

DAILY MAVERICK

OUR BURNING PLANET

KNP IN PERSPECTIVE (PART TWO)

Beyond its exceptional beauty, Kruger National Park is on the ropes and hurting



Veterinary staff capture a white rhinoceros in the Kruger National Park as part of efforts to curb rampant poaching. (Photo: Gallo Images / Sunday Times / James Oatway)



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The Kruger National Park has a major rhino-poaching crisis, but that's just one of many mounting problems — and it's extremely worrying.

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Crags of ancient rock and twisting rivers, 1,000-year-old trees and a rug of bushveld the size of Israel... it's been part of South Africa's DNA for generations. And a way of life.

Load the car, strap the kids into the back seat and head for the Lowveld where the roads kick dust, thorn trees tangle and the bush smells of animals and earth.

Finally, you're through the gates: Crocodile Bridge, Orpen or further north to where elephants congregate in their hundreds: Punda Maria, Pafuri. In January, the morning blisters but that's okay because you're in Kruger and there could be lions around the corner. It doesn't get better than that.

But just beyond the fence it's a different story. Adolescents cluster over a cooking pot in a dismal room with no windows. Both parents are recently dead, maybe from Covid-19 or Aids, and none has a job. For the desperate youngsters, a zebra is not a moment of black and white dazzle, something to photograph, it's the possibility of something to eat.

When they look through the fence at the animals inside, they represent sustenance. There are impala and bushbuck to snare, duiker to trap. But first prize is rhinos with horns that will bring enough money to feed a family all year.

More than two million poor people live up against the park's border. In Bushbuckridge youth unemployment stands at a staggering 60%. With hungry bellies, their days are often about pure survival. Many are from Mozambique on the other side of Kruger which is sandwiched between the two countries.

On both sides of the border there are those who feel the park is land stolen from their forebears during apartheid for exclusive white hunting and leisure. Park outreach programmes notwithstanding, 73% of surrounding residents have never been inside Kruger. Without any interest or loyalty, the youngsters round the fire are ready for something, anything.

So, when poachers roll in along potholed roads in their expensive new 4x4s with Rolexes on their wrists and money to spend on dishing out food or paying rental arrears, how could they not be seen as heroes? Bushbuckridge and the communities that span the length of the Kruger fence are fertile ground for the swaggering "middlemen" of the poaching syndicates.

International crime syndicates are targeting the park with up to seven poaching groups operating daily. In seven years from 2014 there were 19,154 logged poacher incursions, an average of 2,736 a year. You'd think that would demand greater ranger presence, but there are presently 82 unfilled ranger posts and poorly paid rangers are being lured by syndicate cash.

That's not difficult. Sophisticated, organised crime syndicates with deep pockets are able to coax information via a "drop-off" from some staff. Inside the park, it must be so hard for employees to resist the temptation of tip-off money.

Beyond poaching

However, poaching is only part of the park's problems. The Kruger's operating budget has been cut by 66%, the Covid pandemic has culled tourist bookings and rhino numbers continue to drop.

For now the dyke is holding, but it's not clear for how long the park's beleaguered management can keep back the flood. Something needs to be done, and fast.



Luthando Dziba, SANParks head of conservation services. (Photo: Supplied)

In a frank discussion with *Our Burning Planet*, SANParks head of conservation services, Dr Luthando Dziba, and Kruger's managing executive, Gareth Coleman, outlined what it takes to keep the sprawling park afloat. They are frank, they're focused and they're tired — 2021 had been a long, hard year.

These are the country's key conservation officials. They lay out the truth, bare and undisguised. Beneath the successes — and they are there — a disturbing picture begins to emerge with a lot of unknowns. Plainly put: The Kruger National Park is in trouble.

“If we were to start conservation in the park today, we’d do it entirely differently,” says Coleman, who’s been employed to try to change Kruger and turn it around. It’s not an enviable task because many of the problems he’s wrestling with are outside his control.



Kruger National Park managing executive Gareth Coleman. (Photo: Supplied)

“Kruger exists within South Africa and what happens in the park is a microcosm of what happens in the country. I’ve been doing this for 18 months, which is why I have black rings under my eyes,” he half jokes.

The number of rhinos poached has gone below 250 — from more than 800 a few years ago. In part this is attributable to some of the interventions SANParks has put in place, but also because there are fewer and fewer rhinos to poach. Despite Kruger having the most advanced anti-poaching mechanisms in the world, the rhino population continues to decline. “How come?” we ask.

The two men sit silently for a moment. “We’re doing everything we can,” Dziba tells us, “but from a resource point of view we’re overstretched, we don’t have the resources. To be honest, it gives us sleepless nights.”

“Rangers are doing the best they can under very difficult circumstances,” Coleman adds. These circumstances include the fact that rangers are poorly paid and there’s no career path. “With not enough rangers, fatigue sets in and rotation systems are not long enough to give rangers time to rest,” Dziba says.

The notion that the public feels Kruger is doing nothing to curb poaching disturbs Coleman. “If anything preoccupies us, it’s the fight against rhino poaching on one hand and the deficit of morale and trust among employees on the other.”

“This is partly as a result of our successes with enforcement actions,” Coleman says. “Just climbing over a fence and going to find a rhino is much more difficult now. So the strategy is moving to [an insider] seeing a rhino, giving the coordinates, and then there’s money in a bank account.”

Another huge problem is revenue. Kruger, with Table Mountain National Park and a few other parks such as Addo, are the cash cows for SANParks which help fund the other parks. In the 2019/20 financial year, SANParks generated a surplus of more than R290-million. But by the end of the 2020/21 it had registered a loss of more than R92-million despite cutting expenses by nearly R125-million and having received an additional grant from the government.

In 2021/22 it was even worse. Notwithstanding belt tightening, SANParks is already registering a deficit of more than R280-million.

“This year the government is simply not in a position to assist SANParks with additional grant funding due to pressures on the fiscus,” says Dziba. “We had hoped for a bumper festive season to close the funding shortfall. However, the picture has changed since the discovery of the new Covid variant and the closure of borders.”

Kruger clearly requires a major rescue plan. The beginnings of one are starting to take shape. We were given sight of Coleman’s internal Turnaround Plan — still provisional — that takes a hard look at the problems that need solving. It doesn’t pull punches.

The impact of the pandemic on tourism, it says, has been devastating on the operating environment for SANParks and Kruger and the park’s management are caught in a cycle of crisis management to “keep the lights on”. At worst, some are throwing in the towel, ducking compliance, avoiding making decisions or making private plans.

Delays and cumbersome processes, says the report, have seriously impacted on the park’s ability to operate and have affected performance and employee morale at all levels of the organisation, leading to high levels of employee disengagement.

It notes that the ways SANParks is going about maintenance are expensive and not able to meet demand. There are no management plans to deal with existing infrastructure and facilities. This is compounded by a number of camp maintenance teams who do not have the correct balance of skills as well as a lack of building materials and supplies because of supply chain failures.

Kruger, it says, needs a holistic plan to upgrade existing accommodation and infrastructure throughout the park and “to build sustainable living spaces with a very strong greening component”. Without this, it says, SANParks will struggle to access third-party funding.

At root, there are inadequate financial resources to effect change and to secure buy-in and support from employees and stakeholders. This, says the report, has forced a rethink within SANParks on the longer-term sustainability of revenue from a single sector (tourism) and on restructuring and recovery plans.

Beyond the boundary fence

Then there’s the matter of exclusion. Kruger became South Africa’s first national park in 1926, first proclaimed by President Paul Kruger in 1898 as an animal [sanctuary](#). Its inhabitants, the Tsonga people, were evicted. “We’re dealing with that legacy,” Coleman notes, “the problem of excluding people from land and the poverty that has arisen from that.”

A century later, there are communities surrounding the park that still see it as an oppressive and exclusionary entity. This feeds into a narrative that legitimises poaching on “stolen” land.

“How can we ensure communities feel a sense of ownership of Kruger and the rhinos?” Dziba asks.

In a committed venture, Coleman travelled Kruger, meeting 600 small businesses, some of whom are angry. “How do we turn the economy of Kruger outward so we can ensure the people who are closest

to the park can begin to benefit?" he asks. "How can we put rhinos under the protection of communities?"

All the problems Kruger faces are exacerbated by distrust among employees fuelled by previous integrity testing which was badly managed. There was no follow-up. An integrity test minus consequences is useless and poaching, says Coleman, is devastating workplace trust. Relationships between people who have lived and worked in the same environment for decades have broken down.

"My view is very clear," Coleman says. "We need to improve and implement integrity testing. Parliament has been informed that Kruger is targeting a July 2022 implementation date, but this is dependent on funds. There's also a process of consultation with unions which needs to be concluded."

It's about the creatures

The heart of Kruger's mandate is to preserve its bushveld biodiversity and all the creatures within it. One species in particular is at a tipping point. The park's 2019/20 annual report lists the rhino population as 3,592 — this year's report put it at 2,809. That's 783 fewer rhinos. Only 250 deaths are poaching-related, but the mortality numbers are dire.

What happened to the rest is an open question. When questioned in Parliament, Environment Minister Barbara Creecy said counting was not an exact science and talked about count confidence levels, observer bias, sampling error and drought, but 533 "missing" rhinos is hard to swallow.

At this rate, the world's greatest rhino population could go locally extinct in as few as three years. It means Kruger would no longer be a Big Five game reserve. The consequences of that are chilling for the park's international reputation.

SANParks is presently exploring private/public partnerships around rhinos and there are discussions with the Wilderness Foundation to find land to create sanctuaries away from poaching danger zones.

Kruger has also embarked on a massive, ongoing dehorning exercise at tremendous cost. This might stem the tide of poaching. But, because poachers operate at night, the lack of a horn is not easy to see.

With the scourge of poaching sweeping South Africa at the moment — 24 rhinos were [poached](#), mostly on private land, over two weeks in December — many owners are running out of personal funds to look after their animals.

"There's a concern there will be disinvestment in rhino," Dziba says. "We will then have to assist some of the private owners who say it is too costly to look after rhinos. This is on our minds now."

The discussion turns to elephants. How are they faring? Much better, although there's been some poaching. When culling ceased in 2000 there were about 7,000. The latest annual report puts the population at 31,527.

"We need to consider what the options are for a growing elephant population," Dziba tells us. "It's a good problem for a change! We're looking for where we can increase suitable habitat for elephants in the country. We also need to look at sharing our success with African elephant range states, provided the translocated elephants can be adequately secured."



lion in the Kruger National Park. (Photo: Colin Bell)

The lion population has increased by 12%. When measured against the decline by 66% in Central and West Africa, that's something to be pleased about. But in the northern sector of the park, some lions have been found poisoned, which could signal the beginning of an uptick in lion poaching.

Where to from here?

To summarise: Kruger Park has critical revenue problems, tourist revenues have crashed, international criminal networks are targeting its rhinos, there aren't enough rangers so job fatigue is inevitable, and ranger pay is insufficient which has made "drop-off" tips tempting.

There are more than two million poor people just outside the park's fences. While most have no problems with the park and many support its proximity, there are also those with no sense of ownership and for whom the animals the park is tasked to protect are simply food.

Before us are two men passionate about conservation who face a mammoth task of conserving some of Africa's iconic species with dwindling resources. But they also face socioeconomic challenges that the broader community has to deal with: poverty, poor service delivery and transnational crime. It's simply not sustainable. In fact, it's outside their mandate.

South Africa's flagship national park is among the best-known and most-visited attractions in the country and until Covid lockdowns was one of the most profitable national parks in the world. It attracted in excess of one million visitors a year. It cannot be allowed to fail. What it needs, for a start, are:

- Sufficient funds to operate efficiently, internationally sourced if necessary, to finance operations and to upgrade infrastructure to remain competitive in the tourism industry;
- SANParks to be more open to new funding, developmental, business and conservation models;
- Enough trained rangers to do the job;
- Bringing on board private sector partners;

- Continuing to grow collaboration with neighbours and their clients;
- The end of international demand for rhino horn and ivory;
- An end to finger-pointing between the different interest groups, be they park visitors, the private sector, communities, conservation lobby groups or different branches of government; and
- Collective responsibility taken to find sustainable solutions which work and to mobilise the large amount of concern and goodwill towards the park.

We all need the park

Visiting Kruger Park is a magical, unforgettable immersion in African wilderness. For the city-weary exhausted by phones, deadlines and incessant social media chatter, the park is an opportunity to just stop and bathe in an ancient, timeless place, where we are reminded of the legacy Earth offers us.

As the dawn sun filters through the mopane trees, a lilac-breasted roller in flight flashes turquoise. In the shade of a thorn tree, a cheetah licks her paws, the rug of her tongue a sudden pink. A dragonfly hovers over a waterhole, adding a dash of orange. Hundreds of buffaloes churn the water in a milky brown pan as they wade through, like Viking ships on the move.

This is how it's been for millions of years in South Africa's Lowveld. What will it take to keep it this way? **DM/OBP**