

What's driving this massive upsurge in rhino poaching and what is the future for rhino in the wild?

By Ian Craig
Founder of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy
Northern Rangelands Trust, Isiolo, Kenya

Due to a massive investment of effort, time and money by conservationists worldwide, the past two decades have seen a very positive period for *in situ* rhino conservation in Africa. In the mid-80's when conservationists worldwide came together with the realization that rhino were heading for extinction, this catalyzed a whole new investment in management ideas and new thinking. Never had the concept of small, fenced sanctuaries to protect rhino been on the agenda; the philosophy was that rhino need large open spaces with no restrictions. This myth was quickly dismissed with the realization that the only option available was to concentrate animals into small, highly protected areas and this has been the foundation of the growth of Africa's black and white rhino populations over the past twenty years.

The different approaches across Africa of fenced sanctuaries and intensive protection zones (IPZ's) have had different levels of success, but with a major factor in the increase of southern white rhino being the commercial benefits accrued from sport hunting where land owners have seen significant financial benefit in the hunting of southern white rhino. The private sector throughout the continent has played an equal role to national governments and in some countries where private public partnerships are national policy, over 50% of a nation's black rhino population is now on private land.

The cost of protecting rhino over this past decade has essentially risen with the cost of inflation and as long as adequate ground coverage by well-trained, motivated rangers was in place, attrition from poaching could be kept at a level below the natural increment. Most countries look at a minimum 5% growth per annum within their respective rhino populations. The cost of protecting these animals has been significantly carried by concerned individuals, zoo-based organisations and national



Ian Craig, left, Founder of Lewa Wildlife Conservancy

governments, specifically in the US and the UK. These funds have been channeled into both private and government rhino conservation initiatives resulting in this success and steady increase.

Whereas historically illicit rhino horn would move through a series of middle men before reaching its final destination with the increasing presence of Far Eastern investment into Africa and the accompanying nationals, the routing of this horn has been much more direct and easier. Accepting that the black market demand is driven by the end-user price, the increasing levels of wealth within the Far East are influencing the spiraling demand of rhino horn in Africa. With increasing trade between the Far East and Africa, communication, transport and the ease of moving product are all factors contributing to this ever-increasing demand. In 2010, a series of rhino horns were confiscated in Jomo Kenyatta International Airport Nairobi, hidden amongst avocado pears being air freighted to the Far East. These horns proved to have originated in Zimbabwe and had been moved to Nairobi over land and were now on direct flights to the Far East from the hub of Nairobi.

This situation only stands to get worse; economies and demand for wildlife products in the Far East are growing. East Asian nationals get more and more integrated into African societies and lines of communication and transport continue to improve. The inevitable knock on effect of these increasing values is the potential to corrupt government officials responsible for enforcing controls on national borders and within wildlife authorities.

Apart from keeping existing populations safe, the single biggest challenge facing many African governments with a responsibility for rhino conservation is finding *safe* space for rhino. Rhino are the most forgiving animals thriving in the most diverse habitats on the continent, yet ensuring that criminals don't kill them requires the highest levels of 24-hour protection.

The year 2012 is now a time to re-focus on what has worked, what has not worked and what are the opportunities of our time.

What has worked; intensive protection zones and fenced sanctuaries are a proven success. The model is now well-established, the costs clearly identified and minimum standards of ground coverage required are well-documented. This concept can be expanded into national parks, community areas and private land but with the increasing demand comes an ever increasing cost of protection.

What has not worked; free release areas and community conservancies have proven to be a challenge to keeping rhino safe and at this time are an option that has passed. The ban on the sale of rhino horn through CITES; we need to revisit the options.

Opportunities of our time; with technology changing by the day this is the single most cost-effective tool of our day to protect rhino. If the relevant military technology used to protect borders and military locations together with the most modern technology to monitor human movement and the protection of assets can be applied to protecting rhino, this has the potential to dramatically change the future of field conservation for rhino. This is starting to happen in an ever-increasing way and as is normal with such new technology is not being openly discussed through public channels but already is starting to make an impact on how rhino are protected.

One can only ask who is killing these rhino, who is moving the horn and who is driving the price?

Who's killing the Rhino? Every society has its criminals and poverty is rife throughout much of Africa. In Eastern and Central Africa much of the poaching is undertaken by armed criminals who are essentially opportunists, out to make a quick buck. In southern Africa the dynamic is totally different where professional veterinarians and high level officials using helicopters have been prosecuted for the actual field poaching of rhino.

Who's moving the horn? Rhino horn, like hard drugs, counterfeit currency, and illicit diamonds is a high-value, black-market product that once it leaves the hand of the poacher is moved through a series of couriers, on to godfathers coordinating these activities across national and international borders. Rhino horn being such a small article can easily be hidden and moved by a motor bike in a hand bag or hidden in materials being exported.

Who's driving the price? Clearly the market for rhino horn is based on traditional Chinese medicine and connotations around this myth. The end-user can be a very humble member of society who genuinely believes the use of powdered rhino horn can save the life of a loved one, and each one of us would spend our last dollar on such cause. Between the poacher and the end-user the multiplication of value would seem to be four to five times possible more, leaving massive opportunity for middle men to benefit. With the weakening value of many African currencies against the US Dollar and essentially a dollar-based value on rhino horn, this is multiplying the in-country value within Africa, further exasperating an already-volatile situation.

On one hand, the future of Africa's rhino could be seen to be extremely bleak, yet on the other hand with plenty of suitable habitat available, the real challenge is to provide cost-effective security using the most modern technology in support of the field operations. Alongside this, a significant public programme to keep the world, specifically the market of eastern Asia, fully informed as to the myth of rhino horns' potency and the impact of buying rhino horn. A careful assessment is required to look at the effectiveness of the CITES ban on the trade of rhino products; this clearly has not worked and it is again time to consider the options available to us as conservationists to give rhino a new hope.



Cost-effective security programs, like those provided by our Conservation Partners at Lewa and IRF, are proven methods of protecting rhinos. *Photo by Patty Pearthree*