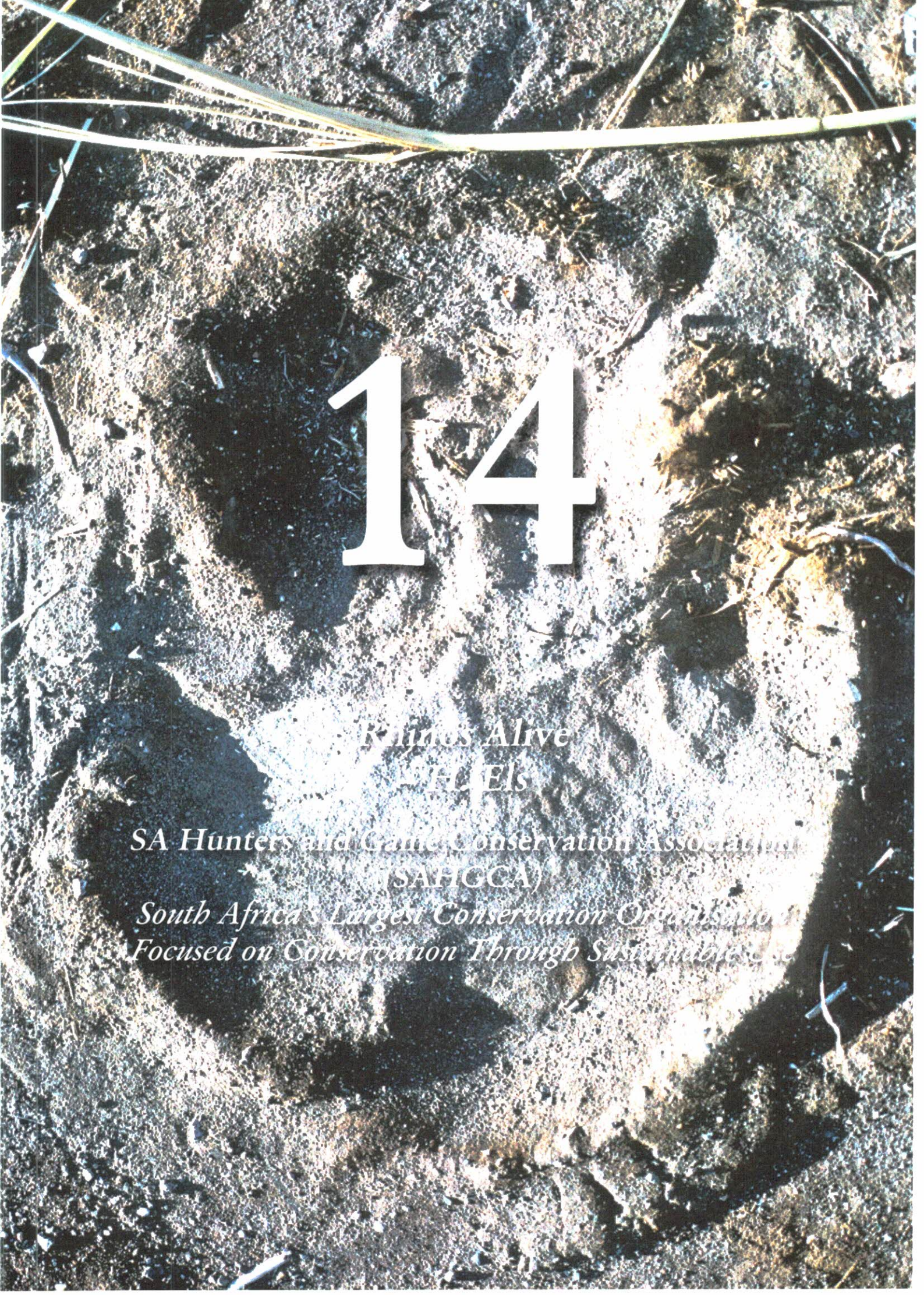
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Rhinos Alive
Forever
SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association
(SAHGCA)
South Africa's Largest Conservation Organisation
Focused on Conservation Through Sustainable

CHAPTER 14

Rhinos Alive - H. Els

SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association (SAHGCA)

South Africa's Largest Conservation Organisation Focused on Conservation Through Sustainable Use

Our Approach to Rhinoceros Conservation

"My 8-year-old son recently asked me to please negotiate with the poachers to take the horn of the animal, but leave the rhino to live. If a child can see this solution, why is it so difficult for highly intellectual scientists to see the same solution?" – Dr. J.G. du Toit, 2011.

The Oriental value judgement attached to the medicinal value of natural products has been developed over more than 5000 years and is an integral part of millions of people's everyday life. In Seoul alone, there are 11 colleges, 20 hospitals, 4700 clinics, 7000 medical practitioners, and 2352 chemists solely focussed on the practice of Oriental medicine (medicinal products include tiger bone, lion bone, rhinoceros horn, etc.). It is SAHGCA's contention, therefore, that it will be easier to effect change among Western nature lovers and scientists to keep rhinoceroses alive through efforts of sustainable use, rather than to try and change a 5000-year-old cultural trait among millions of people in Asia. Against this background SAHGCA is focussed on vigorous lobbying to try and convince policy makers and scientists to realistically manage our existing rhinoceros population through methods of sustainable use. As responsible conservationists, we can in this manner make a real contribution to the future of our rhinoceros population – by fighting to keep them alive!

Rhinoceros Conservation: Some Facts

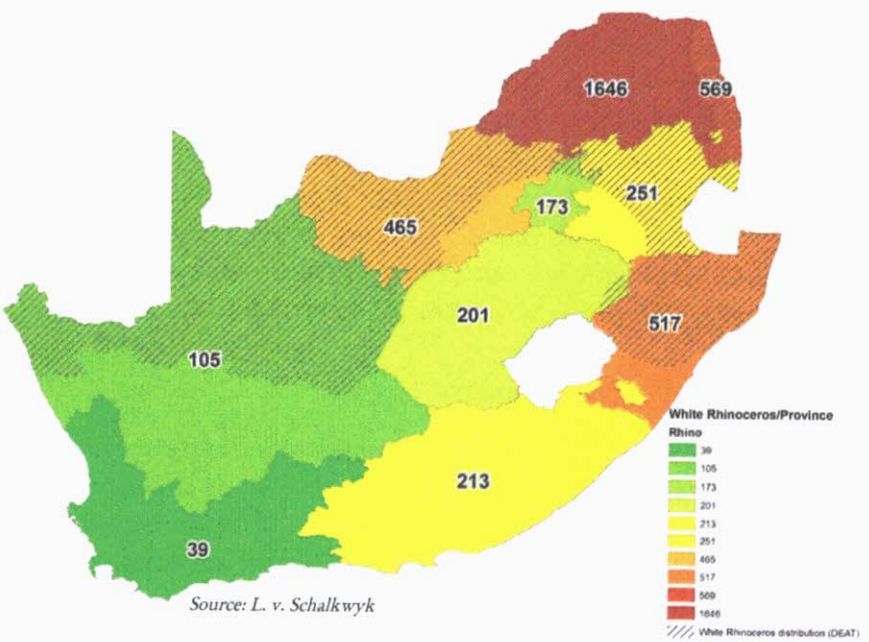
Between 1810 and 1900 rhinoceros were nearly hunted to extinction. The last 100 animals remained in Zululand where, between 1901 and 1960, they were protected in the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe Game Reserves. Rhinoceroses were taken off the threatened list in 1960, and between 1961 and 1970 animals were placed in custody of overseas game parks and zoos, and also exported to African countries to try and increase their numbers. However, bigger success was achieved with the growth of the population when animals were placed into private ownership on game ranches in South Africa between 1971 and 1985.

Rhinoceroses have been presented on auction since 1986 and a steady increase in numbers has been experienced since, once again proving the worth of conservation through sustainable use. At the end of 2005, game ranchers in South Africa were the second largest group of owners of the total of the 15 000 white rhinoceroses in the world. Of these animals, 69.7%

(10 455) were owned by the South African government, 22.1% (3315) by South African game ranchers, 6.8% (1020) by other African countries, and 1.4% (210) by zoos all over the world.

The 2008 distribution of white rhinoceroses on private land in this country can be seen in **Figure 14.1**. Statistics show that of the sustainable population growth of between 5% and 6% per annum after 1970, between 1% and 2% of the South African white rhinoceros population were annually presented for sale at auction. The first six rhinoceroses were placed on auction in 1986 and sold for a total of R61 002. The largest number of rhinoceroses sold at an auction, were 255 animals, sold for R34.8 million in 2001. The important role of rhinoceroses on auctions is confirmed by the fact that between 1986 and 2009, only 0.94% of all animals sold at game auctions were rhinoceroses, while their sales represented 28% of the total turnover at all auctions.

The rhinoceros market is largely driven by the sale of surplus animals at auction where the price is determined by trophy hunters. This process stimulates new land owners to invest in the game industry. Surplus adult male animals are mostly hunted while surplus sub-adult animals are mostly exported to overseas zoos and game parks. The average price for rhinoceroses remained constant between 1990 and 1996 because of political uncertainty, but showed steady increase between 1997 and 2002. Between 2003 and 2005 the price dropped because of the saturation of the trophy-hunting market. From 2006, however, prices again climbed steadily because of a considerable number of Vietnamese hunters entering the market for so-called medicinal hunts.



Source: L. v. Schalkwyk

Figure 14.1: Density and distribution of rhinoceros on private land (2008)

Hunting and rhinoceros conservation

Hunting is undoubtedly the small cog that drives the bigger cog of rhinoceros conservation in this country. Hunting is, however, also used as a smoke screen to bypass the prohibition

on the trade in rhinoceros horn. Up to 2004 rhinoceroses were mainly hunted for trophy purposes, but since 2005 this has been surpassed by hunting for medicinal purposes (undertaken by people from Asia). Between 1971 and 2004, 1148 white rhinoceros were legally hunted in this country, at an average of 36 animals per annum (0.5–1% of total population per annum). Between 2005 and 2008, however, 85 animals were hunted legally per annum (a 236% annual increase). In this period 338 animals were hunted for an amount of R120 million. Of these animals, 269 were hunted by people from Asia (mainly Vietnamese). The flashing of the danger lights was not picked up by the relevant authorities at the time.

The figures above suggest that 196 animals could have been hunted for medicinal purposes alone in the 4-year period (85 – 36 = 49 x 4 = 196). It can thus be argued that these animals were unnecessarily killed for their horns alone, as these could have been harvested and the animals kept alive. If it is accepted that the majority of the 269 animals hunted by people from Asia were for medicinal purposes, the figure of 196 could be even higher.

The poaching of rhinoceroses incidentally also increased in the period after 2005. Between 1980 and 2004, 148 rhinoceroses were poached, an average of 6 animals per annum. Between 2005 and 2010, however, 566 animal were poached, an average of 94 animals per annum, representing a financial loss of R150 million. Of the 566 animals poached in this period, 330 were poached in 2010 alone (146 in Kruger National Park, 57 in North-West, 52 in Limpopo and 38 in KwaZulu-Natal). Despite the adaptation of seeming better regulations after 2005, better policing did not follow as the Threatened Species Unit of the SAPS was disbanded. Specialised knowledge and coordination in provincial governments where application of conservation laws take place also became fragmented because of a lack of applicable capacity.

Poached rhinoceros skulls in Swaziland

Communication between relevant government officials is further hampered because of the constant complexity of having to co-ordinate a 1-to-9 situation (national government plus the 9 provincial governments). To co-ordinate agriculture, conservation and the SAPS, 27 entities have to be consulted at the same time – a situation of near impossibility with a resulting drop in capacity and application. Because rhinoceros poaching had a low incidence for so long (1980 to 2004) there are only anti-poaching units in national parks and on provincial level with no private security companies, for instance, specialising in poaching of high-value game animals (i.e. rhinoceros).

Between 2002 and 2004, 37 poachers were arrested and 84% (37) of the poached horn were recovered. Between 2005 and 2008, 48 poachers were apprehended, but only 51% of 276 rhinoceros horns were recovered. In short, South Africa was not ready for the onslaught on its rhinoceros population since it started to announce itself after 2005.

SAHGCA Action

It is SAHGCA's contention that the only realistic manner to truly and effectively implement conservation of our rhinoceroses, is to responsibly trade the animals and their product. SAHGCA's focus is, therefore, on assisting the Wildlife Industry Trust in its bid to assist the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at Onderstepoort to log the DNA profiles of all rhinoceroses in this country, be that of the animals owned by government or by the private sector. In addition, the support is also towards other relevant databases maintained by the Trust which enhance the capacity to manage our rhinoceros population in a responsible and accountable manner.

Before we can trade in the products of these animals, we must ascertain that we can show that we can manage them and their products accountably. Managing the animals has been proven over time. It is the management of their products which present us with the biggest challenge. We must be able to positively identify each animal and its horn with the animal's DNA profile. By implementing the DNA database to function as envisaged, databases will have to be populated and maintained. The advantage is that game ranchers will then also have a database for sourcing the best genetic breeding partners for cows in smaller herds on ranches (to prevent inbreeding).

In addition, the logging of DNA profiles will largely assist in effecting successful prosecution of rhinoceros poachers as the product they have poached will be immediately traceable to the specific animal. A high-profile poacher has already been convicted through DNA evidence brought before court. It is clear that rhinoceroses can be of higher value when they are alive and thriving, as opposed to when they are dead. Only responsible utilisation of rhinoceros products presents any real conservation benefit and incentive. That is why the association will fight to keep our – ***Rhinos Alive!***