

PATROLLING BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

THE POACHERS' MOON

THE TIME MOST LOATHED BY MOST GAME RESERVE MANAGERS IS WHEN THE MOON SHINES LIKE THE SUN AT MIDDAY, MAKING IT IDEAL NIGHT-TIME CONDITIONS FOR RHINO POACHERS TO PRACTISE THEIR TRADE. WE CALL IT THE POACHERS' MOON – BUT WITH YOUR HELP, WE'RE FIGHTING BACK.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger, Manzibomvu, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

As Section Rangers and Field Rangers in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, we are constantly faced with the threat of poaching, but these attempts often intensify drastically during the full moon. There is often a misconception that full moon is a single day in a month. Whilst this is scientifically correct, for law enforcement staff in the Park as well as the South African Police Service (SAPS), there are at least two weeks of every month when poaching syndicates use every bit of increased moonlight – waxing or waning – to ply their trade. During this time, staff need to be alert throughout the entire night as well as the day.

I'm a Section Ranger, one of five in the Park. Our duty is to ensure that we have a plan of action for our respective Sections to be able to detect and engage poachers under the light of the moon. Plans have to be changed constantly and adapt to new threats. Part of this task is to ensure that our limited number of Field Ranger staff are deployed in the most strategic and tactically sound manner possible to ensure the best chances of effecting an arrest. Special camping and tactical equipment help staff to be in the right place at the right time, but due to the nature of working in the dark, even under a bright moon, this doesn't always guarantee success. In a place where poachers can be in and out of the Park within 15 minutes, clever planning and deployment of staff is crucial.

During the moon phase we have to be flexible. Often a Section Ranger will be out with staff, sitting at an observation or listening post, or deployed in strategic hotspot areas, often from dusk till dawn. On other occasions Section Rangers will be on a standby status during the night, having worked the entire day. Should a reaction occur, they immediately call the relevant SAPS reaction units, co-ordinate a response with other Field Ranger teams, and where

possible try to make arrests.

Regardless of what the Section Ranger does, they won't sleep well during the full moon. They could be out in the field or on standby waiting for a radio call that may come in at 03:30 reporting gunshots. It is not uncommon to find a Section Ranger fully kitted out and grabbing forty winks on a couch through the night, ready to run when required.

During the day, a Section Ranger is required to be up and at it again: attending to staff needs, work plans, meetings and day-to-day management activities. When Section Rangers try catch some sleep, there is almost a sense of guilt, which intensifies when we're off station, taking time off or leave, as generally one wants to always be there, somehow stopping something from happening in one's absence. This has a huge impact on family life. When I get away, I really have to force myself to forget about work for a week or two, to remain fit to carry on.

Our Field Rangers, who are supervised by Section Rangers, are tasked with working at night under all conditions and are under immense pressure and stress. Without their efforts, rhino poaching would be far worse. Their dedication and hard work is so important and should never be underestimated – or taken for granted.

With the support received from Save the Rhino International and its donors like USFWS, Colchester Zoo and Black Rhino Wheels, we at management level can effectively equip staff with the correct tactical gear, make sure they have comfortable accommodation to come home to, have good warm clothing for the long evenings and other such requirements. With high staff morale, we stand a much better chance of succeeding. So thank you to all those who contribute and support our staff on the ground.

IMAGE: DIRK SWART