

PREMIUM AFRICA

# Chinese, South African 'Mafia' Decimating Wildlife in Kruger National Park

Report says 40 percent of rangers corrupt, many others turn blind eye out of fear



Dr Marius Kruger (C) and members of the Kruger National Park keep the head of a white rhino up during a relocation capture on Oct. 17, 2014. (Stefan Heunis/AFP via Getty Images)



By [Darren Taylor](#)

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**A** **A** Print

JOHANNESBURG—A new report from the European Union-funded international crime response group, Enact, says organized crime groups from South Africa and China—in collaboration with corrupt wildlife officials—are “decimating” big game animals in one of the world’s premier game reserves.

The Kruger National Park covers an area of almost 7,600 square miles across South Africa's northeastern provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga, bordering Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) describes Kruger Park as one of the world's most important wildlife conservation areas.

It's home to the iconic but increasingly rare animals known as the "Big Five," namely African buffalo, African elephant, rhino, leopard, and lion.



A helicopter takes off as the carcass of a poached and mutilated white rhino is seen laying on the banks of a river at Kruger National Park during a forensic investigation on Sept.12, 2014. (Marco Longari/AFP via Getty Images)

Ivory from elephant tusks fetches high prices on black markets, and rhino horn and lion bones are in high demand in China for their scientifically disproven healing properties when ground and mixed into traditional medicine.

According to the report from Enact wildlife and organized crime expert Julian Rademeyer, at least 40 percent of Kruger Park's law enforcement employees are corrupt and up to 70 percent of other park employees may be assisting poachers.

The park employs more than 2,500 staff plus more than 400 rangers.

Rademeyer told The Epoch Times the staff is mostly from surrounding communities and as such are at “great risk of coercion and threats.”

In his report, he quotes a ranger as telling him: “You work in the park, your wife is alone at home with the kids and this is where the kids go to school. You make the choice.”

Under pressure, the ranger starts providing information to the syndicate, receiving an initial payment of 25,000 rands (\$1,400). Payments increase depending on the “quality of information” received, such as the location of a lion pride.

The big cats are easy to kill with poisoned meat, and the carcasses are chopped up and transported out of the park with the help of corrupt officials. The bones are then smuggled out of the port of Durban in containers on ships bound for the Far East, to markets in China.

Rademeyer said his information is based on interviews with senior Kruger Park law enforcement agencies, honest and corrupted rangers, private wildlife security consultants, conservation managers, and investigators trying to unravel a “complex web” of organized crime that’s “engulfing” the park.



Female members of the anti-poaching team “Black Mamba” perform a routine patrol through a wildlife reserve on Sept. 25, 2016, in Hoedspruit, in the Limpopo province of South Africa. (Mujahid Safodien/AFP via Getty Images)

Investigators from South Africa's Hawks agency told The Epoch Times they have linked "many" rangers and police officers to poaching networks.

"Rangers must either become part of the crime, or they must turn a blind eye to it. If they do not, they are shot dead in their homes," said one of the investigators.

He continued: "In cooperation with auditors we have traced payments of large amounts of money to more than 50 Kruger Park officials, from syndicates. This is just the tip of the iceberg, as our investigations have just started."

The park's head ranger, Cathy Dreyer, who's received numerous death threats, told The Epoch Times it's "impossible" to enter the Kruger to kill animals "without cooperation from inside the reserve."

Ike Phaahla, the spokesperson for the government-run SANParks agency that manages Kruger Park, told The Epoch Times he could not comment on Rademeyer's report.

"I will first have to read the report," he said.

Kruger Park is considered to be one of the "jewels in the crown" of South African tourism, which prides itself on offering local and international tourists a chance to view the rare game animals.

Yet, said Rademeyer, the government appears to be doing little to protect the animals in the way of giving more resources to agencies to fight the syndicates off.

His report "Landscapes of Fear" traces the beginning of the "rot" to 2011, when rhino poaching began to increase dramatically in Kruger Park.

Between 2011 and 2020 Kruger's white rhino population fell by 75 percent, from around 10,600 to 2,607.

Rademeyer, as well as the Hawks officers interviewed by The Epoch Times, said the same syndicates responsible for denuding the Kruger Park were also involved in kidnappings, cash-in-transit heists, car-jackings, extortion, illegal mining, and ATM bombings.



A South African ranger approaches the area where a poached white rhino has been spotted on Sept. 12, 2014, at Kruger National Park. (Marco Longari/AFP via Getty Images)

Conservationist Kevin Pieterse told The Epoch Times: “The only market for things like rhino horn and lion bones is Asia, and specifically China.

“Law enforcement guys have told me about links between Chinese triads and South African mafia-type groups. It’s easy to smuggle anything out of South Africa; the controls are so lax.”

Several Chinese nationals have been arrested for rhino, elephant, and lion poaching in South African game reserves in recent years. Most have escaped jail terms, instead paying admission-of-guilt fines.

In September 2021, police officer Stephanus Peters—and a woman described by investigators as a “Chinese interpreter” Lina Zhang—were arrested after allegedly delivering 30 rhino horns for transport from Johannesburg’s OR Tambo airport to Malaysia.

Police say the horns were falsely declared as wine.

Rademeyer said the poachers were usually armed with automatic rifles and other high-caliber weapons. They often cooperate with corrupt state veterinarians to source animal tranquilizers and “dart rifles.”

According to Rademeyer's research, rangers and soldiers from the South African National Defence Force shot dead at least 200 suspected poachers in Kruger Park between 2010 and 2015, with seven soldiers losing their lives and many seriously wounded.

Five years ago, the government budgeted millions of rands for 87 additional rangers, but not a single appointment has been made. Requests for an explanation from the department of environmental affairs went unanswered.



A darted tranquilized Rhino moves along as a helicopter from RHINO911 Non-Governmental Organisation hovers before landing and checking on the animal on Sept. 19, 2016, at the Pilanesberg National Park in South Africa. (Gianluigi Guercia/AFP via Getty Images)

A police intelligence source told The Epoch Times most areas around Kruger Park are “hotbeds of violent crime,” with several factions from the ruling African National Congress (ANC) connected to criminal gangs.

In March 2020, Hawks agent Colonel Leroy Bruwer was killed when gunmen opened fire on his vehicle as he traveled between the towns of Mbombela and Lydenburg, near the reserve.

Bruwer was the lead investigator in several cases of rhino poaching.

In July last year, assassins shot dead ranger Anton Mzimba as he arrived home from work.

Bruwer's and Mzimba's funerals were muted affairs, attended only by relatives, close friends, and a few colleagues. But not so the funeral of alleged poaching syndicate mastermind Petros "Mister Big" Mabuza, considered a hero by many in the communities surrounding Kruger Park.

## Fear of Being Killed

Mabuza, often seen in the company of groups of Chinese men in casinos around South Africa, was shot dead in an apparent hit in 2021 as he parked his luxury sedan at a shopping mall in the town of Hazyview, also near the reserve.

His funeral was described as "bling" by a local newspaper, his coffin arriving by helicopter and draped in a leopard skin.

In his report, Rademeyer describes police stations in towns surrounding the Kruger as follows: "They are deeply in the pockets of organized crime groups involved in poaching, cash-in-transit heists, car and truck hijackings, armed robberies, ATM bombings, and illegal gold mining.

"Thus, they offer little meaningful protection. Sometimes they even serve as escorts for contraband.

"The more honest police and those who feel a sense of dedication to their communities have little option but to turn a blind eye to the activities of their colleagues for fear of being killed."

According to police statistics, the murder rate in Mpumalanga province—in which most of the park is located—has spiked by 42 percent over the past decade.

Mpumalanga investigative journalist Sizwe Sama Yende told The Epoch Times the region has been "crippled" by "successive ANC administrations containing corrupt actors."

## Links to Organized Crime

The biggest figure in Mpumalanga politics for decades has been ANC veteran David Mabuza, who up until recently was South Africa's deputy president.

Mabuza—who insists he's not related to Petros Mabuza—has consistently been linked to organized crime groups, and opposition parties often refer to him as being a “mafia don.”

President Cyril Ramaphosa appointed Mabuza as his deputy following the ANC's national conference in December 2017, at which Jacob Zuma lost the party leadership, and subsequently the national presidency, to his sworn enemy, Ramaphosa.

Party insiders say Mabuza played “kingmaker” at the conference, switching allegiance from Zuma to Ramaphosa on the eve of the event.

The ANC describes Mabuza as a “dedicated and law-abiding cadre.”

He spent a large part of his four-year tenure as deputy president in Moscow for “medical treatment” for an undisclosed illness.

Like many of the ANC's top members, Mabuza received education and military training in the former Soviet Union during the apartheid era.

John Steenhuisen, leader of the chief opposition party the Democratic Alliance, recently named Mabuza as orchestrating corruption at South Africa's beleaguered national electricity company, Eskom.

## Risks to Rangers and Families

South Africa's biggest coal-fired power stations are in Mpumalanga.

Mabuza has not responded to the allegation, but his spokesperson described it as “nonsense” in an interview with Johannesburg's *The Times* newspaper.

In his report, Rademeyer saluted the few Kruger Park officials who “genuinely desire” to fight organized crime in the reserve, at great risk to themselves and their loved ones.

Their bravery, he said, had resulted in the recent arrests of two rangers and 11 alleged accomplices implicated in poaching, corruption, money laundering, and wildlife trafficking.

Rademeyer said efforts to counter crime in Kruger Park would ultimately fail unless they are “coupled with carefully targeted efforts to address broader criminal ecosystems in Mpumalanga.

“To be effective, short-term, reactive policing tactics must be replaced with a long-term strategy to counter and disrupt key criminal networks.”

He suggested that law enforcement agencies and South Africa’s National Prosecuting Authority target “high-level actors” by offering amnesties to low-level criminals who cooperate with investigators.

But with senior and junior ANC officials implicated in crime in and around Kruger, conservationists such as Pietersen doubt that the government will put the necessary resources into place to save one of the world’s greatest animal sanctuaries from destruction.

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