

'We can't afford to scale back': S. Africa faces poaching threat amid Covid-19 lockdown

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An elephant at the Greater Kruger Park in South Africa on April 24, 2020. © AFP / FRANCE 24

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Despite a country-wide lockdown amid the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa's anti-poaching rangers remain on patrol, protecting one of the country's most valuable resources at a time when conservationists fear a lack of tourists may be putting rare animals at greater risk from illegal hunting.

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Though most South Africans have been ordered to stay at home during the [lockdown](#) to contain the spread of the [virus](#), anti-poaching rangers have been designated key workers. On foot, in jeeps and by helicopter, they continue to scour the country's vast national parks for signs of poachers.

"We haven't scaled back on our anti-poaching activities or wildlife security and conservation management. We can't afford to do that, we also made a commitment to our partners that we won't do that," Ian Nowak, the general manager at Balule Reserve within Greater Kruger Park, told AFP.

"And our job is to protect the raw material, which is the nature, conservation, as well as the ecosystem, and that's what we'll do and we'll carry on doing that, lockdown or not."

Normally, the park would be full of tourists on safari at this time of year but it is now mostly empty. Conservationists fear the poaching threat may have increased as a result, both from illegal traders and people out of work who, because of the pandemic, may turn to hunting bush meat to survive.

"During this time, usually with the lodges being busy, there's a lot more eyes and ears out there as well. Not necessarily anti-poaching eyes and ears but it's eyes and ears that pick things up, tracks or whatever," said Rian Ahlers, a warden at Balule Reserve.

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"That's not there at the moment. So we need to be a lot more proactive than what we were in the past."

Rhinos are a particular concern, with their horns fetching high prices on the Asian black market. At least nine rhinos have been reported killed in South Africa since the lockdown began in mid-March.

South Africa is home to around 80 percent of the world's Rhino population: in 2019 nearly 600 of the animals were killed by poachers in the country, though that number has been falling, thanks in part to more funding for anti-poaching measures.