



NEWS ENVIRONMENT

WWF responds to South African rhino poaching numbers for 2022



Picture: Armand Hough/African News Agency (ANA) Archives

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Transparency and regular communication about rhino numbers and [rhino poaching](#) are vital to understand the threat to our rhinos and finding the best ways to conserve them.

The most recent rhino population numbers for Africa to the end of 2021, as released by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) last year, showed that white rhino numbers had continued to decline at around 3.1% per year and numbered just below 16 000 animals.

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Between 2018 and 2021, overall numbers of the critically endangered black rhino increased at a rate of 3% per annum to 6 200 animals in part due to the long-term efforts to actively expand their range and numbers across the continent.

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The 40% decrease reported in rhino poaching losses in Kruger National Park from 2021 to 124 in 2022 provides hope and important lessons regarding successful interventions for rhino security in large conservation areas within a landscape exploited by organised criminality.

At a site level, DFFE reported on the benefits of active dehorning programmes in Kruger National Park in shifting the risk/reward to criminals involved in rhino poaching. Dehorning has also been recognised as an important security intervention in the private reserves forming part of the WWF Black Rhino Range Expansion Project in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

The Wildlife Justice Commission 2022 Global Threat Assessment into rhino horn trafficking from 2012-2021 identified irrefutable evidence pointing to the involvement of transnational organised criminal networks.

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The report called for “in-depth, intelligence-led investigations that focus on criminal networks rather than individuals, conducting further investigations after seizure incidents to identify the product owners, using advanced investigation techniques, conducting parallel financial or corruption investigations, and seizing assets.”

The DFFE Environmental Enforcement Fusion Centre (EEFC) plays an important role in these national responses to wildlife crime in South Africa.

An excellent example of such an intervention is [the multidisciplinary integrated take-down operation "Blood Orange"](#) conducted in Mpumalanga, Gauteng and Limpopo provinces by the Hawks, SAPS, Mpumalanga Serious Corruption Investigation, Serious Organised Crime Investigation and Serious Commercial Crime Investigation, Crime Intelligence, Tactical Response Team and Local Criminal Record Centre, KPMG, DFFE and South African National Parks (SANParks).

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This operation led to the successful arrests of former SANParks rangers and family members for their involvement in serious organised crimes relating to rhino horn trafficking, including money laundering. Such collaboration between local law enforcement and prosecution agencies not only disrupts rhino poaching networks but also promotes broader safety and security for people throughout the landscape.

Dr Jo Shaw, WWF’s Africa Rhino Lead said, that “over the last year, several positive security interventions have been proven in disrupting wildlife criminals including dehorning programmes, multi-agency law enforcement collaborations including financial investigations and efforts to build ranger morale and integrity.”

However, Shaw believes that transnational organised crime networks targeting large conservation areas and important rhino populations across southern Africa remain a serious concern.

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