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South Africa – Kruger rhino dehorned to keep poachers at bay



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Lowvelder (South Africa)

Over the past decade, nearly 10 000 African rhino have been lost to poaching. KNP veterinarian, Dr Peter Buss, explains the why and how of dehorning a rhino.

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> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse

Killings fell by 53 per cent in the first six months of 2020 as restrictions and disruption to international flights hindered poachers, but the fight is far from over.

As part of its many anti-poaching efforts, the Kruger National Park (KNP) dehornes some of its rhinos to make them a less attractive trophy for poachers.

With a small media group invited to witness this procedure, a KNP team dehorned a female rhino on Tuesday morning.

Even though frowned upon in certain circles, this sad, but deemed necessary, initiative is not only practised by the park, but by many other reserves.

Dr Peter Buss, KNP veterinarian, explained the intricacies of the process. He has been working in the Kruger for 18 years and mentioned that the dehorning has taken off in the last three to four years.



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz

“What we are trying to do is sort of decrease the benefit to the poacher. We have multiple other mechanisms by which we try and fight and prevent poaching and catch poachers, so the dehorning on its own is not a silver bullet.

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“It is just another layer of anti-poaching that we put on top of everything else to try and make the risk for the poacher higher and his return less.”

According to Buss, the thought process is that the poacher is less inclined to want to shoot this rhino because his return is a lot less, but the risks are the same.

“So when we dehorn them, we tend to do so in high poaching areas and we will select females if we have to make a choice.”

From start to finish, the process goes as follows:

“We fly until we find the rhino. So today, we found this female which also has an older calf.



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse

“Once we find the animal we then try and guide them to an access road so that people on the ground have access to her.

“Once she is within a reasonable distance, we will dart her, and then, using the chopper, we actually guide the rhino until they land up on the road. She stopped running within about five minutes.”



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse

A team member on the scene keeps track of the time that the rhino spends incapacitated.

“The shortest possible time is always important. If we can get the rhino down, dehorned, sampled and awake within 20 minutes, we are happy.”

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In these ideal 20 minutes, the horns are sawn off and then filed down a bit. Samples are also taken and horns measured as legally required.



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz



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> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz

Rhinos' horns grow back at about roughly 10 centimetres a year, said Buss. "It is not that fast, but usually in about 18 months, two years, they have grown sufficiently that justifies dehorning them again."

He mentioned that the process is similar to a person clipping their nails. There is, however, a stark difference between the KNP team's methods, and those of a poacher.

"Obviously, with the poachers, they do not immobilise them, they shoot them. So we have lost the animal already."

"When they take the horn off, there are two different techniques. They either use an axe or a machete and then they actually chop the top of the skull off, or some of them are more skilled and can actually put a knife in between the area where the horn grows and the horn itself. They can cut that connection where it is connected to the skull."

He reminded of the fact that there is no bone going into the horn, so the more skilled poachers can just cut it off.

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If not done correctly by trained personnel, even if the animal does not die, the horn may grow back, or may not, but if it does, it will be deformed.

"It would be like damaging the base of your nailbed. If you really damage it, your nail does not grow back correctly."

Given the choice between males and females, the latter get preference.



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz

“If we have a group of animals running together and there is a bull and two females, we will selectively do the females first. There is a chance that once we are finished with them and we come back, that bull may have moved off and we do not find it again.

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“So we try and do the females first and then if we have time, we find the bulls and do them.”

As to whether all rhinos in the park are facing dehorning in the future, Buss said, “Not at the moment. It is because there are still a reasonable number of rhinos and it is not logistically that easy to do that, so we try to selectively dehorn rhinos that are in very vulnerable areas – high poaching areas.

“So that generally is along fence lines and sometimes we become aware that a group of poachers is operating in a certain area, so then we will try and target the rhinos in that particular part.”

As a way of keeping track of them, they have microchips implanted. “We notch it on the ears, and we have a standard notch to tell us it was dehorned and then we also put a microchip into the animal.

“So if we find a carcass, hopefully we can see if it was dehorned or not. If it was, we know that we have the DNA from it already.”



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz



> Photo: Linzetta Calitz

Whether removing a rhino's horns puts them in danger from other rhinos, he said, "My personal feeling is that it does not make a difference. A lot of dominance is actually a psychological issue.

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"If you were to dehorn a big bull and he is a dominant animal, he does not realise that he no longer has his horn and the bulls he fights do not realise it either, so it is really a size and a mental issue in terms of dominance. I do not think, personally, that it makes a huge difference."



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse

Buss said it has happened that dehorned rhinos get poached, but it is extremely difficult to determine why.

“And the difficult question always is, if we hadn’t dehorned the rhino, how many more would have been poached?”



> Photo: Chelsea Pieterse

“You don’t know whether it is because it is dusk or night-time and the poachers cannot see, or whether they just do it out of spite, you don’t know if they are doing it because they want to discourage us from doing it. It is difficult to ascertain how they feel.”

It is controversial, but people have done it in the past. He mentioned that it was done in Zimbabwe when they were going through their poaching crisis, and it seemed to work.

◀ DEHORNING RHINOS ◀ KRUGER NP ◀ RHINO POACHING



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