

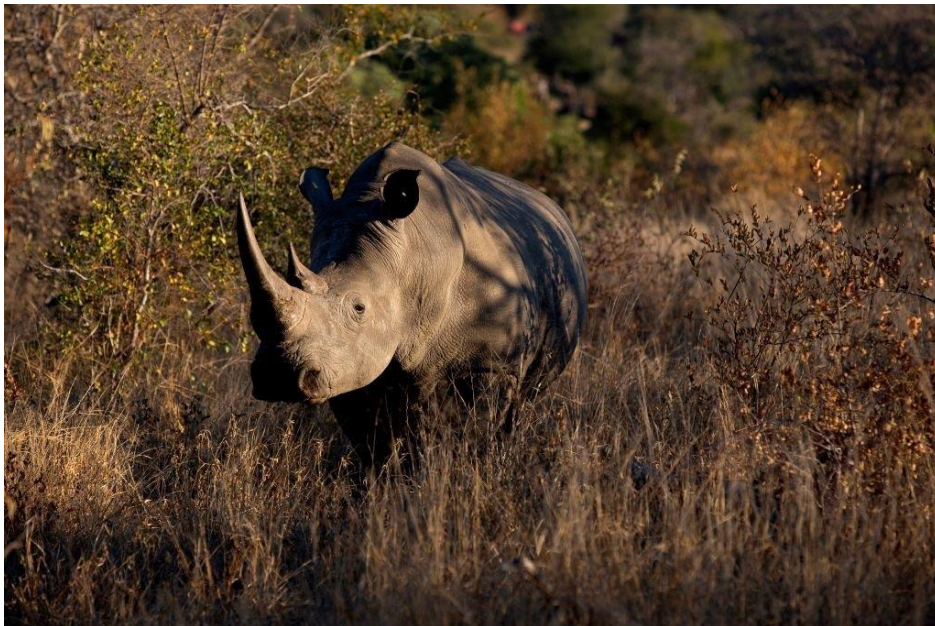
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## Rhino poaching hits private game reserves in the pocket

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White rhinoceros standing in the bush in Kruger National Park.  
Nicolas Deloche /Godong/Universal Images Group via

- **Private game reserves are buckling under the costs of keeping rhinos safe from poachers.**
  - **This as the trend shows poachers have set their sights on private reserves.**
  - **More than 250 rhinos were poached in the first half of the year.**
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Rhinos are fast disappearing from South Africa's game reserves, under the constant onslaught of poaching. And as private reserves struggle to fund the cost of securing these iconic animals against poachers, many are being forced to give up or sell their rhinos.

Simon Naylor, conservation manager at &Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve, said protecting rhinos came at a great financial cost. Private reserves are investing in more field rangers, training for those rangers, specialised equipment and technology, and K9 units. This is in addition to the cost of dehorning or trimming of rhino horns.

"For many, the cost has become too much to bear, and many private reserves have removed or sold their rhinos and no longer have them. Tourism is a key part of the whole equation and generates benefits for the ecosystems, wildlife, and communities. If we lose the wildlife, we're going to lose tourism," he said.

Rhinos face the risk of being injured or killed for their horns, but field rangers face the same risks in protecting them, said Naylor.

He said:

This is often the forgotten risk: Loss of life or injury to staff protecting rhinos, which places a big burden on them and their families. Field rangers being shot, killed, or injured in the line of duty has a tremendous loss for reserves too.

Glenn Phillips, chief executive of Lapalala Wilderness, said the "conservation business is an expensive one", which is largely funded through tourism.

"Apart from the very real safety risks that face the men and women protecting the reserves from rhino poaching, a key risk is the financial sustainability of these reserves. When the cost of protecting rhinos and other wildlife becomes unsustainable, owners are faced with

the difficult decision of removing their rhinos in order to save the reserve. This is neither good for rhino [nor] tourism," said Phillips.

He adds that national reserves tend to have more access to funding through government support while private reserves "do not enjoy this safety net".

"The resources employed to protect their reserves come at great cost. These costs often amount to anything between 20 to 30% of the reserve's operational budget. If that money was employed to enhance wildlife management and or community initiatives, it would be far more sustainable," he said.

Joe Cloete, CEO of Shamwari Private Game Reserve, says the costs run into millions.

"Obviously there's the value of the animal. Then you need to consider the costs of measures put in place to protect them and the people who work on and visit the reserve. These run into millions and were a cost that did not exist before poaching became such a major problem," he said.

"Of course, the biggest cost is the potential extinction of the species."

Cloete said that many reserves have rolled out secure fencing and access control, as well as anti-poaching patrols and community outreach programmes.

"When people realise that a live animal is an asset that supports jobs and income in the area, but if killed brings little if any value to the community, they become intolerant of poaching," he said.

He added:

An important thing to remember about all this, though, is that unlike national parks, which receive support from the government, private reserves pay for all these anti-poaching initiatives, whether it's funding patrols or community outreach.

A manager of a reserve in Limpopo, who requested to remain anonymous for safety reasons, said populations in the Kruger National Park and other larger reserves in KwaZulu-Natal were decreasing.

"Poachers need to look for other sources of horns. Many reserves and rhino owners have reverted to dehorning to reduce the value poachers would receive for a poached rhino," he said.

He estimated that the value of rhinos has decreased by between 10 and 20%, due to the extensive security measures that have to be put in place to protect them from poachers.

"The continuous dehorning of rhinos and the secure storage of the horns also add to the cost to rhino owners," he said.

"I find it sad that resources that would be used for other conservation initiatives are diverted to counter poaching measures."

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According to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, 259 South African rhinos had been poached in the first six months of the year. The bulk of these (113) were killed in KwaZulu-Natal reserves. Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment Barbara Creecy said this supports data showing a trend of poachers targeting private reserves.

Elise Serfontein, founding director at StopRhinoPoaching.com, said that if poaching continues unchecked in national reserves, private reserves may soon be the only safe spaces for rhino populations.

The poaching is driven by transnational rhino horn trafficking networks, which see poached horns moving through a network of middlemen into target markets, most often in Vietnam or China, News24 previously reported. These networks are highly adaptive and complex making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to track down those managing them.

Olivia Swaak-Goldman, executive director of the Wildlife Justice Commission, an international organisation that provides support to local law enforcement agencies, said wildlife crime is the fourth most profitable crime area globally.

She said:

Organised crime networks are attracted by the large financial rewards and low risk of detection or prosecution, emboldening them to prey on vulnerable species for profit.

"Given their complex and transnational nature, wildlife crimes are often overlooked: rather than going for the high-level international criminal networks and those who are organising and profiting the most from these crimes, focus tends to be placed on targeting more accessible criminals in the supply chain, such as poachers and low-level smugglers."

The Wildlife Justice Commission provides training and mentoring and conducts joint investigations, to support governments in developing the necessary skills and methods to conduct intelligence-led investigations into poaching. Since 2015, the organisation has facilitated the arrest of 181 high-level suspects, with a 100% conviction rate for cases that have gone before the courts.

"Criminal networks must be continuously disrupted and weakened until wildlife crime no longer represents a profitable option for them," said Swaak-Goldman.

Cloete adds that saving Africa's rhinos will require a multidimensional strategy, with private game reserves and national parks cooperating and anti-poaching efforts working in tandem with education campaigns.

But, says Cloete, even well-coordinated efforts by game reserves, national parks and effective community-engagement programmes aren't enough.

He said:

An intensive, concerted international science-based campaign, involving governments and global conservation NGOs, is required to debunk the fictions

about rhino horn. They should use every tool at their disposal, including influencers and social media.

The failure to stem rhino poaching could be potentially devastating. National parks have already seen their rhino populations decimated, and poachers will likely look for new targets, said Naylor.

"Once these animals are depleted, poachers will start to cast their eye on the remaining small-medium size populations which are mostly on private land," he said.

"Rhinos are not only an iconic species, but also an indicator of the health of the whole system. If we lose our rhino, what's next? We're going to lose something else. If we can't protect rhino, we won't protect the other species."

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