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## **In the midst of coronavirus poachers seize the chance to kill rhinos in Africa**

**ENVIRONMENT**

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by

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Poachers in Africa are encroaching on wildlife and killing rhinos in travel hotspots now devoid of visitors due to the coronavirus pandemic.

**Tourism revenue** for some of Africa's wildlife reserves and national parks has declined sharply as a result of the [coronavirus](#) crisis. Conservationist group the [World Wildlife Fund](#) has warned of a sharp rise in [illegal bushmeat hunting](#) and surge in organised **poaching** of black and white [rhinos](#) and [elephants](#), threatening endangered species whose numbers have declined dramatically over the past years. Meanwhile, recent data shows that [black rhino](#) populations have fallen by 97.6 per cent since 1960 and [lion](#) number have gone down 43 per cent in the last two decades. Additionally, at least 35,000 African [elephants](#) are killed by poachers every year.

[Traffic](#), a conservation organisation specialised in contrasting the wildlife trade, says that an estimated 5,000 black rhinos and 20,000 white rhinos remain in Africa, and the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) has since classified both species as **critically endangered**. Traffic, a British NGO, has in the past revealed that [criminal networks of Chinese origin](#) operating in South Africa [process rhino horn](#) locally into beads, bracelets, bangles and powder to evade detection and provide ready-made products to consumers in Asia, mainly in Vietnam and China. Coupled with the challenges surrounding the coronavirus, such circumstances pose a catastrophic challenge to already over-stretched law enforcement agencies across Africa.

**Read more:** [Andrea Crosta. The man who uses his intelligence network to prevent poaching and save endangered animals](#)

## Poachers seize chance to kill more rhinos

At least **nine rhinos** have been killed in North West province in South Africa since the Covid-19 lockdown took effect. In Botswana, another **six rhinos** have been poached since the pandemic caused the tourism industry to be halted in the country. In April, its security forces **killed five suspected poachers** in two separate incidents. Particularly worrying is that the fact that the poaching took place in what were previously tourism hotspots normally safe for animals to roam. In addition, Botswana is also facing flooding in the vast, swampy Okavango Delta that has engulfed roads in the area: government workers in the northwest of the country are racing to evacuate the few remaining black rhinos.





A rhinoceros walks to a watering hole in Edeni Game Reserve, South Africa. Edeni is an 8,000-hectare wilderness with an abundance of game and birdlife located near Kruger National Park in South Africa © Cameron Spencer/Getty Images

President [Mokgweetsi Masisi](#) of Botswana has vowed that his government will **fight the poachers**, most of whom come from

neighbouring Namibia and Zambia. “At the rate at which the black rhino population are depleting, I’m afraid our iconic species will be out by the end of 2021. There’s a serious problem with poaching in this country and this must be stopped. Illegal poachers don’t bear a spear or a knobkerrie, or a knife, like some of those who break into households. These criminals have procured sophisticated arms, they’re extremely dangerous and highly radicalised to kill. That’s why we’re going to put an army in place to defend the animals, so any intruder is an enemy,” he strongly stated.

## **A blood calamity**

“It’s a bloody calamity,” in the words of [Map Ives](#), founder of NGO [Rhino Conservation Botswana](#). “It’s an absolute crisis in Africa. The poachers have been emboldened because the **playing field is in their favour** and they won’t have as many problems moving around. We lost hundreds of sets of eyes and ears in the delta. I’m sure poachers know this — they watch these camps closely.”





Conservationists in South Africa cut off rhinos' horns to protect them from poachers © Leon Neal/Getty Images

Meanwhile, a priest, police officer and Lusaka businessman have appeared in court in Zambia on charges of illegal possession of **over four kilos of rhino horn**. According to court records, the trio had two

pieces in their possession, which without a certificate of ownership are automatically the property of the Republic of Zambia. However, the accused have been released on police bond.

## **Plans to legalise consumption of rhinos in South Africa**

In addition, the [South African government](#) is proposing an amendment to the [Meat Safety Act](#), which in its present form aims “to provide for measures to promote meat safety and the safety of animal products; to establish and maintain essential national standards in respect of abattoirs; to regulate the importation and exportation of meat and to establish meat safety schemes”.

The law classifies animals for slaughter, consumption, import, export and sale, and the amendment seeks to [expand the list of animals](#) that may be legally consumed by humans to include many threatened species including rhinos, elephants and giraffes, on top of bird, reptile and fish species.

**Read more:** [Rhino poaching decreases in South Africa for the fifth year in a row](#)





Poaching, logging and unrest stemming from Congo's civil wars have damaged the wildlife population and made Virunga National Park vulnerable to attacks by militia groups

## **Horrific attacks in Virunga National Park, Congo**

Twelve rangers were among 17 people killed in [Virunga National Park](#) in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** – closed until the beginning of June to protect staff and animals, including the endangered **mountain gorilla**, from the coronavirus. Park officials have accused members of a [Rwandan rebel group](#) of being behind the attack. At about 11:00 on Friday the 24th of April, near Rumangabo village, “the rangers were on their way back to their headquarters when they encountered a civilian vehicle that had been attacked and subsequently came under a ferociously violent and sustained ambush,” the park’s official [statement](#) reads. In Congo, civil war has damaged the wildlife population and made the park vulnerable to attacks by militia groups. So far [hundreds of rangers](#) among the Virunga’s dedicated team of 700 have been killed.