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New study reveals shocking white rhino declines

Over the past 10 years, Africa has lost one quarter of its white rhino population.



A new report serves as a wake-up call to South Africa: Act now, or risk the extinction of white rhinos. Photo for illustration: iStock

The most extensive and up-to-date report on the status of rhino populations worldwide released recently makes for grim reading.

Over the past 10 years, Africa has lost one quarter of its white rhino population.

Dwindling numbers

In South Africa, which holds over 80% of the species on the continent, numbers are down from 15 625 in 2017, to 12 968 at the end of 2021. This is a decline of 17% in just four years, bringing the population to its lowest level since before 2005.

The report, compiled by the African and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC, takes an in-depth look at several issues, including rhino numbers, poaching incidents and rhino horn trade.

- South Africa accounted for 90% of the 2 707 poaching incidents that were recorded in Africa between 2018 and 2021.
- South Africa was the country most affected by the rhino horn trade between 2018 and 2020. An estimated 1 116 whole horns were seized, representing more than 558 rhinos.

ALSO READ: [259 rhino poached in first six months of 2022 in South Africa](#)

The picture looks most bleak in the Kruger National Park, where white rhino numbers have declined by 75% between 2011 – when the wildlife haven still had 10 621 white rhinos – and 2020, when estimates stood at around 2 607.

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Whereas the downward trend for white rhinos continues, for black rhinos, there seems to be a glimmer of hope.

Black rhino numbers have risen by over 12% between 2017 and 2021, and currently stand at an estimated 6 195 individuals, of which 2 056 are in South Africa.

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Safety through fear

Luckily, new research on innovative conservation measures to make a significant impact on the rhino poaching scourge is increasingly coming to light.

One of these is harnessing the fear animals have of humans to potentially aid in the conservation of specific species, such as white rhinos.

A paper on this topic is providing encouraging evidence that using fear could be a cheaper and less invasive method than capturing and moving animals from areas with the potential for conflict or poaching.

Published in the *Journal of Mammalogy* last month, the [study](#) was a collaborative effort between the Mammal Research Institute of the University of Pretoria, the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation of the University of Florida and Scientific Services of South African National Parks.

Almost all animals, including white rhinos, perceive humans as “super predators”, especially since humans are now the most dominant ecological force in virtually all landscapes.

During the nearly three-month study in 2019 in the Marakele National Park in the south-west of Limpopo, researchers tested their hypothesis that regular encounters between animals and humans will lead to a fear response.

ALSO READ: [Rhino poachers now targeting private properties, latest stats show](#)

Extensive poaching is threatening the existence of white rhinos, and there is a need to deter them from areas with elevated poaching risks.

To investigate the feasibility of harnessing the fear white rhinos have of humans to aid in their conservation, researchers conducted auditory playback experiments at rhino middens.

They broadcast repeated human vocalisations, and then measured changes in visitations. Overall, rhino visitations decreased by 46%, while female visitations decreased by 70%.

Professor Robert McCleery of the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation at the University of Florida says while they thought their experiments would work, they were amazed at how strong the response was.

“Human interactions in small doses are likely to alter animal movements. We need to show that these patterns play out on broader scales for longer time periods.

“If it works, we would push for broad adoption as a management tool. Using fear shows great potential as one of several tools to reduce rhinos’ risk of being poached.”

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Edited by Nica Richards.

*This article first appeared on Caxton publication Boksburg Advertiser’s website, by Liryn de Jager.
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