



## Anti-poaching strategist wages war in order save rhinos in the Kruger National Park

*A white rhino cow is seen in the Kruger National Park. Picture: Armand Hough African News Agency (ANA)*

Published Nov 22, 2022

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Rhino war

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Johan Jooste and Tony Park

Pan Macmillan

Review: Barbara Spaanderman

Retired Major General Jooste was headhunted for the position of Commanding Officer, Special Projects, at SANParks where he was responsible for developing, planning and executing an anti-poaching strategy.

Tony Park is a novelist who divides his time between his home country, Australia, and the South African bush, which features prominently in his well-loved novels.

Together they created “Rhino War” which chronicles the three years, or 1 000 days, starting in 2012, in which Jooste took up his controversial position and transformed the anti-poaching unit of the Kruger National Park into a force to be reckoned with.

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South Africa has the distinction of successfully bringing back the endangered rhino from extinction; however, the numbers of rhinos started dropping again through poaching.

The scrappy beginning of Jooste’s appointment was the first area of change. There was no uniform for General Jooste, and it was perfectly evident that the incumbent rangers’ clothing was shoddy and almost non-existent. Jooste spruced up the uniforms and boots and began his militarisation of the anti-poaching unit.

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His wife, Arina, queen of his heart, was often instrumental in how he saw the rhino war. People count. Poachers also have families to support. Because of the belief held by so many people in the Far East that rhino horn cures impotence and cancer and enhances virility, rhino horn is a relatively easy commodity to find in the right area, with a steady stream of buyers. Poachers risk their lives in pursuit of the horn as much as the rangers, and anti-poaching units risk their lives in trying to prevent the scourge of rhino horn poaching.

Arina pointed out to her partner that the living conditions of the rangers' families were deplorable and needed drastic improvement, and by upgrading the circumstances of the staff, their morale and capabilities would improve.

“I had always believed that ... my leadership was ratified by what was in the hearts of the people...” says Jooste, who was at an immediate disadvantage

being white, Afrikaans and retired, but by working hard right from the beginning, he was successful. He was appointed by Dr David Mabunda, CEO of SANParks. Although he did not eradicate rhino poaching, his efforts levelled it out; and, subsequently, numbers started dropping.

The problems Jooste had to tackle seemed to mount. Mozambique, with much poverty, borders on the Kruger National Park, and many of the poaching raids are conducted from there. Surveillance of the border is crucial.

Surveillance is a huge issue and seeing as much of the park as possible by using a variety of technologies is vital. As money was always a limiting factor in what the park could purchase, salesmen were always punting drones. Jooste recounts with some amusement how a drone, glued together, got too hot and fell apart at the demonstration, much to the consternation of the salesman. "The Hollywood image of drones and their effectiveness was vastly different to the harsh realities of the African bush," he noted.

The most effective surveillance system developed was dubbed the Meerkat, a visually apt description.

Donations formed the backbone of a lot of Jooste's paramilitary development, with Howard G. Buffet being a significant donor. Here, the problems were ultimately insurmountable: a lack of administrative expertise in controlling donation funding. A donation of the magnitude of Buffet's was not a casual blank cheque.

Another heartbreaking aspect of this rhino-poaching tale is the indescribable cruelty meted out by the poachers – cutting out the rhinos' horns while they were alive. Initially, baby rhinos were left with their dead mothers to perish, but later it was decided that as the death of the mother rhinos was unnatural, the orphaned baby rhinos were put into a rhino orphanage, brought up, and reintroduced into the wild.

Tony Park's influence in writing this memorable memoir is unmistakable, and he was also wise enough to allow some of Jooste's Afrikaans colloquialisms to remain, like "plank" and "klap". This familiar tone, coupled with the dramatic scenes of poachers almost alongside tourists, makes for riveting reading.