

A decade of pecking at a poaching kingpin



29 Aug A decade of pecking at a poaching kingpin

Posted at 08:11h in [Oxpeckers Blogs](#) by [Fiona Macleod](#)

*How we tracked the notorious Mozambican syndicate leader 'Navara' from 2013 until he ended up in jail in 2024. By **Fiona Macleod & Estacio Valoi***



A photo of 'Navara' supplied to Oxpeckers by intelligence agents in 2015

“Navara”, the codename used by Simon Ernesto Valoi, first appeared in our crosshairs in 2013 when we were researching rogue South African trophy hunters directly involved in rhino poaching and trafficking in the Kruger National Park. The article [Rhino trafficking: Down the rabbit hole at Kruger](#) did not mention Navara, but intelligence agents we spoke to did.

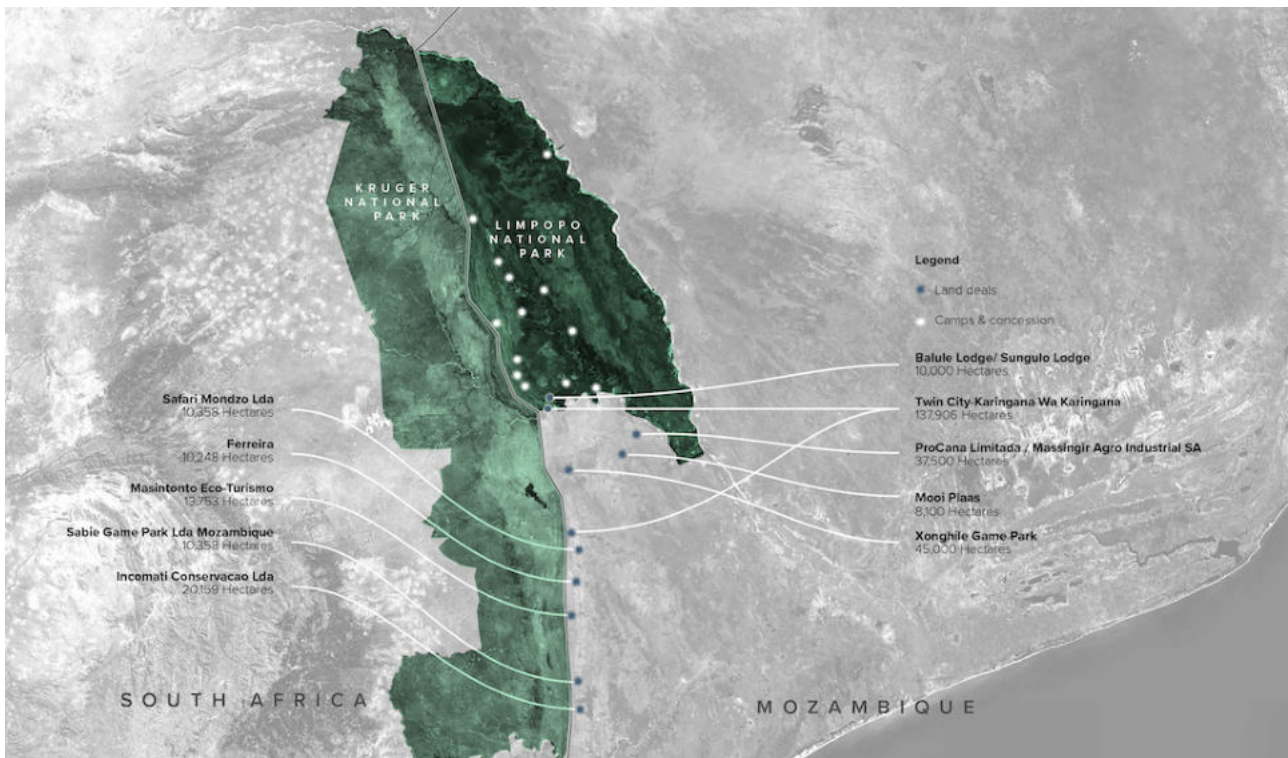
Oxpeckers journalists kept pecking away at Navara over the years. As one of the kingpins of cross-border trade in rhino horns, he was a mastermind of operations and a recruiter of young men sent on poaching missions into Kruger – where at least 3,934 rhinos were killed between 2014 and 2024, according to data compiled by our [PoachTracker map](#).



Navara's home in 2017. He was not in, and locals said it was risky to go looking for him. Photo: Estacio Valoi

In 2017 we travelled to his home town, Massingir, to find out whether information that Navara and other syndicate leaders were living like kings on the proceeds was true. In [Mozambique's poaching castles are crumbling](#), we reported that he was linked not only to poaching but also to alleged murder and car hijackings – which apparently was his first “profession”.

Navara was not at home, and locals said it was risky to look for him because of his popularity within the community and the government. “Navara is a very dangerous person. If you investigate him the population will report you to the police, like what happened to the overseas journalists who were here and were almost killed by the locals,” warned one of the sources on the street who did not want to be named.



In 2018 we found conservation buffer zones being developed along the eastern border of Kruger National Park. Map: Code for Africa

The next year we headed back to Massingir to investigate conditions on the ground giving rise to the poaching. In a multimedia collaboration with the Pulitzer Center and Code for Africa titled [Kruger's contested borderlands](#), we found conservation buffer zones were being developed in the border zone and displaced communities were accusing rich foreigners of grabbing their land with the aid of corrupt local politicians.

We continued to track Navara and on July 26 2022 he was arrested in Maputo with an associate, Paulo Zukula. In [our report on the arrest](#), a spokesperson for the National Criminal Investigation Service said the pair had brought pieces of horn from rhinos poached in Massingir and Gaza province to Maputo to meet a potential buyer – not suspecting they were being caught up in a sting operation set up with the Wildlife Justice Commission.



Navara and an accomplice, Paulo Zukula, were arrested in a sting operation in July 2022

Our [#WildEye Southern Africa tool](#) followed their trial in the courts after they were arraigned on December 26 2023. Following several adjournments they were convicted of crimes relating to financing terrorism, poaching, the sale of protected species, money laundering, the use of banned weapons, the use of forged documents, the sale and purchase of illegal guns and vehicles, and criminal conspiracy.

On August 16 2024 Navara was sentenced to 27 years in jail, and Zukula to 24 years. A fine of 15-million Mozambican meticaais (about US\$235,000) in compensation was imposed, and all their properties were seized in favour of the state.

- **You can track environmental crime cases around the world on our [#WildEye tools here](#)**