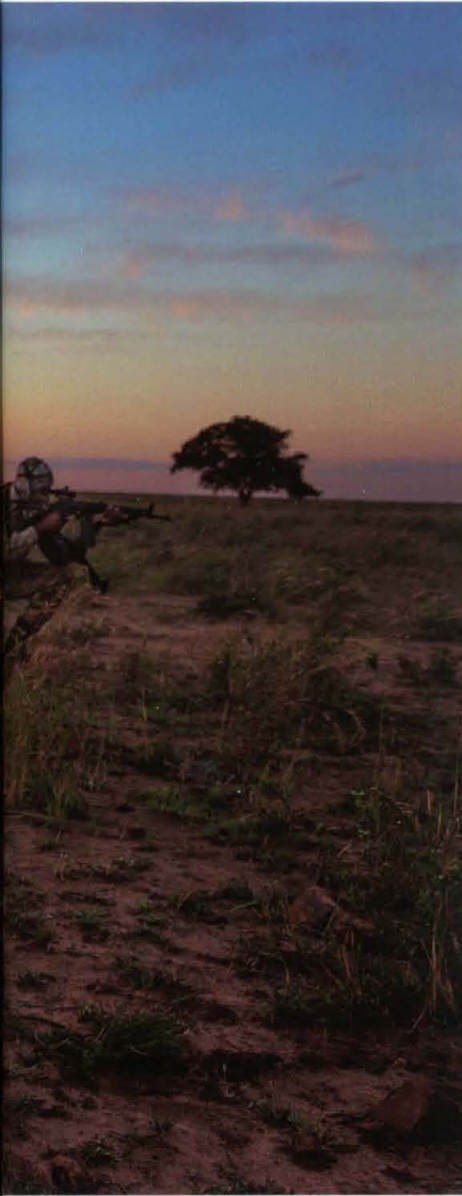


African to export live rhinos with government approval, but it's unclear what kind of life the rhinos would be headed to. According to Hume's farm manager, wild rhinos each need nearly a thousand acres, but Hume has a captive-breeding permit allowing him to keep one rhino per 7.5 acres as long as he provides them with supplementary food. Vinpearl's safari park, part of its five-star resort on Phu Quoc Island in the Gulf of Thailand, had allocated a fraction of that to a massive rhino-breeding operation.

On December 7, 2015, a representative from

Vinpearl, accompanied by the Vietnamese ambassador to South Africa, met with South African authorities to urge approval of Hume's export application. In a letter, the Department of Rural, Environmental and Agricultural Development for South Africa's North West Province stated: "Vinpearl intends to import at least 100 rhino, which will be kept on an enclosure of 15 hectares [37 acres]. Vinpearl aims to have the largest number of rhino in the world in a safari park/zoo, and wants to breed rhino." The government denied Hume's application.





A two-man security team deploys by helicopter at sunset for antipoaching duties on Hume's rhino ranch. Hume reckons he spends \$330,000 a month to operate the ranch, \$200,000 of which goes to keeping his rhinos safe. He has joined a lawsuit to lift South Africa's ban on rhino horn trading.

2015, World Rhino Day. He won—good news for Groenewald—and the ruling has been upheld through two appeals. The government has filed a final appeal, and the ban remains in force pending the outcome.

Meanwhile Groenewald and Hume are both preparing to sell rhino horn. Groenewald tells me that shortly after the win in court last year, he brought a group of eight Asian men to inspect Hume's rhino horn stockpile. "It's like you take kids, five or six years old, and you put them in a Toys 'R' Us," Groenewald says.

But lifting the domestic ban is only half the rhino bosses' battle. Because there's virtually no market for rhino horn in South Africa, they need the international ban to be lifted too. And that's unlikely, since neither Vietnam nor China has indicated formal interest in legalizing the rhino horn trade. Hume's lawyer, Izak du Toit, tells me that in extreme circumstances law-abiding people may feel that they have no option other than to break the law as an act of civil disobedience. Private rhino ranchers, who are forbidden to sell their horn and whose staff and animals are under threat from poachers, may choose to trade their horn anyway. He draws a comparison to apartheid: "Black people had to transgress the very law they objected to in order to show it was illegal."

"Who cares what they do with it?" Groenewald says. "If they want to take it illegally out of the country, it's their problem."

Hume isn't bothered that rhino horn is snake oil when it comes to treating serious maladies. "I'm not ashamed that the rhino horn I make available to the world could possibly be ingested by somebody who's got cancer and he dies anyway. It's not going to help them. I have arthritis. I take at least six bloody remedies. And as far as I can see, none of them work."

What has worked so far, for Dawie Groenewald, is South Africa's legal system. When it comes to rhino horn, he hopes it works just a little bit more. "If they legalize it, I'm going to be the main man selling it." □

Seven months earlier Hume had taken his own initiative to get the 2009 domestic ban on rhino horn trading lifted when he joined Johan Krüger's lawsuit as a co-plaintiff—the same lawsuit Groenewald claims is secretly his. Hume relied on a simple technicality to make his case: The government, he said, had failed to adequately notify the public before implementing the ban, because it had failed to consult the world's top rhino rancher—him—before it enacted its moratorium.

Hume's case was heard on September 22,