

SOUTH AFRICA

White rhino population at KZN nature reserve dehorned

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White rhinos in Spioenkop Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal were dehorned in the fight to save the species from increasing poaching threats.

Image: Casey Pratt

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, funded and supported by conservation NGO Wildlife ACT, dehorned the white rhino population in Spioenkop Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal over three days, making it one of the biggest rhino dehorning operations in the province.

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On Wednesday, Wildlife ACT, a registered non-profit organisation established to save Africa's iconic and endangered species from extinction, explained that dehorning of rhino populations was adopted as an effective tool in the fight to save the species from increasing poaching threats.

“Though not a solution on its own, dehorning has proven effective when used in small populations and in conjunction with a number of other initiatives, including strong law enforcement,” the organisation said.

Eric Mlaba, the officer in charge at Spioenkop Nature Reserve, said the chances of a rhino being poached was drastically reduced once the animal had been dehorned.

The entire population was dehorned. However, exact numbers are not disclosed due to security concerns.

“The threat will always be there, but this is one way we can deter that threat. To be effective, it is important that the entire population is dehorned, reducing the incentives for poachers to consider Spioenkop as a target,” he said.

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The Ezemvelo Game Capture team and Wildlife ACT also notched the ears of several young rhino that were dehorned for the first time. Notching allows for individual rhino to be easily identified, thus ensuring effective management of the population.

“Dehorning rhino is a large-scale operation involving experienced ground teams, wildlife vets and highly skilled helicopter pilots who are able to ‘manoeuvre’ these animals into areas that are easily accessible for the teams,” said Wildlife ACT.

“The team on the ground work swiftly to remove the horn while the animal is sedated. DNA samples are taken for the national rhino database, the drug is reversed and the team moves off to watch from a distance as the animal wakes and walks off. The operation needs to be carried out swiftly and efficiently, reducing stress and risk to the animals.”

Wildlife ACT MD Mark Gerrard said the operation gave rise to bittersweet feelings.

“It was a bittersweet feeling after an initiative such as this – the accomplishment of a highly successful operation, tainted by the unfortunate need to have to undertake such an invasive

process due to the unnecessary demand for horn. We hope, however, that this is only an interim measure to safeguard populations such as these while work is continued in the education and demand reduction space," he said.

Both black and white rhino populations in the region continue to face pressure from poaching syndicates who look to trade their horn to consumers, primarily in [Asian markets](#).

"Funding is desperately needed to make operations like this more frequent. A rhino's horn grows back, which means that these rhino that we have just dehorned will all need to be dehorned again in 18 months to two years' time," said Mlaba.

"We are hugely appreciative of the contribution from Wildlife ACT, without whose support this work would not have been possible."

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