

# DAILY MAVERICK

## SAVING PRIVATE RHINO

Private and communal lands conserve half of Africa's rhinos, and call for 'adaptive policies'



*White rhino seen grazing at a private game reserve in North West Province, near Brits, on Tuesday, 10 April 2012. (Photo: Nadine Hutton/Bloomberg via Getty Images)*



By [Ed Stoddard](#)

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16 Jan 2023 0

Private and communal lands now conserve at least 50% of Africa's rhinos, according to a newly published paper in journal 'Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment', highlighting the need for 'adaptive policies' to build on this success. These trends have policy implications as debates rage about rhino-horn trade and trophy hunting.

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One of the most significant trends in megafauna conservation in recent years has been the growing numbers of rhinos on private ranches and reserves in South Africa, at a time when populations in state-run parks have plunged in the face of unrelenting poaching to feed Asian demand for horn.

In the past few years, the number of privately owned rhinos in South Africa has exceeded the number in state hands, as a result. And private populations continue to grow while state-managed populations, notably in the Kruger National Park, [maintain their dramatic decline](#).

A newly published paper in peer-reviewed journal '[Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment](#)' has cast a wider net around the issue, looking beyond South Africa and including populations found on communal land in Africa.

"We aggregated African rhino population data, highlighting the growing role of private and community rhino custodians, who likely now conserve > 50% of Africa's rhinos," says the study, lead-authored by Hayley Clements of the Universities of Helsinki and Stellenbosch. Dave Balfour, a widely regarded South African expert on rhino conservation, is one of the co-authors.

"As the role of private and community custodianship becomes increasingly central to the protection of Africa's remaining rhinos, its resilience must be strengthened through implementation of adaptive policies that incentivise rhino conservation," they write.

Incentives are clearly lacking and policies are needed to address the realities on the ground.

The situation in South Africa's government-run parks is nothing short of catastrophic, and is emblematic of the ANC's failing state.

“Until the past decade, by far the largest populations of South Africa’s rhinos were found in the state-run Kruger National Park. The park has, however, become a poaching hotspot, with figures released in 2021 signalling 76% and 68% declines in the white rhino and black rhino populations over the past decade, respectively,” the authors note.



A white rhino stumbles at the effects of a tranquiliser dart before having its horn trimmed, at the ranch of rhino breeder John Hume, in the North West Province. In a bid to prevent poaching and conserve the different species of rhino, the horns of animals are regularly trimmed, a controversial decision where off-cuts are placed on sale at auction. (Photo: Leon Neal/Getty Images)

“Over the same decade, the estimated number of white rhinos on private land in South Africa has steadily increased. As a result of these divergent rhino population trends on state and private lands, the proportion of the country’s white rhinos on private land increased from 25% in 2010, to 53% in 2021. This means that, collectively, private landholders in South Africa now support the largest number of white rhinos on the continent. A lower but still substantial proportion (~25% over the past decade) of South Africa’s black rhinos are conserved on privately held lands.”

This is partly related to surging security costs, which the South African state — saddled with a growing debt burden and social needs, and a woeful track record of putting tax revenue to good use — is simply incapable of meeting.

“We could find only one published figure for what SANParks spends toward fulfilling their stated objective of ‘Sustainable rhino populations monitored and increased’: R25.6-million or R8,600 per rhino in 2020 (SANParks 2021). Even if this is an extremely conservative figure, it is markedly less than the average spent by private properties on rhino security: R28,600 per rhino in 2017.”

### **Prohibitive security price tag**

One of the consequences has been a [concentration of private rhino ownership](#) as smaller players find the security price tag prohibitive.

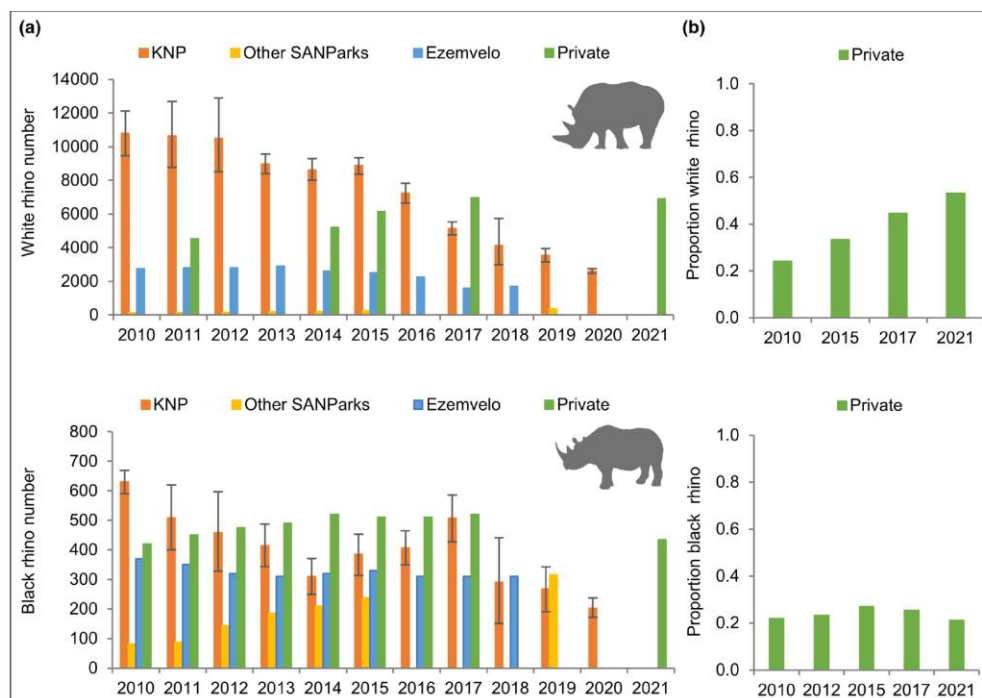


“In aggregate, across the African continent, the proportion of white rhinos and black rhinos on private land in 2021 was over one-half and one-third, respectively. In addition, 5% of black rhinos were held on communal land, largely in Namibia and South Africa. In light of the ongoing rhino declines in Kruger National Park, contributions of private and communal landholders to rhino custodianship are likely to be growing,” the authors write.

Private wildlife ranches in South Africa account for 17% of the country’s land area now, twice that of state parks, the study says. In Kenya, communal and private conservancies support 65% of the country’s wildlife on just 11% of its land surface.

In Zimbabwe in 2018, 88% of black rhinos and 76% of white rhino populations were found on private land. In Namibia, 75% of the white rhino population is on private reserves, and 7% of its black rhino population roams in community conservancies.

In total, the study estimated the total African white rhino population in 2021 at just under 16,000 – versus more than 20,000 in 2012 – with almost 8,000 in the hands of private owners in South Africa, versus less than 5,000 in 2012.



**Figure 2.** (a) Number of white rhinos (top) and black rhinos (bottom) in South Africa over time in Kruger National Park (KNP), other South African National Parks (SANParks), Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife Provincial Parks (Ezemvelo), and on private land (Private). Error bars (95% confidence intervals) are included for KNP values. (b) Proportion of white rhinos (top) and black rhinos (bottom) in South Africa over time on private lands. Data sources are provided in WebPanel 1.

A graph showing the importance of private and communal lands to the sustainable conservation of Africa’s rhino. (Supplied)

“Over the past century, private and communal wildlife ranches and conservancies have emerged as competitive land use in several southern and eastern African countries. Revenues (and therefore livelihoods) in these areas are generated through wildlife-based tourism and/or consumptive wildlife uses, including hunting for meat or trophies, wildlife sales, and meat sales. Such land uses are dependent on policies that enable

landholders to generate wildlife-based revenues that are competitive in relation to alternative land use options such as agriculture.”

To that end, the authors raise some policy suggestions, while cautioning about the practice of “intensive management”, which often entails controlled breeding and fenced enclosures. Whether or not this makes a population “less wild” as the paper asserts, is a source of debate.

The vexed issue of loosening restrictions on the global ban in rhino horn under the auspices of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is one policy issue the authors address.

### **Context-appropriate conservation**

“It has been proposed that a more appropriate first measure for conserving threatened species could be the development of context-appropriate conservation programs in partnership with local people, as opposed to the blunt instrument top-down approach of an international trade ban.”

In short, perhaps listen to what local people on the ground in Africa have to say, instead of middle-class western suburbanites spouting outrage on Twitter or at cocktail parties.

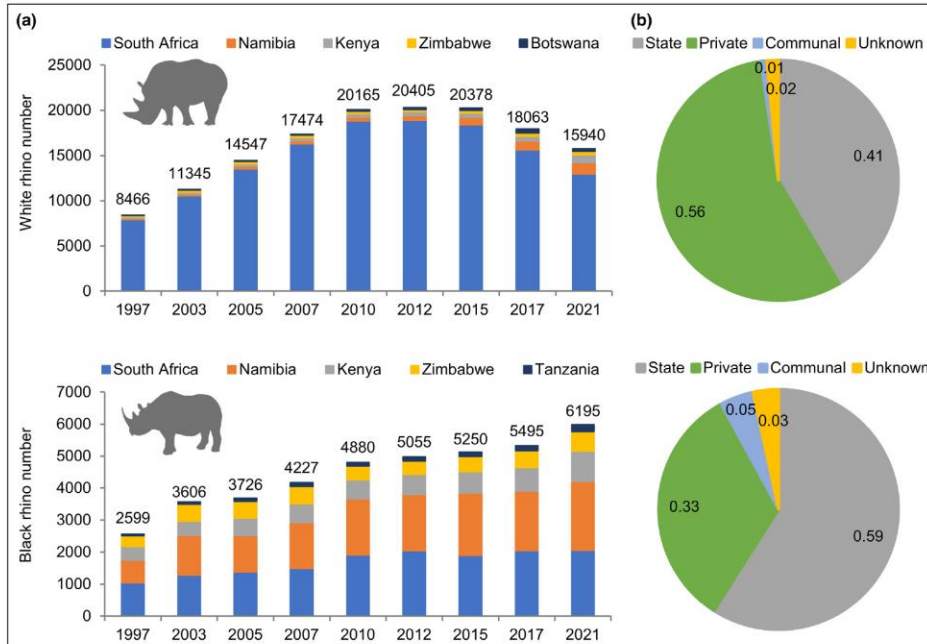
Then there is the emotionally charged issue of trophy hunting.

“Also at the international scale, there is growing pressure to ban trophy hunting, which was an instrumental activity in enabling the recovery of African rhino populations and is currently a key revenue source to fund rhino protection. As with trade regulations, consideration of the local contexts in which trophy hunting takes place is essential, as are the likely implications of restrictions on hunting for both local livelihoods and rhino conservation,” the authors note.

There is staunch opposition among some conservationists – a very vocal if perhaps growing minority – to “consumptive utilisation” of wildlife as a conservation tool. And some of the arguments against rhino horn trade – notably that it will fuel demand and trigger more poaching – are not without merit, while also being open to debate.

Opposition to trophy hunting is rooted in animal welfare concerns and an aversion to the idea of humans taking pleasure from blood sports. Even if you disagree with the sentiment, it is an understandable stance. But it fails to even consider the conservation benefits of hunting, not least because the past time is regarded as beyond the pale. This has triggered [stale debates such as comparisons with game viewing tourism](#), which has a far bigger carbon and environmental footprint and is far more intrusive. And sometimes ends with dead animals anyway.

But many current measures that thwart consumptive use are clearly not working, and so why not try “adaptive policies” to provide incentives for conservation strategies that are actually working?



**Figure 1.** Within the countries that conserve 99% and 97% of white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) (top) and black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) (bottom) populations, respectively, (a) number of white rhinos and black rhinos from 1997 to 2021 and (b) proportion of white rhinos and black rhinos across different land tenure types in 2021. Data sources are provided in WebPanel 1.

A

second graph showing the importance of private and communal lands to the sustainable conservation of Africa's rhino. (Supplied)

Moving beyond trade and hunting, the authors have some sensible suggestions, including incentives to address the "intense management" issue.

They say "it is imperative that future policy enables new incentives that encourage rhino conservation in more extensive" systems. "For example, could landholders that conserve rhinos in extensive systems qualify for a more favourable tax structure? Could they be eligible for carbon credits or rhino bonds, given the role of rhinos in carbon cycling? Could they receive certifications for extensive management that increase the value of their wildlife-based tourism and hunting offerings?"

Crowdfunding to support big animal conservation projects is another option the authors raise, pointing to [Wildlife Credits, a Namibian initiative](#) that "crowdfunds donations to support payments to communal conservancies linked to conservation performance, including rhino sightings and monitoring".

It's all food for thought. If rhino populations are thriving on private and communal lands and getting shot out on state reserves, why not encourage what works? One danger, of course, is if poachers will increasingly turn to such settings, as populations in state parks get wiped out. There is also evidence that [horn stockpiles](#), both private and government, are "leaking" product to illicit markets.

With all this in mind, fresh approaches are urgently needed. **DM/OBP**