

# Project Blood Orange



In my 22 years at Save the Rhino, one of the things I have been most excited about, because of the potential to achieve a major strike against rhino poaching, is Project Blood Orange. This is a follow-the-money investigation into a rhino poaching and trafficking syndicate operating primarily in South Africa.

Cathy Dean | Grants Manager, Save the Rhino International

On 17 March 2020, Lt-Col Leroy Bruwer was assassinated as he drove to work in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Colonel Bruwer was a senior, highly experienced officer in the South African Police Service's Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations (SAPS DPCI), who had gained valuable insights into the major rhino poaching syndicate that was the focus of this Project, codenamed Project Blood Orange.

Although there were suspicions about who was involved, tangible evidence was needed. Understanding the connections between people and organisations, by following

their financial footprints, became a necessity. KPMG's technical expertise was therefore requested by the SAPS DPCI, with the approval of the South African Government's Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

As a commercial entity and according to its own governance rules, KPMG could not apply for or receive grants, it can only invoice for work done. It was therefore looking for an NGO partner that could provide funds and/or fundraise for the project. Save the Rhino agreed to give two grants – of £20,000 and US \$60,000 – and to work on a proposal

to the UK Government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund.

At the time of writing, we are only able to share information about the syndicate that is already in the public domain; the court cases of the accused are not due until early 2024. However, to date, 17 suspects have been arrested and charged with money laundering, corruption and conspiracy. Two of them were rangers working for SANParks in Kruger National Park; they have since been dismissed from their posts.



As Kruger's Head Ranger, Cathy Dreyer reports:

*"In 2022, Kruger National Park saw a 46% decline in rhino poaching incidents, with the specific Section in which the arrests took place experiencing almost no losses since the arrests in April 2022. Since the investigations, it appears that for the first time those involved in rhino poaching and facilitating rhino poaching in the Park fear the consequences of their involvement and their possible arrests. The fact that many family members were also arrested sent out an even stronger message and was a strong deterrent."*

By investigating the financial flows associated with individuals within this syndicate, identifying people and entities involved in these transactions, providing evidence of illicit activity to prosecutors, the intention was that Project Blood Orange would contribute to the dismantling of the syndicate and disable the links between poaching rhinos and exporting of their horns.

Thus, this would impact the fight against rhino poaching and add to efforts that aim to address this pressing threat on white and black rhino populations. We have every hope that the court cases in early 2024 will demonstrate the success of Project Blood Orange.

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A follow-the-money investigation is like a jigsaw puzzle, except that it is much harder. You don't start with all the pieces. There's no box with a picture of the finished puzzle on the lid. There are no hard edges or corner pieces, so you can't start at the outside and work into the middle. And there are many extra pieces that may not ever fit into the puzzle.

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