



33

Rhino Trophy Hunting in South Africa

By 2011, 75% of the wild rhinos in the world were living in South Africa, and their numbers were being decimated by the catastrophic poaching epidemic. White rhino trophy hunting resumed in South Africa in 1968, when there were only 1800 animals,¹ and by the beginning of 2011, their numbers had increased to 18,800. Indeed, hunting rhinos was a key component of the South African game industry.² But was there a link between this and the poaching epidemic?

We will start by re-examining some of the extraordinary goings-on that we glimpsed earlier.

South Africa comes top when a trophy hunter is choosing which African country to visit, one of the main reasons being that it provides an opportunity to hunt the prized ‘big five’, namely: buffalo, leopard, lion and our two animals, elephants and rhinos. The hunters come mainly from the USA and Europe, as well as 60 other countries. And with the hunt comes money. In 2000, the total value of the game industry was an estimated ZAR140 million (about USD20.2m).³ This had risen to approximately ZAR730 million (about USD91.2m) by 2007⁴ and to about ZAR1 billion (about USD124.8m) a year later, a peak.⁵ By any standard these are enormous amounts.

¹ Adcock and Emslie 1994 in Milliken T. and Shaw J. (2012) *The South Africa – Viet Nam Rhino Trade Nexus: A deadly combination of institutional lapses, corrupt wildlife industry professionals and Asian crime syndicates* TRAFFIC, Johannesburg, South Africa.

² Ibid.

³ Barnett and Patterson 1995 in *ibid.*

⁴ PHASA 2009 in *ibid.*

⁵ DEA 2010 in *ibid.*

Although the data was incomplete, rhino trophy hunts showed major jumps in price in 1989, 2001, 2008 and 2010, effectively doubling after 2007. Furthermore, the numbers of rhinos hunted increased after 2004 with the figures showing demand exceeding supply. Milliken and Shaw observed that *'from 2005 onwards, the sport hunting of rhinos has boomed in South Africa as never before, rapidly driving the number of hunts and their prices to unprecedented heights in an effort to service the appetite of a new, non-traditional trophy market: Viet Nam'*. And this is where it begins to get very interesting.

Viet Nam, unlike North America and Europe, had no sporting tradition of hunting, so it was a surprise when Asians, particularly Vietnamese, suddenly became the dominant force in trophy hunting for white rhinos. And the direct result of this was that hunt prices steadily rose from 2004 onwards, with over USD22m estimated to have been paid by Vietnamese hunters to trophy hunt rhinos between 2003 and 2010. It also became clear that these hunters were radically different. They were not doing it to show off their hunting skills and bring back a trophy. They were acquiring rhino horns for commercial trading.

The authorities gradually realized that there was something strange about these particular hunts. For a start, they were not booked by the normal methods but by word of mouth, a device described as having progressively expanded *into an insidious web of relationships binding key representatives of organized Asian syndicates, with a cadre of a few corrupt professional hunters and selected property owners*.⁶ The key personnel in any hunt are the foreign client, the property owner and the professional hunter.

So what made these 'pseudo' rather than 'true' hunts?

There are repeated accounts of these 'trophy hunters' being taught to shoot during an actual hunt, because they were unable to handle a gun. Sometimes the professional hunters had to step in and kill the rhinos themselves. One of them, operating from the Loskop Dam Nature Game Reserve, was successfully prosecuted in 2006 *'for leading hunts feeding the horn trade'*, and *'he paid a token fine after his Vietnamese hunter casually told an official that he did not know how to shoot'*. When, two years later, he was prosecuted again, he was represented by a lawyer who succeeded in convincing the judge that the case should be dismissed. It was apparently *'a technicality that the client had not actually fired the fatal bullet, a privilege that may have gone to [his] teenage son'*. According to him, the Game Department was present on most of the hunts,

⁶Ibid, p.53.

but although he defended the practice, *‘he stopped guiding the Vietnamese after the Game Dept. informed him they were involved in the horn trade.’*⁷

Another professional hunter, C. F. van Wyk, who also happened to be a taxidermist, was successfully prosecuted and fined ZAR30.000 (about USD4250) for illegally shooting a white rhino. The hunting trip, for a Vietnamese client, was organized by a different professional hunter who also owned a Safari company. Although he himself did not attend the hunt, his wife and father did, together with van Wyk and the client. It took four shots to gun down the poor rhino, four shots from a distance of between 50 and 100 m away. The Vietnamese did not participate. During the subsequent court proceedings, it was revealed that van Wyk did not have a permit to hunt the rhino, nor was he registered as a professional hunter in that area (Limpopo).⁸

Professional hunters have also been accused of other offences involving hunting permits, including:

- Allowing people to shoot rhinos when they were not named on the hunting permit
- Obtaining export permits under false pretences, for clients whose names were not on the hunting permit

Over time it became clear that the Vietnamese hunters, unlike other hunters, did not want their trophies either mounted or prepared in some other way by a taxidermist. What they wanted was the horns to be removed as quickly as possible from the dead rhino and to take them with them when they left the ranch. It also became clear that certain ranch owners *‘were repeatedly hosting Vietnamese hunting parties on multiple occasions.’*⁹

By 2011, some of the hunts had become quite bizarre. Prostitutes and strippers from Thailand, who had been trafficked to South Africa and with whom Chumlong Lemtongthai (from the Bach Brothers gang) had made friends while they were working in the bars in Pretoria to pay off their debts, were hired by an international wildlife trafficking syndicate to pose as *hunters* in sham rhino trophy hunts. It was, apparently, better than bringing in phoney Vietnamese clients, cheaper!¹⁰

⁷ Borrell 2010 in *ibid.*

⁸ Rademeyer 2011b in *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Rademeyer 2011c in *ibid.*

Chumlong was one of the traffickers setting up the pseudo-hunts. Stooges were paid to stand by the professional hunters, while the rhinos were shot. Each stooge then had his/her photo taken with the dead rhino and their name put on the paperwork which allowed the horn to be 'legally' taken back to Asia, to the Bachs and another notorious trafficker Keosavang.

Chumlong started by bringing the stooges over from Thailand and paying them 5000 rand (about USD350). Using prostitutes saved him the air fare. The Guardian (the UK newspaper) has seen paperwork showing that at least six members of the Bach family also travelled to South Africa to take part in the hunts. Chumlong was paid USD 20,000 a time for their horns, and dozens of rhinos were killed.¹¹ There is also evidence suggesting he was trafficking in rhino horn from poachers.

Eventually however, South African revenue officers arrested him and went through the documents on his laptop. Packed full of incriminating evidence, one 6-month period showed a white South African hunter had been paid USD1,394,282.40 for killing rhinos in the pseudo-hunts and that '*Chumlong was paying USD6,500 per kg for the horn*'. As a Chinese end-user would pay ten times as much, Chumlong's rhino horn trafficking was '*potentially worth USD13.9m*' to those involved.¹²

There were also hunters from other Southeast Asian countries. Between 2007 and 2012, Chinese hunters acquired and exported 20 rhino trophies, and at least one hunter came from Cambodia.¹³ And then there was the curious case of the citizens from the Czech Republic. Suddenly there was a dramatic increase in the number of hunts they were taking part in. Could they also be working on behalf of Asian crime syndicates?

Unfortunately, the syndicates were assisted not only by some unscrupulous professional hunters but also by some of the people who owned white rhinos, people concerned mainly with making a quick killing financially rather than abiding by ethical standards and rhino conservation. Furthermore, export permits continued to be issued to some of the Vietnamese nationals who had previously been implicated in unlawful hunts and their aftermath. Suddenly they seemed to have acquired addresses, business and/or residential, in South Africa itself.

So what were the South African authorities doing while all this was happening? We are about to see.

¹¹ see Nick Davies and Oliver Holmes *Revealed: how senior Laos officials cut deals with animal traffickers* The Guardian, 27 September 2016. See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/sep/27/revealedhow-senior-laos-offi> Accessed 27/09/2016. Accessed 27/09/2016.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Milliken and Shaw (n.1).

33.1 South Africa's Response

To begin with it was slow, because the legislation was inadequate. But then, what we might term *'the Vietnamese connection'* had taken everybody by surprise. One reason it was so unexpected was that before 2003 the Vietnamese had no great desire for rhino horn. The growing problem was recognized during the years of 2005–2007, when more and more operators from the private sector became involved in the *pseudo-hunts*. A surge in enforcement action across the provinces, recommendations from TRAFFIC and others that both trophy hunting and professional hunters should be more strictly monitored¹⁴ and growing pressure from CITES finally enabled the South African government to recognize the threat this was posing to their lucrative hunting industry. They took action.

In August 2008, a major loophole was abolished by the TOPS regulations. Before this, *standing* permits had enabled white rhino hunts to take place on certain properties without the local conservation authorities being aware of what was happening. As they did not know whether or not a bona fide hunt, as opposed to a *pseudo-hunt*, had taken place, the provincial authorities could be issuing CITES export permits for animals killed in the phoney hunts. Then, in July 2009, new standards were imposed. These only allowed individual hunters to take part in one white rhino hunt a year and also required national approval be obtained before provincial licences could be issued.¹⁵

And a moratorium was imposed on domestic sales of rhino horn.

- In April 2012, the amended norms and standards for sport hunting of white rhinos came into effect, bringing about the final demise of *pseudo-hunting*. No more shape-shifting of hunting trophies into plain rhino horns. It was the result of a challenge to the courts, brought by a private hunting operator who was testing the new legislation to see how restrictive it really was. So what happened when the challenge arrived?
- Provincial authorities were advised by the DEA not to issue hunting permits to Vietnamese citizens because of concerns regarding illegal hunting practices. Mr. Slipper, who brought the challenge, had applied for hunting permits for five Vietnamese citizens. These were authorized at provincial level, a decision that was overturned. The court ordered that the permits could only be issued provided certain conditions were satisfied. The intending

¹⁴Milledge 2007a,b in *ibid*.

¹⁵Milliken et al. 2009b in *ibid*.

hunters had to submit themselves for interviews with relevant government officials in order to verify:

- Their personal details
- Their backgrounds
- Their financial capabilities
- Other related information.

This was required by the amended norms and standards.

Although all the arrangements were made for the hunters to attend the court hearings, they did not appear because they were not yet in the country. The government then discovered that there were legitimate grounds for refusing the permits so the court ordered that the permits should not be issued. Mr. Slipper had to pay the costs of the action.¹⁶

The objective was admirable. The measures were designed to reduce white rhino sport hunts to the numbers that had taken place before ‘*pseudo-hunting*’ took over. Law enforcement officers were mandated to be present at every hunt to make sure the new legislation was strictly adhered to. All should have ended well, but unfortunately this did not happen. The problem was poaching or rather the spike in poaching. So were the new measures contributing to the increasing levels of poaching now taking place on both state and private land?

33.2 The Unintended Consequence

33.2.1 Disaster!

Earlier in our story, we learnt that some officials in China were stockpiling rhino horn, because, as a commodity, it was so very valuable and that had led to a catastrophic rise in rhino poaching. During that episode, Zimbabwe was the worst affected of the southern African states. Matters improved again after 1994. The major consumer countries, which at that time were China, Taiwan and South Korea, took drastic action to restrict rhino horn use by their traditional medicine industries, and Zimbabwe not only moved its rhinos into Intensive Protection Zones but also dehorned them.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Milliken et al. 1993 in *ibid.*

Then came the current crisis. Suddenly, a vibrant new market had surfaced. The consumers were back in big numbers. And they had quantities of money. It was a very threatening situation for the rhinos.

A trickle of poaching started in the early 2000s. TRAFFIC noticed and published a warning for CITES Parties at CoP14. The trickle developed into a torrent and then a tsunami. By 2008, both Zimbabwe and South Africa were experiencing major losses to poachers. To fully comprehend the depth of the disaster, we need look at some numbers. These figures, published by the South African DEA in 2015, show the number of rhinos poached each year from 2006 to 2015:¹⁸

- 2006: 36 (at that time a record, the highest number for decades)¹⁹
- 2007: 13
- 2008: 83
- 2009: 122
- 2010: 333
- 2011: 448
- 2012: 668
- 2013: 1004
- 2014: 1215 (one rhino killed every 8 h)
- 2015: 749 (as at 27 August 2015)

The TRAFFIC/IUCN report (tabled in late 2009) to CoP15 was blunt, pointing out that *'since 2006, 95% of all detected or presumed rhino deaths in Africa from illegal killing, have occurred in Zimbabwe and South Africa'*, countries that are *'the epicentre of an unrelenting poaching crisis in Southern Africa'*. And unfortunately, the killing was having an adverse impact not just on Kruger National Park (its border with Mozambique) but on other protected areas (in KwaZulu-Natal) and, for the first time, on a range of private sector game ranches spread across the provinces (Limpopo, Gauteng, North West and Eastern Cape).²⁰

The numbers showed only too clearly, just how dramatically the situation was deteriorating.

¹⁸ Save the Rhino International *Poaching: The Statistics 2016* See https://www.savetherhino.org/rhino_info/poaching_statistics Accessed 21/01/2016.

¹⁹ See Milliken and Shaw (n.1).

²⁰ M. Knight in litt 2009 in Milliken et al. 2009b, *ibid*.