



South Africa: Rhino

TRACKING RHINO



TEXT AND PHOTOS: CHRIS EBERHART

Rhino seem to be all over the North American and European media these days. There is grave concern about their future, they are facing extinction – at least that is the message. Unfortunately, the conversation is dominated by NGOs that are completely against any form of consumptive use, and that are generally anti-hunting. With this in mind, I traveled to South Africa to get a firsthand look at what is really happening there regarding the future of rhino.

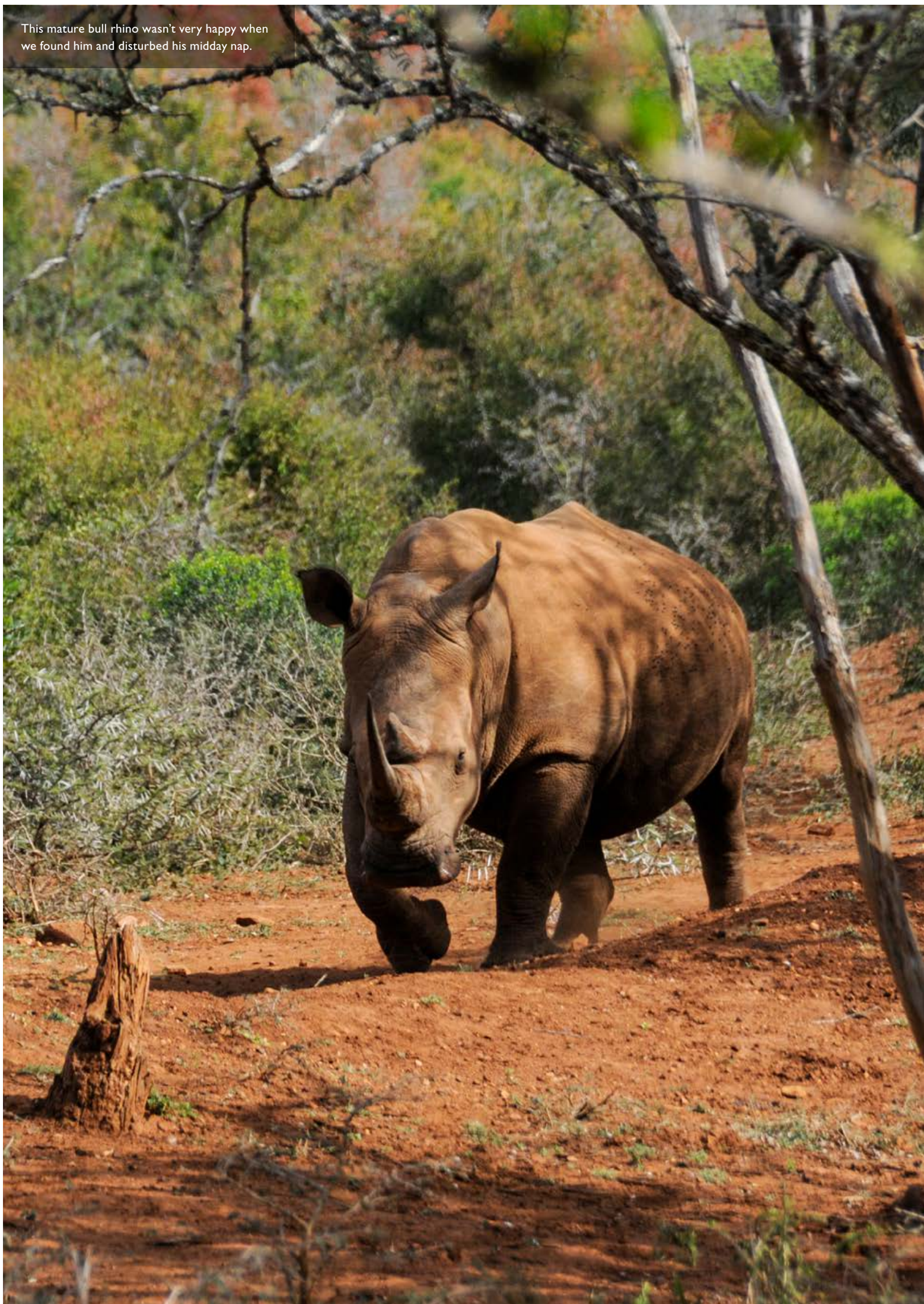
White Rhino

It's winter in South Africa and there is a chill in the morning air. As the old Toyota Land Cruiser slowly rolls away from the lodge, I tuck deeper into my wool sweater, closing any gaps. Streaks of yellow and orange, visible between the low mountains to the east, are the remnants of a spectacular sunrise that cast an orange hue across the valley. It will, however, be a while until the sun rises above the mountains that ring this hidden valley, and warms things up. Sitting next to me is Mike, my host and the owner of this preserve. He tells me that everything I can see is part of the property, and he goes on to explain that it encompasses about thirteen thousand hectares. The preserve is home to a good population of white rhino, Mark's rhino, and many other species. Sitting behind us in the elevated seats above the cab is Daniel, a tracker, who spends his days locating rhino.

I have never seen a rhino in the wild, and I am rife with expectation as we slowly cruise along the bumpy dirt track. In a matter of minutes we see the first animals. A group of impala stare at us as we drive by. They are close, and I lift my camera to try to capture a decent ram about twenty meters away, but as

soon as the Land Cruiser stops the group expediently bounds off, stopping out of good camera range to watch us. In the distance behind them, a couple of warthog hastily cut across the scene. We drive on, and a bit down the road we come across two nyala bulls. They are about thirty meters up a hill behind some acacia trees, mostly hidden in tall grass and bushes. Their long black manes, contrasting white facial markings, and spiral horns are strikingly beautiful. A few females and young surround them. Bright red coats and white stripes make the females almost seem like a different species, a definite example of sexual dimorphism. Around the next curve several giraffe are feeding on the acacia. At first I don't even see them. Looking for animals lower to the ground, I manage to look right through their legs. I chuckle at myself, for literally missing the elephant, uh giraffe, in the room. For about an hour we slowly cruise a maze of roads. Along the way there are various species of game at virtually every turn; gray and red duiker in the low, thick spots, blue wildebeest and zebra in the more open terrain, a waterbuck in some reeds, and even a bushbuck.

This mature bull rhino wasn't very happy when we found him and disturbed his midday nap.



In the center of this photo you can see a rhino track in the sand. The many antelope tracks surrounding it are an indication of the abundance of game in the reserve.



PRIVATE RHINO OWNERS' ASSOCIATION

The only animals we can't seem to find are the ones we are looking for. There is sign from them all along the roads, in the shape of formidable dung piles. Later I would hear, "Thirteen thousand hectares and rhino only shit on the roads." Impressed by an abundance of game like I have never seen before, I ask Mike about predators. "We have a high population of leopard. On the preserve and in the neighboring areas there is at least one leopard for every thousand hectares. A study done by the group Panthera came up with that number. There are more than enough for regulated hunting, but the South African government has a moratorium on hunting them. We also have many spotted and brown hyena." Mark answers, suddenly interrupted by Daniel, who says something in Zulu. Umkombe! There are rhino to our left. Mike looks and points in their direction as the Toyota comes to a stop. They are perhaps two hundred meters away. I lift my binoculars, but only get a short glimpse as they vanish in the bush.

Mike and Daniel have a short conversation in Zulu, and we drive off a little faster than before, and away from the rhino. Daniel knows where they are headed, and we circle to cut them off. A few minutes later Mike parks in a patch of thick trees and says, "Let's go." I grab my camera and jump out of the truck. With Daniel leading the way, we follow a game trail into the trees for about one hundred meters. Daniel stops. The rhino are just coming over the crest of a small hill. We carefully stalk about thirty meters closer. Mike whispers, "There is a cow

There are approximately 330 private game reserves in South Africa, that cover an area of over two million hectares. These reserves are exceptionally important, as they provide pockets of indigenous bushveld and natural ecosystems and habitats for many species of wildlife (various mammals, birds, plants and insects) that thrive alongside rhino. Collectively, these private reserves are home to about 35% of South Africa's rhino (approximately 6,300). It is crucial that the voices and opinions of private rhino owners are heard and considered in the ongoing global rhino-poaching debate.

The Private Rhino Owners' Association (PROA) is a voluntary association with general members, and is a non-profit organization that promotes the conservation, protection and proliferation of all species of rhino on private land in South Africa and in the rest of Africa. Most private rhino owners are members of PROA.

With specific reference to rhino and private owners of rhino, PROA promotes the following principles: biodiversity management, sustainable use, ecotourism, security (legal compliance and law enforcement), self-regulation and administration, ethical hunting, environmental education, scientific research and principles.

Along with ongoing endeavors to eradicate rhino poaching, PROA is also dedicated to promoting the establishment and maintenance of a national database on rhino and rhino-related information. PROA engages with all governmental departments, as well as with many non-governmental organizations, to promote the interests of rhino and private rhino owners.

For further information: www.rhinoalive.com





Top left: The first rhino I had an encounter with in South Africa. The young bull in the front was only about twenty-five meters away.

Bottom Left: One of the dominant bulls on the preserve. A rhino horn can weigh between six and seven kilograms.

Right: We sometimes walked dry riverbeds while searching for rhino.

and a calf, together with two young bulls. Move up behind that tree, you should be able to get a few good photos from there.” I am a bit nervous, because I know nothing about rhino behavior. The wind is in our favor, and the cow and calf lead the way, passing at about forty meters. Both bulls are behind them, but they are a little to the left, closer to us. The larger of the two veers a little and heads straight toward me, closer and closer. At about twenty-five meters my heart begins to race, and I’m not sure if the fifteen-centimeter-diameter tree trunk between us is enough to stop a couple of tons of angry rhino. I try not to think too much about the situation, and trust my guide as I snap a burst of photos. At twenty meters, Mike moves, grabbing a stick, presumably to throw if need be, and he shouts something at the bull, as does Daniel. The bull notices us, stops for a few seconds, turns and rumbles off, taking the others with him. “That was an intense first encounter,” I think to myself as we walk back to the vehicle.

Back at the Toyota Mike reminds me to pull out my tracking sheet. He gave it to me the night before, just after I arrived at camp. It has numbers that coincide with each rhino on the property, and indicates whether the animal is male, female, or a calf. As a means of identification, every rhino has notches cut out of its ears. Each notch location corresponds to a number. I am baffled by the combination of notches and numbers, so Daniel tells me which rhino we saw. I put checks in the appropriate boxes. Mike had already explained that he has a crew of rhino trackers who attempt to locate every rhino on the preserve every day. Keeping tabs on them is important for a couple of reasons. The first is simply to confirm that an animal is still alive and hasn’t been poached. The second is about protection. Being present and near every rhino each day keeps poachers from attempting to kill them, since the chances of getting caught are that much higher. The third is to monitor the health and condition of the rhino. If one is injured,

as sometimes happens, especially among competing males, and during breeding, they discover this almost immediately, and can take veterinary measures if necessary. The trackers ride quads for fast transportation.

We continue our search for rhino throughout the entire day, with only a short lunch break at the lodge. It turns out to be a good day for finding them. We roll up on several small groups, including a couple of cows with relatively young calves. Some of the rhino let us stop and glass, while others, especially the cows with calves, are skittish and head for cover as soon as they notice us. I get some practice trying to identify them. It definitely isn’t easy, and it is obvious that Daniel knows at a glance which rhino is which. He is of course with them every day. I also learn that white rhino are rather docile, but black rhino are a different story altogether, and very dangerous. Only white rhino inhabit this preserve.

Apart from the simple experience of seeing rhino and actually getting close to



Top: The main lodge is the center of activity for hunters and professional hunters alike in the hunting reserve.

Middle: Land Cruisers are the primary mode of transportation while on the reserve.



them by tracking, I also get a great tour of the preserve. It is enormous and the habitat is varied, from open grassland, to savanna, to acacia forests, to lowland around riverbeds, with tall reeds. Each area seems to have its own species. While walking along a riverbed a red duiker dashes up the bank and disappears. Out in the grassland ostrich are quick to make haste as we roll through, definitely keeping their distance. As we approach one of the dams, as waterholes are called, Mike asks if I want to see a crocodile. "Sure," I reply, since I want to see everything. Not one, but two crocodile, are sunning themselves on banks at the water's edge. They are both longer than three meters. The waterholes seem to me to be isolated, and thinking of the perimeter fence I ask, "How do the crocodiles get here?" "They walk in from the nearby rivers, especially when it rains and the rivers in the preserve fill with water." Mike answers.

In an entire day of tracking rhino we manage to spot a little less than half of the population in the preserve. I promised

not to tell how many that is, because of the poaching threat. I also promised not to mention my location in South Africa, nor the name of the preserve. The names in this story have also been changed.

Lodge

The lodge is beautiful and first-rate, everything you could hope for on a hunting adventure to South Africa. Mounts adorn the walls, of species both large and small. There are two dining rooms, a bar, a fireplace with comfortable seating, a covered terrace, with a view of a small waterhole below that attracts animals almost constantly, a grill, and firepit. Dinner is usually some kind of game from the preserve, and is good enough to earn five stars as far as I am concerned. The amenities are incredible, but what interests me the most is the mix of people in the lodge.

These are the hunters who pay for the preserve, and who pay for the protection of the rhino. There is currently no other source of funding to prevent rhino poaching,



PELHAM JONES

Chairman of the
Private Rhino Owners' Association

Pelham Jones, Chairman of the Private Rhino Owners' Association (PROA), has over thirty-five years of conservation experience, and is a private reserve and rhino owner.

When the first rhino were poached on private reserves in late 2008, he realized the need for an organization that would represent the interests of the private rhino owners. Under his guidance PROA was established in September 2009, and today it is recognized as a national body that lobbies for and coordinates assistance for private reserves that are faced with the ever-increasing poaching pressure. PROA is a member of the SADC (Southern African Development Community) Rhino Management Group and the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group.

Since 2009 Jones and PROA have been involved in every facet of rhino protection, and in assisting private owners. Security nodes have been established, donor equipment and specialist Anti-Poaching Units (APU) have been deployed, and dialogue and interaction with government departments have been ongoing. Jones was appointed to serve on the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Minister of Environmental Affairs, to advise on how to address the current poaching crisis and to advise on matters pertaining to a possible application to CITES for legalized trade.

For further information: www.rhinoalive.com

neither public nor private. There has never been any offer from any of the so-called conservation NGOs to help pay to protect rhino. This is all privately funded through hunting.

There is a grandfather, son, and grandson from the Czech Republic. During their hunt they would kill a couple of Cape buffalo, a giraffe, a crocodile, and several antelope species. A grandfather from Finland is in camp with his granddaughter. She would kill her first animal ever, an impala. A couple from Texas is also in camp. They too, have their granddaughter with them. She is a superb shot, and takes, among other species, a bushbuck, an nyala, and a blue wildebeest. The fees for these animals are where the money comes from. The sums are not inconsequential. The preserve employs a staff of more than fifty people. In an area without any industry, that is an important economic factor.

The mood at the lodge is positive and celebratory every night. There is a family-like atmosphere. Hunting is something that brings people together across cultures. Each day someone has had a hunt of a lifetime, perhaps for a species they have been dreaming about for decades. Congratulations are given, and toasts are made. Stories are shared among hunters and guides alike. Laughs are also shared. What could possibly be more natural and primal than sharing tales of hunting around a fire under the brilliant stars of an African night.

Black Rhino

Two days later Mike arranges for me to visit a neighboring preserve. It is about one third larger, and is home to the complete big five. My main





Above: Nyala bulls are one of the spiral-horned species that attract many hunters to Africa. The money spent hunting them helps fund rhino protection measures.

Left: The habitat that supports rhino also supports a host of other species, including Cape buffalo. If you want to help rhino, the best thing you can do is book a hunt where they are present.

interest is black rhino. My guide for the day is Jim, a young PH in his mid-twenties. He has been working for the preserve for a couple of years, and hailing from a different part of South Africa, has learned how to speak reasonable Zulu in that time. This preserve follows a similar program and tries to locate each rhino every day. The GPS coordinates of each sighting are recorded and then plotted via a computer program.

It's still early in the morning as we hop in a Land Cruiser, with a ranger sitting in back, and head into the bush. Unfortunately, it is quite windy, and for a couple of hours we don't see much of anything, except the ubiquitous impala. Immediately, it is apparent that elephant live here. The vegetation is far sparser, and broken branches and knocked-down trees provide clear evidence. Eventually, Jim decides to drive to the highest point and just glass for awhile. We aren't there for five minutes before our ranger/tracker spots two black rhino a couple of kilometers away, along a road we had just driven down. About a

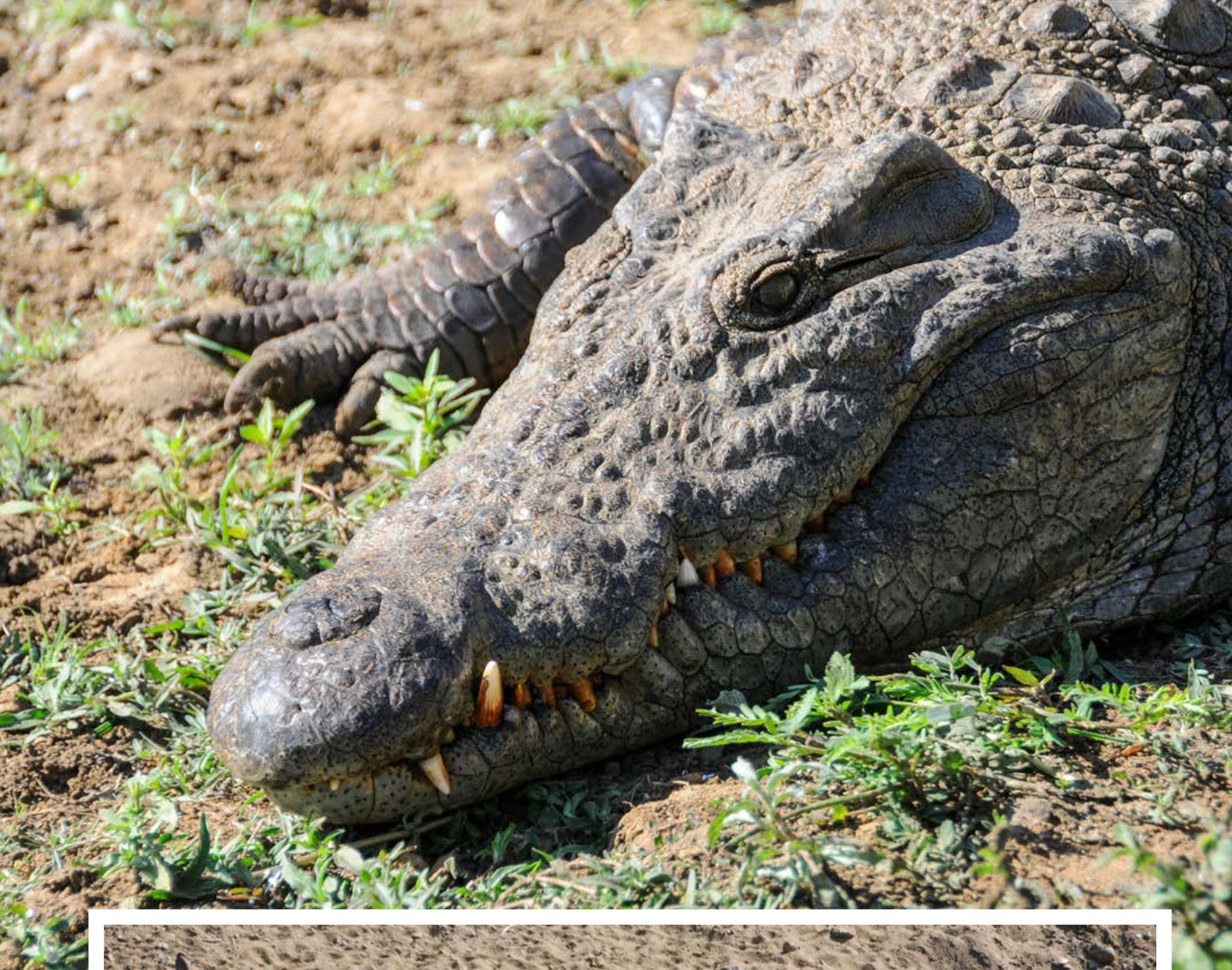
minute later we are driving back around to the rhino. It turns out that they are well hidden in a low spot, with tall grass, above which only the tops of their backs can be seen from the road. Jim and the ranger decide that we should stalk closer, so I can get a better look, and perhaps a few photos.

The entire character of this stalk is different than while with the white rhino. The ranger checks the wind continuously, and is very cautious, almost nervous. We are extremely quiet as we cover the distance, always keeping some kind of cover between the rhino and us. It isn't long before we are about forty meters from the gray beasts. Still I can only see their backs, ears, and sometimes a flash of horn. We have been so quiet that I am hesitant to even snap photos, fearing the noise will arouse attention. I am nervous, and my heart is racing. Black rhino have been known to charge at sound, and are generally unpredictable and aggressive. Suddenly, the ranger seems even more nervous and says we have to leave, "Right now!"

This rhino calf was born during my visit.
In this photo it is just four days old.









Above: Getting to within just a few meters of this crocodile was enough to make my knees shake. Rumor has it that crocs can be unpredictable.

Top right: A hunter killed this crocodile during my visit. It was 3.5 meters long, and the money the hunter paid for his hunt goes a long way in helping both conservation and the local economy.

Left: A group of nyala that came in for a drink in a pool in an otherwise dry riverbed.



Carefully we back out and sneak to the truck. It is then that I find out the reason for the sudden departure.

When we got close enough the ranger recognized the rhino. Instead of two, there were three. The third wasn't visible in the tall grass because it was a tiny calf, born only a few days earlier. Female black rhino are especially aggressive when they have young calves with them.

We don't see another black rhino the rest of the day. It is, however, magical in regard to other wildlife encounters. A large dam is full of hippo and crocodile. The crocodile keep a close eye on us as we walk along the dike. Warthog, including an absolute giant, come in to drink. A single old dagga boy slowly crosses a slope about a hundred meters away. Later while on foot, we happen across some very fresh lion tracks. The tracks lead to a small

waterhole and then toward some tall reeds. Jim thinks we should return to the Land Cruiser to try to find them from there. I agree. We attempt to locate elephant, but despite steaming hot tracks and dung, we never catch up to them. To close out the evening we stalk to within about twenty-five meters of a white rhino cow and calf. Thinking that was it for the day, we drive back to the preserve office. As Jim was lamenting about not seeing more Cape buffalo, we roll around a curve and into a herd of about a hundred of them. I don't want the day to end.

Just a couple of minutes after that encounter, a ranger rides up from behind us on a motorcycle, a shotgun is strapped across his back. He stops for a brief chat with Jim. After he rides off I ask about what had been said. The ranger is on his way to check and patrol a section of fence,





Top left: Despite high quality Leica optics, it was still difficult to identify rhino by their ear notches.

Left: Ostrich were present in some areas of the reserve, but usually they kept their distance from any vehicle.

Above: A young rhino that was born only a few weeks before my arrival.

and then spend the night on poacher patrol. During the day, our conversation had drifted in and out regarding the poaching problem, and how they combat it. Poaching patrols take place every night. The patrols are well-planned, but give the impression of being random. The idea is to seem to be everywhere and nowhere all at once. The tactics are military and law enforcement based. There are also paid informants. In the last two years the preserve has lost three rhino to poaching. During one of the incidents they had information, and waited to ambush the poachers. The poachers however entered the preserve from a different spot. There were also five apprehensions over the same period. The cost of constantly patrolling

such huge areas is literally hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions, per year. Currently, preserve owners have no way to recoup their money. This has to change.

A Day with Jeffrey

After three days of tracking rhino, I get the opportunity to ride around the preserve with Jeffrey, the preserve manager. Walter, a retired hunter-conservationist from Germany who helps out around the preserve several months a year, joins us. Jeffrey is a little hesitant at first to talk about anything relating to rhino, so I diffuse the situation and ask him questions about other things. His life story is fascinating, and it has taken

THE COST OF THE CITES TRADE BAN TO AFRICAN RHINO CONSERVATION

By Pelham Jones

Despite the introduction of the CITES international trade ban in 1977, overall rhino populations have suffered a severe decline. It is estimated that some 100,000 have been poached, that twenty-three African range states no longer have rhino, and that certain countries that still have rhino, have populations of less than 100 animals, and those are declining.

All of this is despite attempts to reduce demand, to improve law enforcement, and to implement rhino protection projects costing hundreds of millions of US dollars across Africa. South Africa was relatively free of poaching until 2008. Since then, in excess of 6,000 animals have been lost, and over 1,200 of which were poached on private reserves. A conservative calculation of the financial loss for rhino killed on private reserves is US\$30 million. Add to this the annual cost of rhino security on private reserves alone, at an estimated US\$25 million a year, and allowing for a low-cost factor in 2008 to where we are today, an additional security cost of US\$115 million can be added to the value of the animals lost. Thus, private rhino reserves have lost over US\$170 million directly, plus the loss due to the devaluation of the value of rhino due to risk and the lost progeny or the breeding potential of the animals poached. Regrettably, these private reserves receive no assistance from the state.

The reality is that the CITES trade ban has not worked by any reasonable measure, and has on the contrary helped create a vast illegal market dominated by transnational crime syndicates that remain untouchable. Like the illegal drugs trade, will demand go away? As long as there is money to be made, the syndicates will drive any illegal demand, whether it be for rhino horn, pangolin scales or even human trafficking.

It is estimated that the US government spends about US\$70 billion on drug enforcement annually; despite this, drugs are freely available in all US cities. Not even the death penalty is a deterrent. The illegal killing of

rhino is no different. Despite the number of poachers that are shot and killed or arrested, and despite our best efforts and at huge financial and personal costs to rhino owners, the syndicates remain relentless.

At the CITES Convention held in Bangkok in 2013, I came across a poster that credited the success of white rhino conservation in South Africa to the CITES ban! What an inaccurate and misleading representation. The success of rhino conservation in South Africa has been driven by sustainable utilization, and by the ability of private reserves to purchase excess animals from state and provincial reserves. We now find ourselves in a situation where population decline is a reality due to poaching.

In 2011, the Private Rhino Owners' Association (PROA) addressed a letter to the Minister of Environmental Affairs, requesting that the moratorium on domestic trade be lifted. During the Rhino Issue Management (RIM) public hearings, PROA proposed that a domestic trade module be used as a template for the international community, on how sustainable utilization, through the sale of rhino horn, can be used to bring much-needed revenue back to rhino conservation.

It is a total misrepresentation made by certain anti-trade NGOs that the privately owned reserves want trade opened to make money. Firstly, we are already over US\$170 million out of pocket (ignoring the original investment costs, land use and management costs), and secondly, the private reserves hold the smallest volume of the horn stockpiles after provincial and national parks, all of which are in desperate need of additional funding to cover the cost of ever-increasing security.

So we must ask the question, who will help cover these costs? In the current domestic and international economic environment, I do not see any billion-dollar donor funding, or the government's willingness to cover these costs. The suggestion of a tourism levy is naive, and little to no

tax rebates can be expected from the South African Revenue Service (SARS). If we are allowed to trade in rhino horn, rhino will become the most protected and valuable animal in Africa. The value of horn exceeds that of gold and cocaine.

Our plea to the member states of CITES that will be attending CoP18 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, will be to carefully consider the motivation of our conservation experts, scientists, economists and individuals who are responsible for preserving and protecting 92% of Africa's rhino on a daily basis. It would be the greatest travesty if the needs of one nation are negated by the counter-vote of a nation that has no rhino, but that has been influenced by radical NGOs or advisors who are not directly involved in rhino conservation, and who have little understanding of this complex problem. Campaigns aimed at curbing demand in end-use countries have not been successful in reducing poaching. It is possible to meet the demand from well-regulated trade, as substantial stockpiles do exist, and the ability to dehorn without killing is what could save the species.

The greatest tragedy is the polarization that the trade debate has caused in the conservation community. It has never been stated that trade in rhino horn is the simple or only solution; it must form part of a comprehensive management plan that includes better law enforcement, international co-operation, community involvement with financial benefits, to name a few strategies. It goes without saying that we live in desperate times, and we will be judged as much for what we did not do as for what we did do.

This issue has been debated since 1992 in thousands of meetings, discussions and position papers, while rhino continue to be killed on a daily basis. It is now time to stop talking and to carry out bold actions to save one of the most iconic species in the world.

Rhino horn trade, you choose: legal or illegal, dead or alive?



Above: Poachers tend to come during full moon.

him all over Southern Africa, to Europe and back, in a sort of freewheeling life that can only happen on the wild frontier. He has been involved in numerous major wildlife and survival film projects, among other things. As we ride along he opens up, and leads the way, just showing us things. One of our first stops is at a pond that has a couple of big crocodile sunning themselves on the banks. These crocs are quite tame, and it is winter, so we get to within about five meters of them. Close enough for me. I manage to get a few good photos.

A little later we drive by a small brick dwelling. Jeffry explains that there are several on the preserve, and that a member of the anti-poaching crew lives in them for three weeks at a time. These are the

eyes and ears on the ground. Their job is to watch and listen, to patrol the fence, and to sweep for snares. They literally know every animal in their areas, notice when something isn't right, and are a front-line of defense against poaching.

Our meandering path takes us to the peak of one of the mountains that ring the valley. First we stop at a rocky outlook point with a view over the preserve. It is spectacular, African bush at its finest! Jeffry proclaims his love for such wilderness, and his passion for protecting it by any means. We spend quite some time sitting in the sun enjoying the view, and talking about life, while a gentle breeze keeps us cool. It is getting close to lunchtime, but Jeffry wants to show us one more thing. A short



Top: While attempting to find black rhino, we came across fresh lion tracks. This photo is of two lion tracks on top of one another.



Right: Being in the presence of such incredible animals, like this bull rhino, is an experience one can never forget.

drive along the top of the ridge brings us to a dead end. Jeffry parks, and as we get out he says, “Watch out for vipers, they like these rocks.” We follow him through a wall of brush and step out onto a rocky outcrop, to an entirely different view.

A fence corner is just a couple of meters in front of us. It is the fence between two preserves. We have a view over a neighboring preserve, which contains more of the same type of habitat. Beyond that, however, the contrast is stark. Bordering the neighbor’s preserve are fields as far as the eye can see, sugarcane and not much else, no small woodlots, no fence rows, nothing that could hold large wild animals. Some of the sugarcane fields are still smoking after having been burned, and others are being irrigated.

Framed almost perfectly in the center of the open landscape is a cattle feedlot. It is huge and literally packed from end to end with cows, being finished on corn, the likes of which are common across the U.S. prairie. That which stretches before me is the alternative to that behind me. The preserves are islands of diversity, surrounded by an ocean of monoculture. The contrast is almost enough to bring tears to your eyes, if you love wild things and places. There are virtually no large wild animals outside of preserves and private ranches in most of South Africa. Human encroachment and uncontrolled poaching, often with the use of snares, have done their best to eliminate nearly all the animals. The pressure certainly won’t decrease any time soon, as the



RHINO HORN TRADE AFRICA

Rhino Horn Trade Africa (RHTA) is a rhino horn trade initiative started by the Private Rhino Owners' Association (PROA). This initiative is in response to the lifting of the moratorium on the trade in rhino horn, confirmed by the Constitutional Court on April 5, 2017, which made trade in rhino horn legal in South Africa once again.

RHTA is an entity that was created to provide a legal, managed, and efficient marketplace for the sale of legal, humanely-acquired rhino horn to approved buyers. The primary objective of RHTA is to assure the long-term survival of the rhinoceros. The sale of rhino horn will enable those entrusted with its custody and protection to utilize the funds acquired from the sale of its horn to better protect and safeguard the lives of the existing rhino.

RHTA represents the interests of participating members of PROA, as well as other established organizations and individuals, who have legal permits to own rhino and/or rhino horn. For these entities RHTA provides a legal and convenient avenue to sell surplus horn.

It is the task of RHTA to ensure that any horn offered for sale is a "clean", humanely-acquired horn from an approved and sustainable source. The supply of "clean" horn to the market is preferable to the market being supplied with horn harvested by illegal, gruesome poaching practices. RHTA will ensure that all existing legislation regarding the transfer of legally acquired rhino horn is strictly adhered to, and that both sellers and buyers are known to RHTA, and to other relevant authorities.

For further information: www.rhinoalive.com

population has been increasing by about a million a year in South Africa.

Anti-Poaching

Despite night-vision technology, poachers like to come during the full moon. It happens to be a waxing moon. Skipping dinner I have a date with Samuel. Part of his job, like most of the PHs, includes patrolling for poachers. We meet at 7:00 pm and set out across the preserve. Like everyone, he is armed. We drive with our lights on and take a track up one of the mountains. Along the way he pulls out a spotlight and shines it from time to time into the bush. He knows where most of the animals tend to be. We stop briefly on



Top: The landscape is often bleak outside the reserves. Cattle grazing in garbage piles was a sight I saw several times. If animal rights activists get their way, the only large animal species remaining in Africa outside of national parks will be cattle.

Middle: Poverty and exponential human population growth are real problems that need to be addressed, and not only in Africa.

a dam and he points to the light below. Several eyes reflect back out of the water, crocodile. Eventually we arrive at a grassy peak, turn off the lights, roll down the windows, and listen and watch. From our vantage point we can see across the valley inside the preserve, and outside of the preserve. A small town glows in the distance, and here and there islands of lights indicate small settlements.

Several others are also on patrol, and are in occasional radio contact. Across the preserve a set of headlights suddenly go on, and beams cut through the inky black for a distance and then vanish. A little while later the same thing happens, but from a completely different spot. Then lights appear on another peak. For about an hour we sit still, and then Samuel starts the truck and slowly drives down the mountain in the dark. We make it to a sort of grassy plain, and he shuts the motor off again. We sit and listen. It is incredibly quiet. Yet an hour later we are on the move again, this time with lights. We come to a section of border fence, and slowly creep along the boundary, checking for any signs of tampering. We then park again, listening. We return to the lodge

A female giraffe nursing her young.







Top left: Special thanks to Leica Optics for supporting private rhino conservation in South Africa. Their gift of optics to rangers is greatly appreciated and helpful in the fight to save rhino.

Bottom left: Acacia thorns get your attention fast on any walk in the bush in South Africa.

Above: Not an ounce of harvested game is wasted. Professional game processing facilities are an important aspect of any game reserve.

just after 10:00 pm. At 3:00 am we set out again on another patrol. The procedure is repeated, but in a different area. We patrol until about 7:00 am, and we aren't alone, the entire anti-poaching team is doing its thing. This amount of patrolling takes place every day of the year. There is no respite, no down time, because the poachers are waiting for the slightest breach in security.

Incredible Effort

What I learned is that the amount of time, effort, and money put into protecting rhino from poachers is almost difficult to comprehend. Rhino owners are spending fortunes to protect a species, without any possibility of recouping their investment from the rhino themselves. At the moment, they are entirely self-funded, i.e. funded mostly by the income that comes in from the hunting of other species in their preserves. The cost of this protection however is prohibitive, and many rhino owners have given up their fight recently. Something has to happen to

make it financially viable to keep and protect rhino, to save the species.

The only way to accomplish this is by legalizing the trade in rhino horn. Trading horn, which can be harvested a number of times in a rhino's life, and selling it in a legal and regulated marketplace, will provide the incentive for rhino owners to keep protecting their property, pay for their efforts, and disrupt the organized crime syndicates that are currently the only groups profiting from the CITES ban on the trade in horn. Exactly how this can work is outlined in the following pages. Forty years of prohibition clearly hasn't worked. It's time to be pragmatic and take advantage of the economic value of rhino horn. How it is used is completely irrelevant. The important thing is that people are willing to pay large sums of money for it. Animals don't go extinct if humans can raise them, and there is a financial incentive to do so. This is what it will take to keep rhino around, so future generations can enjoy an experience similar to my own. ■

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RHINO CRISIS

BY TANYA JACOBSEN

The tragic plight of the world's rhinoceros species should never have been allowed to happen. Yet, in Africa, the northern white rhino is virtually extinct, the feisty black rhino is critically endangered, and the placid southern white rhino has been rescued from the brink of extinction more than once; and is threatened again. Their Asian counterparts are facing similar trouble. The Javan rhino is virtually extinct, the Sumatran rhino is critically endangered, and the Indian rhino is vulnerable.

Rhino horn

All of this is because of their horn, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine practices, and as handles for traditional daggers in Yemen. Recent years have also seen an upsurge in demand for rhino horn in Vietnam, where powdered horn and water are used as a 'cure-all' tonic. According to TRAF-FIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, it is the Vietnamese demand that poses the greatest threat.

Throughout the world rhino are being brutally slaughtered for their horns. Poaching is usually carried out by impoverished local people, who are paid large amounts of cash by middlemen from large criminal syndicates. These syndicates are well established and mostly impenetrable. The conduits that rhino horn travel through are the same as those for trafficking drugs, humans, weapons, and other contraband.

Ironically, South Africa has a stockpile of an estimated twenty tons of horn in

government coffers and in private hands, yet we are losing almost four rhino a day. These horns are from rhino that have died naturally, from knock-offs (rhino sometimes knock their horns off in territorial disputes or when transported), and from private rhino owners who have dehorned their rhino in response to the threat of poaching.

Dehorning is a simple twenty-minute procedure that is performed by a veterinarian while the rhino is anesthetized. The horn is removed just above the growth point. This does not cause the rhino any pain, as the horn is composed primarily of keratin. The procedure is very similar to cutting your fingernails, or to a vet trimming a horse's hooves. Although it is unfortunate to have to remove a rhino's horn, it is nonetheless fortunate that rhino don't have to be killed for their commercially-used product, unlike tigers, whales, sharks, and other endangered species.

Rhino horns grow back, at a rate in excess of 1 kg/year for males and 0.6 kg/year for females. Rhino can live for up to forty years, and could effectively produce about nine horns in their lifetimes, or about 60 kg of horn. Despite this fact, they are poached every day for a single set of horns, which is a tragic waste of a valuable and sustainable natural resource.

A Conservation Story

In 1977, rhino were listed on CITES Appendix I, due to the poaching threat that faced them. At the time, white rhino were just starting to recover from a previous brush

with extinction, due to injudicious hunting and poaching practices. It is estimated that there were fewer than 200 remaining in South Africa in the 1960s. Thanks to the concerted and dedicated efforts of a small team of conservationists in Kwazulu-Natal, those rhino were protected. When numbers increased, they were reintroduced to national reserves (most notably Kruger National Park), and private game farmers were encouraged to buy them for a nominal price, and conserve them on their land.

Innovative methods of transportation allowed rhino to be distributed all over South Africa, to other African countries, and to zoos throughout the world. The late Dr. Ian Player, who spearheaded "Operation Rhino", and his colleagues recognized the risk involved in keeping all their 'eggs' in one basket.

CITES Trade Ban

Under the CITES Appendix I listing, no trade in these animals or their parts was allowed. In 1995, the white rhino was downlisted to Appendix II, for South African populations, because it had recovered sufficiently. The Appendix II listing allowed for live animals to be traded, and for hunting trophies to be exported. Unfortunately, the white rhino population in South Africa was the only one that recovered and that did not decline.

So did the trade ban help? Although South Africa's white rhino have recovered well, let's look at what happened to the other species of rhino since the trade ban was declared:



The horn on this cow rhino has been harvested. Notice how it has regrown, and is nearly long enough to be harvested again. Horn can be harvested several times over the course of a rhino's life.

- When black rhino were listed on Appendix I in 1977, there were still more than 50,000. Today, they are critically endangered. Africa has lost 96% of its black rhino between 1970 and 1992.
- The northern white rhino is all but extinct today, much like the Javan rhinoceros.
- In Swaziland, the "Rhino War" lasted from 1988 - 1992, during which time it lost 80% of its rhino population to poachers.
- In Mozambique, the rhino is all but extinct.
- In 1992, Botswana had less than twenty white rhino, and the black rhino was locally extinct.
- In Tanzania, the numbers of both species of rhino have declined drastically over the past fifty years. There were approximately 10,000 black rhino in the 1960s. By 1984, there were only 3,000. Six years

later, in 1990, there were less than one hundred.

- There were about 20,000 black rhino in Kenya in the 1960s. Today, there are less than 1,000.

Rhino poaching figures in South Africa rarely reached double digits prior to 2008, but this is not because the trade ban was effective. This was because other African states were having their rhino populations decimated to feed the demand.

In 1992, a number of African rhino range states proposed legal, controlled trade in rhino horn. Their proposal was rejected, and the following suggestions were tabled to combat the poaching scourge:

- A trade study of the market for horn was to be undertaken



- Education and awareness campaigns were to be launched in consumer countries, to warn of the effects of this demand, and to negate the belief in the medicinal benefits of the horn
- The media was to be harnessed to assist with these campaigns
- Offenders were to face severe punishment, law enforcement was to be enhanced and better anti-poaching measures were to be implemented.

Even today, various NGOs, individuals and animal rights organizations continue to call for these measures to combat poaching. Although all are necessary, they are not the solution, and have been ineffective.

We are facing great demand from eastern markets that are fed by criminal syndicates operating in a black market. In this type of market there are no means to ensure the

protection of rhino. In order for trade in horn to be legalized, rhino must be down-listed by CITES, and such a proposal may only be submitted at the CITES Convention of Parties (CoP), currently held every three years. The proposal must achieve a two-thirds majority vote from the 176 member parties in order for it to be passed. The rhino poaching crisis is indeed a global issue.

A Parallel

The vicuña of South America, related to the llama, is another animal that was poached to the brink of extinction, for its beautiful wool. Its wool is one of the finest fibers in the world, and there was a massive demand for it from European fashion houses. People from impoverished communities were killing vicuña and selling the pelts to middlemen, who then sold them to buyers in Europe. In

the early 1960s, there were less than 5,000 remaining.

In the 1970s, concerted efforts by conservationists kept the only remaining population safe in Peru, and it was listed as critically endangered. In the 1980s, an Italian fashion designer recognized the absurdity of the situation – these animals were facing extinction for a product that could be harvested without having to kill them – and launched the “Shear a Vicuña to Save a Vicuña” campaign.

With government support, these diverse sectors reinstated the traditional chaccu, where vicuña were corralled by local communities, sheared, and immediately released back to their highland habitats. Simultaneously, CITES accepted a proposal to downlist vicuña, in order to allow for trade in their wool. The income generated from these sales was returned to the



The reserve stretches as far as the eye can see. When we walked up to the banks of this river, my guide warned me that it was full of crocodiles.

communities and to vicuña conservation efforts. With the communities incentivized to protect their resources, numbers soared over the next few years. They were reintroduced to their former range states of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina, where similar principles were applied. Today, there are more than 350,000 in the world. Their status of 'Least Concern', and the continuous poverty alleviation that they provide, allow for ever-greater protection. This is an undisputed conservation success story.

The Rhino Solution

We believe that legalizing international trade in rhino horn is the solution to the rhino crisis. If horns were sold through a central authorized organization in a controlled market, the benefits would be far-reaching:

- Consumers would have the option of buying the product from a legal, ethical, and controlled source. This would undercut the grossly inflated black market prices and would reduce poaching levels.
- If national parks and private reserves are generating a new and sustainable income (national parks could sell horns from rhino that have died naturally), rhino protection and conservation efforts would increase. With these sectors incentivized to breed and conserve rhino, numbers would increase.
- Legal trade would alleviate poverty, by introducing sound principles of community-based natural resource management into rhino conservation areas. By devolving the ownership rights of wildlife back to currently marginalized communities, their quality of life would be improved,

they would become involved in wildlife management, and poachers would not be tolerated, as they threaten the community's livelihood.

- Legal trade would encourage biodiversity, by creating habitat. Community trust lands that are being used for injudicious cattle grazing areas would become natural rhino habitat. National and private conservation areas would have the means to increase the size of these areas.
- Legal trade is a conservation-based solution to the rhino crisis
- Legal trade would not threaten rhino, because they do not have to be killed. In fact, very few rhino guardians will ever want to kill their rhino.
- Legal trade would allow us to keep rhino in Africa, where they belong. About 150 rhino have already been sold to China, and it is surmised that these rhino have entered experimental horn-harvesting programs.

Rhino are one of Africa's natural resources. On a continent fraught with poverty we should attempt to increase our natural resources at every opportunity. The rhino is a flagship species that could become the symbol for the principles of community stewardship, poverty alleviation, pragmatic conservation, and wildlife success stories. We desperately need the rest of the world to sit up, take notice of the complexities of the poaching crisis, recognize South Africa's rhino conservation success in the past, hear our solution, and spread this message. ■