

LIVING

A rhino poacher in Africa reveals why — and how — he kills the animals

By Paula Froelich

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Confessions of a Rhino Poacher



Much has been written about the decimation of rhino populations in Africa due to poaching. Due to COVID-19, **the problem has worsened** as gangs in Mozambique take advantage of the lack of tourists and guards in South Africa's Kruger National Park, killing nine rhino already.

Since lockdown, six rhino in Botswana have been slaughtered for their horn.

Why do the poachers do it? In all the coverage of the rhino disaster — about the demand from China, the gangs who control the racket and the horrific on-the-ground images — the people who commit the actual murder of the animal have largely remained silent, until now.

In 2016, award-winning journalist Godknows Nare spent six months in the epicenter of rhino poaching, around the perimeter of Kruger National Park, interviewing poachers and their families.

Shortly after he returned, I talked with Nare about his time with the poachers. (Nare, who had received death threats for several years due to his work exposing the inhumane prison system in Zimbabwe as well as his investigations into corruption in South Africa, was shot and killed outside his home by Johannesburg Metropolitan Police in 2017. Three officers were arrested and put on trial for murder, **later to be acquitted.**)

“At first I thought [poachers] were just cruel criminals,” Nare told me. “But then you engage with the people, you live with the people ... There are villages just around the Kruger National Park, [where people] live on social grants because there is no more land to farm ... You just need to fill up your stomach. Then you can think about other things.”



Paula Froelich

Mpumalanga, in eastern South Africa near the border of Mozambique, is a hotbed for poaching recruitment. One local poacher who uses the Skukuza area of Kruger to hunt, said on camera: “I have been a poacher for a long time now. I used to poach elephants, but now we are targeting rhinos ... A lot of my family members get paid to poach [and do it] because of circumstances. There is no work, no money and no food.”

According to Martin Bornman, a director of the [African Conservation Experience](#), there is close to a 70 percent unemployment rate in the communities that surround Kruger, a population of almost 2 million people. The [average salary](#) for a general worker — if they can find a job — in Mpumalanga is just \$8,628 a year.

While Kruger is the epicenter of poaching in South Africa, many say it doesn't have to be this way. In contrast, the Phinda game reserve south of Swaziland is run by the luxury company [&Beyond](#) and had such a surplus of rhino that it [relocated some to Botswana](#) in 2016.

Bornman explained: “In South Africa, whoever owns the land owns the animals on the land. What happened in Phinda was a group of wealthy individuals bought the land and returned it to the local tribes in exchange for a contract to manage the property. The local tribes now protect and police their land, making it almost impossible for poachers to penetrate. They also work for [[&Beyond](#)] and everyone makes money off the animals.”

And while the government-run Kruger park saw [1.8 million visitors](#) last year — with [average guest costs](#) ranging from \$225 to over \$5,000 a night, for a considerable cash flow — outside the park, where many communities don't have electricity or running water, it's another story.

Sboniso Mhlongo, a suspected poacher, told Nare: “We only get free water from Skukuza. There is a dam and we go there with drums of water to fetch and then we push the water back in wheelbarrows. There are no other benefits to the community.”

Another Mpumalanga resident, who wished to remain anonymous, said on tape: “Rhinos are government property and we need to eat. We are stuck without any income.”

It is this desperation that leads many people to poach.

“Poaching makes me good money,” said the anonymous poacher. “After poaching and getting money, I can open a small business and prosper.”

He outlined how the deed is done: A lookout will alert a group, comprised of six or seven people, of a rhino's location. Then, “we usually leave at 4 p.m. and get to the park at six, when it's dark.” After finding the rhino, “we shoot it, and then there is another team with machetes. While [the rhino] is still kicking and fighting, we are working [on the horn]. They quickly cut out the horn and once that is done, we run out.”

Often the rhino is not killed right away, but dies a painful death either during the horn extraction or shortly thereafter.

“After removing the horn, we go to our boss to deliver it,” the anonymous poacher said. “We are usually a group of at least 6 or 7 people and he will give us each a 15 thousand rand [\$810] fee ...I don't know how much they sell [the horn] for.”

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The average price for a three-kilogram rhino horn, at **\$77,548 per kilo**, is \$232,644 — down from a high of **\$300,000 in 2013**, but still an astronomical number that fuels the Chinese and Vietnamese cartels behind the illegal wildlife trade.

The on-the-ground poachers put themselves at risk. In April of 2019, a poacher **was killed by an elephant** and then eaten by lions. They are also at risk of being shot and killed by guards, police or each other.

“[Park] rangers use R1 [guns] and we shoot at them if they fire at us,” the anonymous poacher said. “[There can be a] huge fight and people die ... when we fight, they shoot at us and we shoot back, and we kill some [rangers]. If they defeat us, we usually run out. Once, we were busy working on a rhino and the rangers came and a shootout ensued and one of our men died. We go there knowing that death is a possibility. It’s dangerous, but we go anyway.”

June Mabuse, whose brother Henry — a suspected poacher — was shot dead inside Skukuza, said: “We are being killed like animal, but it seems like the animals are now more valuable than human life. I don’t understand how.”

At Henry’s funeral, which was attended by most of the community, Mabuse was asked about why his brother was killed. He said: “because we are poor. There is no work, and people are going in there to try and put food on their tables and are being killed. If you counted how many people were killed versus the animals, there are less animals dead. Thousands of people have been killed in that park and only hundreds of animals. There are people who benefit [from Kruger] — and it’s definitely not us, but it belongs to all of us ... In a way, our government is killing us.

“We don’t know what else to do. No one I know around here works at Kruger,” June continued. “There is lots of employment [at the park]. But we are never hired. Most of the people come from outside our neighborhood ... We who live nearby — a walk away — will never get hired. We are now forced to relocate to Johannesburg to look for work. The Kruger Park is not helping any of us. It is killing us.”

Across town, the poacher, who was waiting on word about another rhino, said: “Life and death are the same ... there is no other option.”

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