



IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE SOUTH AFRICA'S RHINOS?

APRIL 11, 2022

topics: [HUNTING & POACHING](#)

by: [Cyril Zenda](#)

located in: [South Africa](#)

tags: [conservation](#), [poaching](#), [rhino](#), [South Africa](#)

REPUBLIC THIS ARTICLE

A report by the South African government reveals a worrisome increase in the number of rhinos poached in 2021, as the decline attributed to the COVID restrictions is now being threatened with reversal. But is it too late to turn the tide?

"I'm exhausted, I'm furious, I'm devastated. PTSD is a real consequence in this career and I've seen the fallout in too many good people."

This was a desperate plea shared in late December by renowned South African wildlife veterinarian Dr Dave Cooper when he took to [social media](#) to express his exasperation with the [country's rampant rhino poaching](#).

"Some days (most) I want to scream it out for everyone to wake up and acknowledge what's really going on. SOMEBODY needs to do a whole lot more to rein this slaughter in. But who is that somebody? All of us, that's who! OUR rhino are dying in numbers."

This was posted in the aftermath of the [killing of 24 rhinos](#) within two weeks. "We vets, rangers, managers, front line personnel are sick to the core of dealing with cruelty, brutality and the greed-fuelled destruction of our wildlife that continues unabated and unpunished. It's time for the whole world to get angry with us and help to bring about change," Cooper added.

Cooper, who is involved in various organisations, including [Rhinos Without Borders](#), [African Wildlife Vets](#) (which he co-founded) and [Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife](#), is not alone in calling on the government of South Africa and ordinary citizens to do something about the resurging trend of rhino poaching in the country.

OVER 450 RHINOS KILLED IN 2021

In February, a [report](#) by the South African Tourism and Wildlife ministry revealed a worrisome uptick in the number of rhinos poached in the country in 2021, as the welcome [decline attributed to the COVID-19](#) restrictions appears to be waning.

The report showed that poachers killed some 451 rhinos in 2021, up from the lowest figure of 394 in 2020, a 14 percent increase. Of these killings, 327 occurred within government reserves and 124 on private game sanctuaries.

These rhino poaching rates - the highest in the world - are still considered very high.

South Africa is home to most of the world's [white rhinos](#) and some black rhinos. These pachyderms are killed for their horns to satisfy the demand in East Asia, where a prevalent belief attributes medicinal properties to these

horns, which are considered effective in treating cancer and increasing virility.

At the beginning of 2021, South Africa's biggest game reserve, the Kruger National Park, reported that rhino numbers had dropped by over 70 percent in the past decade, from over 10,000 in 2010 to just under 4,000, primarily because of poaching.

COLLABORATIONS REMAIN THE KEY

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) responded to the report of an upsurge in poaching by encouraging continued strong collaborations between law enforcement agencies to prevent wildlife trafficking.

"The latest rhino poaching numbers from South Africa confirm the ongoing nature of the threat to the world's rhino populations, regardless of the brief respite in poaching pressure in 2020 due to lockdown restrictions," Dr Jo Shaw, senior manager at Wildlife Portfolio, WWF South Africa, said in a statement.

"In fact, global travel and tourism restrictions in response to the pandemic continue to have a devastating impact on income for conservation areas and the livelihoods of local people living near those areas," shaw added. "To dismantle the known trafficking networks threatening people and wildlife we need international commitment to cross-border collaboration across law enforcement agencies from rhino range states, transit countries and consumer countries."

The WWF said that it was encouraged by some notable convictions during 2021, such as three arrests under 'Project Python', including charges of racketeering and money laundering related to rhino horn trafficking.

There were also a number of successful convictions for killing rhinos in Kruger National Park, with sentences of up to an effective 45-years in prison, based on strong collaboration between the South African Police Service and South African National Parks (SANParks).

In February and March this year, two rhino poachers from Mozambique were jailed for over 20 years.

INSIDE JOB ALLEGED IN POACHING

While arrests and convictions are taking place, a survey has shown that up to 72 percent of South Africans strongly feel that their government is not doing enough to protect its wildlife from poachers.

Furthermore, a research by geographer and conservationist Tara Keir appeared to suggest that the poaching crisis is being driven by the involvement of some game rangers and other people tasked with protecting wildlife.

"The 'real driver' being overlooked is income potential (for game rangers), as well as changing syndicate tactics that influence the recruitment of informants and poachers themselves," Keir wrote in the report published on 25 March.

"Local community members, and even individuals whose livelihoods depend on wildlife such as rangers and safari guides, are turning to informing poaching syndicates as a means of additional income. Here lies an intricate and important human side to the poaching story that is consistently overlooked."

Some of the rangers that Keir spoke to contend with what they allege to be an inefficient legal system, which she said is one of their primary challenges in relation to corruption. They saw sentencing for rhino poaching-related crimes as severely lacking and did not perceive them as a powerful enough deterrent for poachers and those involved as informants to syndicates.

"Additionally, added that if rangers feel that the countermeasures being carried out by themselves and their colleagues are not working effectively to eradicate poachers, then they are more easily incentivised to join the side of poachers themselves - especially considering the affluence that their illegal involvement would bring."

EDUCATION TO END DEMAND

Conservationist Toast Seagers from Rhino Africa told FairPlanet that the real solution to the growing poaching crisis, in his view, is controlling the demand.

"I do think that controlling demand is the key to finally ending poaching," Seagers said in written responses. "All solutions that focus on supply should still be considered as a supplementary solution to reducing demand."

"Until governments in the market countries really invest in education, everything else is only plugging the dyke holes with your fingers," he added. "Those governments, and the world, need to start seeing our natural heritage as a worldwide asset so that the protection of it does not fall solely on the countries where that heritage lies."

Image by pxhere

ARTICLE WRITTEN BY:

Cyril Zenda