

DAILY MAVERICK

OUR BURNING PLANET

PLUNDER IN THE PARK

The Rhino Report is a vital tool in combating poaching — if Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife pays attention



In 1895 the threat to the last remaining rhino was hunters' vanity, today it is poachers and human greed. (Photo: Supplied)



By [Angus Begg](#)

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Looking at a January 2021 photograph of about six or seven rhinos in a mud wallow on a Facebook page dedicated to wildlife viewings in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, my first thought was to wonder if they are still alive today.

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As several stories have revealed across different platforms of late, most pertinently in the long-delayed release of the [Rhino Report in *Daily Maverick*](#) of 31 May, poaching in the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park has boomed.

There is little argument among conservation bodies about the numbers — some 95 rhinos have been poached in the park so far this year.

It drew to mind an interview I recorded with former Environmental Affairs Minister, Edna Molewa, in about 2013 for a multimedia eBook I was producing called, *iRhino*.

“We are working,” said Molewa, “to stop the poaching.”



The carcass of a poached rhino at a waterhole on the Hluhluwe side of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. (Photo: Angus Begg)

That was already five years into the poaching epidemic. Nine years after that interview, some 50-odd years after people walked on the moon, it remains incomprehensible that we in South Africa have not managed to stop the slaughter.

Africa Geographic online magazine reported in January that despite “back-breaking work from a dedicated and passionate SANParks team”, the [Kruger Park’s white rhino population had plummeted by 75% from the 2010 count, to 2,607.](#)

The already minuscule black rhino population of 415 in 2013 was reported to have dropped to 202 — both figures according to counts undertaken in 2020.

The poached rhinos

“The province has lost 123 rhinos,” according to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZN Wildlife) spokesperson Musa Mntambo. “Inside and outside the protected areas.”

Seen in the context of *Daily Maverick’s* story about the report exposing “some major weaknesses in anti-poaching measures by the provincial conservation agency”, there is concern about what the Rhino Report reveals about the workings of EKZN Wildlife.

There is concern about why it took an opposition politician — DA and KZN legislature member Heinz de Boer — using the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), to access a crucial report published in 2020 that could have, if acted upon, saved the lives of more than 100 rhinos.

In the time that the report was kept concealed from the public — and given the rapid decline in the Kruger Park’s number of rhinos — poachers turned to smaller reserves and parks where it is easier to locate and kill the animals.

At close on 100,000 hectares, Hlulhuwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP) presents a far easier source of rhino horn than the two million hectares of the Kruger Park.

Far east of the Kruger, HiP’s 123 poached rhino would’ve been an easy target — especially when local communities report significant sections of the fence line are broken.

Frightened people and broken fences



Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, established in 1895 to protect the white rhino on the verge of extinction, is reputedly the oldest protected wilderness area in Africa. (Photo: Angus Begg)

“Numerous confidential sources have indicated large sections of particularly the western fences of HiP are in tatters,” says De Boer.

While this will have facilitated poaching incursions into the park, resident Mzisi Myaka of Ulundi district – which borders the park – says it has also exacerbated human-wildlife conflict in the area.

“We have lions... elephants, three times... they were shot, and Giba Khanyile’s hands were mauled by a leopard... maybe you saw it on TV.” Myaka says a child was also killed by wild animals.

Ezemvelo’s Musa Mntambo says “our relationship with [local] traditional leadership is very good”, acknowledging that “now and then we experience some form of issue, particularly if any of our wildlife escapes and kills livestock outside the park”.

De Boer says this could’ve been avoided if EKZN Wildlife’s “R35-million fencing tender” had not “gone so horribly wrong”. He says the matter is in court, adding that the wildlife authority “certainly doesn’t have the budget to adequately address the issue”.

We are not living in Kenya, where parks and game reserves are generally unfenced and rural communities have negotiated coexistence with the authorities. Broken fences in a Big Five national park should never have been allowed to go unrepaired.

An anonymous private sector conservation professional who works with EKZN Wildlife says he is concerned about the organisation’s functioning.

“They (both Ezemvelo senior executives and field personnel) are not equipped to handle the work required of them; they do not have the capacity, the financial means, the political support, the judicial support or the passion required to do what needs to be done for the province’s conservation efforts.

“And then there’s the undermining drain from corruption.”



The view from the park's Mngqabatheki hill, overlooking hunting grounds used in turn by King Shaka and colonial hunters. (Photo: Angus Begg)

Responding to the Rhino Report in the *Daily Maverick* article of 31 May, environment MEC Ravi Pillay was quoted as acknowledging “suspicion... of collusion between criminal syndicates and those tasked with conservation”, highlighting that (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) “has been in a poor state of affairs for some time”. He said this had led to the former board’s dissolution.

Mntambo says he has not seen the report and is “unable to comment on it as it was not commissioned by Ezemvelo. I suggest that you check with the premier’s office”.

And yet De Boer, who made the PAIA request, says Mntambo was present at the presentation of the report.

‘I did not see it.’ Really?

“The full Ezemvelo executive team were present at the KZN Conservation Committee meeting where rhino poaching, and the anti-poaching initiatives, were discussed last week,” says De Boer.

“Regardless, it is inconceivable that the spokesman (Mntambo) is not aware of recent figures. Given the crisis of poaching, all information should be at the fingertips of all senior Ezemvelo staff.”

Mntambo acknowledges that “the 2022 numbers are high”, adding that if it was not for “our committed staff who risk their lives on a daily basis”, the numbers would be higher.

The report refers to outdated weaponry with which rangers are equipped — “some of which are more than 60 years old, having been donated to the organisation by the then South African Defence Force”.

Mntambo says “our guns are more than adequate to meet the need that we face on a daily basis”, adding that the organisation is embarking on “a replacement programme”.

Given the professed ignorance of the contents of the Rhino Report by a spokesman of the organisation tasked with conservation in an entire province, it becomes a matter of some concern as to who and what to believe.

Especially considering that the Rhino Report refers to “evidence that some Ezemvelo board members tried to slip untrained ANC ‘military vets’ into positions as game rangers”.

Harsh working conditions

When added to the Rhino Report’s concern about “outdated weapons for rangers, uncontrolled access points to parks, cases of indiscipline, low morale, post-traumatic stress among anti-poaching staff and an exodus of skilled staff from key posts” – questions are left hanging: were those board members successful in their efforts to insert cadres into EKZN Wildlife ranger posts? What happened to the board members? Are rangers risking their lives paid enough? Are some rangers complicit in poaching? Why has the fence not been repaired?

It’s sometimes hard to believe that EKZN Wildlife was previously the Natal Parks Board which, while operating during the apartheid era, was the home of Dr Ian Player and his friend and mentor, Magqubu Ntombela, who gave his name to the [Magqubu Ntombela Foundation](#).



Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, established in 1895 to protect the white rhino on the verge of extinction, is reputedly the oldest protected wilderness area in Africa. (Photo: Angus Begg)

This is where Player led the Operation Rhino team which pioneered the translocation of the remaining population of southern white rhino around South and southern Africa, essentially to repopulate areas in which they had been decimated.

In the eyes of many, not just MEC Pillay and experienced conservationists, EKZN Wildlife has fallen far.

“The burden is just too great for the few dedicated staff,” says the anonymous private sector source, “and good people are there.”

Hope and promise

A conservation professional with property on the park boundary spoke of the “incredible dedication” displayed by the EKZN Wildlife’s anti-poaching rangers he had met — rangers who patrol the park’s dense bush night and day, having to be alert to the threat posed by elephants, nocturnal predators and well-armed poachers.

Supporting EKZN Wildlife in its efforts to protect the rhino are other committed types, conservation NGOs and private sector tourism operators like the Isibindi Foundation.

An initiative of Isibindi Africa Lodges, which, with the Mpembeni community, operates and owns Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge — the only private accommodation in the Hluhluwe section of the park — the foundation is Isibindi’s community-focused arm. It’s a “purpose-driven entity with the sole function of consolidating and expanding the existing community programmes operated at the lodges”.

Homestays, community tours and a community schools environmental programme are some of the initiatives aimed at ensuring that the people of Mpembeni see value in their relationship with the park.

“The Foundation facilitates greater funding opportunities for our projects,” says foundation manager Luke Martin, “and ensures their effective implementation.”

Hearts and minds

The relationship between communities, national parks and nature reserves is really a “hearts and minds” project, a term that described the failure of the United States’ efforts in its war against North Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s, preferring to bomb instead of engage with the citizens of the country they were at war with.

The primary battle here is against rhino poachers, but it’s also a continuous struggle to change mindsets of people who often have no reason to see value in animals behind a fence that sometimes “escape” and cause damage.

Private sector making a difference



The Hluhluwe-iMfolozi K9 anti-poaching unit. (Photo: Chantelle Melzer)

The Isibindi Foundation's engagement, says Martin, extends beyond the community fenceline to assisting EKZN Wildlife and other partners in the area, among them the park's K9 unit.

Currently comprising two tracking dogs, Martin says the K9 unit, another tool in the modest anti-poaching effort, was relaunched in September last year.

"The approximate cost of a trained dog is in the region of R90,000," says Martin, which, added to the R39,000 it costs to train a handler, probably amounts to more than the conservation authority — in its current embattled state — can manage.

He says the Foundation, alongside the lodge, has launched a campaign to assist the K9 unit in raising funds to add three more dogs and handlers and build up sufficient funding to ensure the unit's long-term sustainability.

With many such tales of cooperation throughout South Africa, and the private sector's willingness to step in, the omens for this magnificent park — arguably the oldest in Africa — look more promising than the previous month.



Love, scenting and affection in the bush. Hluhluwe-iMfolozi K9 anti-poaching unit. (Photo: Chantelle Melzer)

“On a positive note,” says De Boer, “many of the solid recommendations from the Rhino Report are contained in the new anti-poaching initiative, and we seem to have the political impetus to make Ezemvelo work... with the private sector and NGOs ready to collaborate and assist.”

The report may have opened up a Pandora’s box for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, and while it won’t work miracles, it may be just what the doctor ordered for Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, its rhinos and local communities. **DM**