

# World's largest private rhino herd doesn't have a buyer — or much of a future

by **Jim Tan** on 11 August 2023

- *Controversial rhino breeder John Hume recently put his 1,999 southern white rhinos up for auction as he can no longer afford the \$9,800 a day running costs but no buyers have come forward so far.*
- *Hume's intensive and high-density approach is undoubtedly effective at breeding rhinos, but with the main issue currently a shortage of safe space for rhino rather than a shortage of rhino, the project's high running costs and concerns over rewilding captive-bred rhino make its future uncertain.*
- *Platinum Rhino's financial issues reflect a broader debate around how to move forward with rhino conservation and the role that private owners have to play when the financial costs of rhino ownership far outweigh the returns.*

On May 1 this year, an online auction for a controversial captive-breeding project that comes with one in eight of all southern white rhinos in the world ended in a whimper — with a grand total of zero bids. According to a press release on the website of the Platinum Rhino project, it received offline offers that are being considered, but no new owner has yet been announced. Mongabay is aware of at least one interested party that is interested predominantly in the potential profits should the rhino horn trade be legalized.

The auction was the culmination of escalating financial woes for Platinum Rhino founder John Hume after he announced five years ago that he was running out of cash to fund the operation. In the intervening years, Hume was unsuccessful in his search for an investor to help share the burden of the project's daily running costs of \$9,800.

"I'm so disappointed that more billionaires have not come up to the table," he told Mongabay in an interview prior to the auction.

Intact ecosystems, where rhino populations can exist as naturally as possible, are generally considered the main goal by conservationists. As such, large parks and protected areas have long been the cornerstone of rhino conservation. This

approach enjoyed success for many years, but a poaching epidemic that began around 2008, combined with limited budgets for many large protected areas, has dramatically changed the rhino conservation landscape. South Africa's Kruger National Park has lost 75% of its southern white rhinos since 2011 — more than 8,000 rhinos. Smaller protected areas and private operations that are easier to protect are now having the greatest success in weathering the poaching storm.



If number of rhinos protected is the only metric of interest, then Hume is undeniably one of the most successful, with approximately 13% of all the southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) left in the world in his private herd. That amounts to 1,999 rhinos, a number Hume achieved by adopting the approaches of South Africa's \$1.5-billion-a-year game-breeding industry in which studbooks, productivity and calf yields are the lingua franca.

While you won't find it in any of the tourism brochures, the game-breeding industry has always been inextricably linked with conservation in South Africa. A key component of the model is a market in which to sell the end product — for South Africa's game-ranching industry, [more than half of its income comes from trophy hunting](#).

In Hume's case, the market he bet on was the [legalization of the rhino horn trade](#) — a debate that has been rehashed ad nauseum by conservationists and economists and is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. If the international trade were to be legalized, Hume stands to make a significant sum of money from his stockpile of horn gathered during regular dehorning operations on his property — a stockpile not included in the sale.

But in the absence of a legal trade, Hume's approach is financially unsustainable. The lack of bidders to take on one of the most important rhino populations in world highlights an important question that rhino range states now face: with many wild populations being decimated and the sums not adding up for private owners, where does rhino conservation go from here?



recorded on one of Otto's 23 spreadsheets. Breeding rhinos intensively has offered many insights into rhino biology that would have taken many years to discover in a wild setting. Image by Jim Tan for Mongabay.

Who can own a rhino?

The game-farming industry in South Africa is built on the principle that private landowners can own wildlife, including rhinos. This principle was enshrined into South African law in the Game Theft Act of 1991, a year before Hume began breeding rhinos.

The southern white rhino came perilously close to extinction in the late 1800s, after populations were decimated by colonial hunters. The subspecies was saved by the creation of Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park in KwaZulu-Natal province and the work of Ezemvelo, the government body responsible for managing KwaZulu-Natal's conservation areas.

By the 1960s, the Natal Parks Board, as it was then known, had enough rhinos to start donating and selling them to other conservation areas, including to Kruger in 1963. By 1986, it began selling to private operations too.

“What was really pivotal in South Africa is that coupled with the ability of private landowners to own rhino, what also happened is that the government allowed them to do very limited trophy hunting,” said Hayley Clements, a researcher at Stellenbosch University. “Because the price that people were willing to pay to hunt a rhino was really high, there was a lot of incentive for landowners to grow the population of rhino.”

The high values paid by trophy hunters kept live prices high, meaning that even for properties that didn't offer trophy hunting, rhinos could make them money. And so the number of rhinos in private hands began to grow.

“The saving of rhinos was not because private owners could have ownership,” said Sam Ferreira, scientific officer for the African Rhino Specialist Group at the IUCN, the global wildlife conservation authority. “It was good biological management that created the opportunity for private owners to have ownership. The success of rhino conservation opened other opportunities to utilize other values for rhinos.”



The security team includes a helicopter and rapid-response K-9 unit on site 24/7. "It's a show of force, it's a dominance, it's to show anyone coming into our area to stay away," says Brandon Jones, head of security at Platinum Rhino. Image by Jim Tan for Mongabay.

### Rhino economics

In the last 15 years, the economics of rhino ownership have dramatically changed due to the surge in poaching, which economists attribute to growing income levels in key rhino horn consumer countries in Asia.

Studies have found that demand for rhino horn is both price inelastic, meaning that consumers don't substantially reduce their purchases even as the price goes up, and income elastic, suggesting that as consumers' incomes rise, so does their demand for rhino horn, said Adrian Lopes, a professor of economics at the American University of Sharjah.

"As long as there is demand for rhino horn as an ingredient in traditional Eastern medicine, an incentive to supply that market would continue to exist," he said.

Rising demand has fueled the poaching epidemic that has seen rhino numbers plummet on state lands.

“Of course, we all want rhinos in places like Kruger, but the reality is it’s not working, and the reality is these private operations are contributing a lot in terms of numbers of rhinos across the continent now,” Clements said. She estimates that more than [50% of Africa’s rhinos are now in private hands](#).

At the same time, the rapidly escalating costs of tackling poaching have meant that fewer and fewer private landowners can afford to keep rhinos, depressing the live sales market. Essentially, as the costs for private owners go up, their potential revenue is going down. Hume previously paid up to \$32,000 for a rhino, but he said the same animal might be worth a tenth of that price today.

Private owners in South Africa exist along a continuum, from large private reserves aiming to get as close as possible to an intact natural ecosystem, to the intensive models of captive breeding operations (CBO) like Platinum Rhino, focused predominantly on breeding and numbers. Around 28% of private owners are now divesting from rhinos, the majority are doing their best to survive as is, and around 15% are doubling down and buying up the rhinos from those who are getting out of the business, as Hume has previously done, Clements said.

“We’re talking money, and of course, many of the landowners in South Africa that have game reserves with rhinos are not primarily driven by money,” she said. “Many of them are highly motivated by conservation but at the end of the day it has to be viable — the money matters even if it’s not the primary objective.”





Hume's high-tech security system — including a 360° radar system that rotates every 2 seconds, bank of thermal-imaging cameras, and full-time anti-poaching team — make up a large part of the unsustainable project costs. Image by Jim Tan for Mongabay.

### The Platinum Rhino model

In line with the broader South African game-ranching sector, in which sustainable use is one of the core goals, economic efficiency was one of the key rationales behind the design of Hume's project.

“Our security is our biggest cost,” he said. “Your security costs you by the hectare, not by the rhino.”

This high cost of securing space was one the main reasons Hume chose to adopt an intensive, high-density approach and keep the project's footprint as small as possible, thus requiring him to register as a CBO. Hume also chose to locate the project in the flat former agricultural land of South Africa's North West province to make it easier to secure.



Research shows that smaller reserves have generally fared better against rhino poaching than larger conservation areas across both the private and public sectors; it's just easier to secure a smaller area. South Africa National Parks implemented an "intensive protection zone" (IPZ) within Kruger National Park in 2016, a measure that the then minister of environment, Edna Molewa, said [reduced poaching by 20%](#).

Aside from security, Hume's operation is also geared toward productivity, which in the rhino-breeding context means maximizing the number of calves born and raised.

The 8,500-hectare (21,000-acre) property is divided into three sections and 14 camps, with meticulous records kept of all matings, births and deaths. Twice daily, the camp master in each section takes a roll call of every animal in their care and reports any activity to Hume's full-time veterinarian, Michelle Otto.



During the winter months, the rhinos are given supplementary feed to ensure maximum breeding productivity. The sex ratio of males to females, normally roughly 1:1 in the wild, is adapted to maximize productivity and minimize fighting between bulls in a confined area. And any sick or abandoned calves are taken to the on-site orphanage before being brought back into the breeding herds as subadults.

Platinum Rhino's intensive management and high-security approach come at a significant cost. Hume estimated that he's spent \$150 million on rhino breeding over the last 30 years.

The mixed response to Hume's approach and his outspoken stance on legalizing the rhino horn trade reflects the varied and often inconsistent social norms around which animals can be bred and managed, and which ones should remain wild; in 2021, South Africa announced it would ban the lucrative yet controversial [captive lion-breeding industry](#). Yet breeding game such as Cape buffalo for the trophy-hunting industry remains a commonly accepted practice.

In the absence of revenue from rhino horn sales or the recovery of live sale prices, Hume's model is unsustainable. But with ecosystem-focused approaches often dependent on donor funding to maintain the high costs of antipoaching measures, combined with a high risk of "donor fatigue," conservationists are left grappling with the difficult problem of how best to conserve rhinos.



### The future of rhino conservation

“We’ve got the largest viable and vital breeding population left in the world for the southern white rhino,” Otto. “We might have the same number of rhinos that are left in the Kruger, but they don’t have the breeding potential we have.”

If the number of rhinos is the main measurement of success, then it would be hard to argue with Hume’s model. While wild and free ecosystems are the preferred end goal for most conservationists, where a species faces imminent extinction, a case is often made for a species-specific program outside of its natural ecosystem — such as zoos. The question conservationists are grappling with is whether Hume’s intensive species-focused approach is a step too far — a question that Ferreira said is one that must be tackled at a national level.

In 2020, a [government panel](#) proposed phasing out CBOs like Platinum Rhino, citing concerns over the ability of captive-born rhinos to adapt to life in the wild.

Within the rhino conservation sphere, there's tacit acknowledgement of the significance of Hume's breeding achievements. But the absence of partners stepping forward reflects the fact that [no one is quite sure what to do with the project now.](#)

The project is potentially an invaluable source population for rewilding initiatives, although the current challenge is finding safe spaces for rhinos, not having enough rhino, Ferreira said.

"Ideally, everyone likes the idea of these really extensive systems where animals can be wild, but where are those systems and who is paying for those systems?" Clements said. "I think we need to become more comfortable with conservation being a continuum in many different forms."

Ferreira pointed to alternative solutions like community-led models with rhino guardians.

"The only way we are currently thinking about safe space for rhino is when we have very intensive anti-poaching to create a safe space," he said. "One of the options with these CBO rhinos is, can I use this opportunity to learn about other ways to create a safe space?"

Innovative approaches such as these take time and resources to develop. But as time and money run low, Hume's rhinos face an uncertain future.