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Singapore

Inside the 9,000km smuggling route bringing rhino horns from South Africa through Singapore

Singapore's position as an air cargo hub makes it a critical transit point in the illegal rhino horn trade from South Africa to Southeast Asia.



A rhinoceros being dehorned in South Africa as a prevention measure against poaching. (Photo: WWF South Africa)



[Fabian Koh](#)

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KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, South Africa: When Singapore airport officials investigated a suspicious shipment of furniture fittings last month, a pungent smell led them to [something far more sinister](#).

Inside the cargo from South Africa were 20 rhino horns weighing 35.7kg and worth around S\$1.13 million (US\$870,000), along with 150kg of other animal parts including bones, teeth and claws.

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The Nov 8 seizure marked Singapore's largest rhino horn haul to date, surpassing a 34.7kg cache intercepted in 2022. Both shipments followed the same 9,000km route from South Africa to Laos, a known destination for trafficked wildlife products.

Wildlife experts say Singapore has become a transit hub in a smuggling pipeline that begins in South Africa's rhinoceros-rich grasslands and terminates in Asian markets where the horns – despite being composed simply of keratin, like human fingernails – command high prices as supposed medicine and status symbols.

The trading of rhino horns is prohibited under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which lists all rhino species as endangered or critically endangered.

THE AFRICAN SOURCE

South Africa dominates global rhino horn seizures for one simple reason: it's home to most of the world's remaining rhinos.



A member of the WWF South Africa team carrying out a dehorning operation in South Africa. (Photo: WWF South Africa)

"In essence, there are more populations of animals to poach, or it's easier to find poachable herds in South Africa than in other parts of the world," said Professor James Larkin, director of the radiation and health physics unit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Poaching is concentrated in areas with the densest rhino populations, such as the Greater Kruger National Park and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park in KwaZulu-Natal province, Mr Cooke said.

MAFIA-STYLE SYNDICATES

The fight against rhino poaching has become what Prof Larkin calls an "ongoing arms race" between increasingly sophisticated networks and conservation authorities.

Modern poaching operations function as "highly organised, syndicated crime", Mr Cooke said, with networks constantly adapting to exploit weaknesses in security measures.

A typical poaching gang consists of three people – a shooter, an axeman to remove the horn and a logistics coordinator – who may spend up to three weeks living in the bush, tracking rhinos while evading anti-poaching patrols, said Prof Larkin.



Rhinos are photographed at a rhino orphanage in Mokopane, South Africa, on Jul 31, 2025. (Photo: AP/Alfonso Nqunjana)

These teams use helicopters, dart guns, snares, silenced high-powered rifles, night vision goggles, GPS devices and mobile phones. Rhino owners and authorities counter with intelligence sources, vehicle recognition systems, radar, infrared cameras and drones.

Financial desperation and coercion drive many poachers, who often live in the same communities as anti-poaching patrol members.

“Do they know it’s wrong? Mostly yes, but hunger or money can make people put their conscience aside,” said Prof Larkin.



A warning sign at Rosebank Art and Craft Market in Johannesburg, forbidding the trade in rhinoceros horns and elephant ivory. (Photo: CNA/Fabian Koh)

The poachers "aren't averse to using violence to get their way", he said, adding that the syndicates typically engage in human trafficking and drug and arms dealings alongside wildlife smuggling.

The criminal networks operate in tiers, from poachers on the ground to mid-level dealers to international traffickers who move the horns to end-user markets, primarily in Asia.

"Some of the criminal network leaders are known but, as with all organised crime, it is very difficult to obtain solid evidence against the ring leaders as they are always removed from the actual poaching events," said Mr Cooke, likening them to "mafia-type enterprises".



Members of the WWF South Africa team carrying out a dehorning operation on a pair of rhinos in South Africa. (Photo: WWF South Africa)

Conservation efforts have shown some success. The mass dehorning of rhinos in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park last year – a painless but expensive procedure that must be redone every 18 to 24 months – resulted in an 80 per cent drop in poaching, saving an estimated 120 rhino lives.

SINGAPORE'S GEOGRAPHY PROBLEM

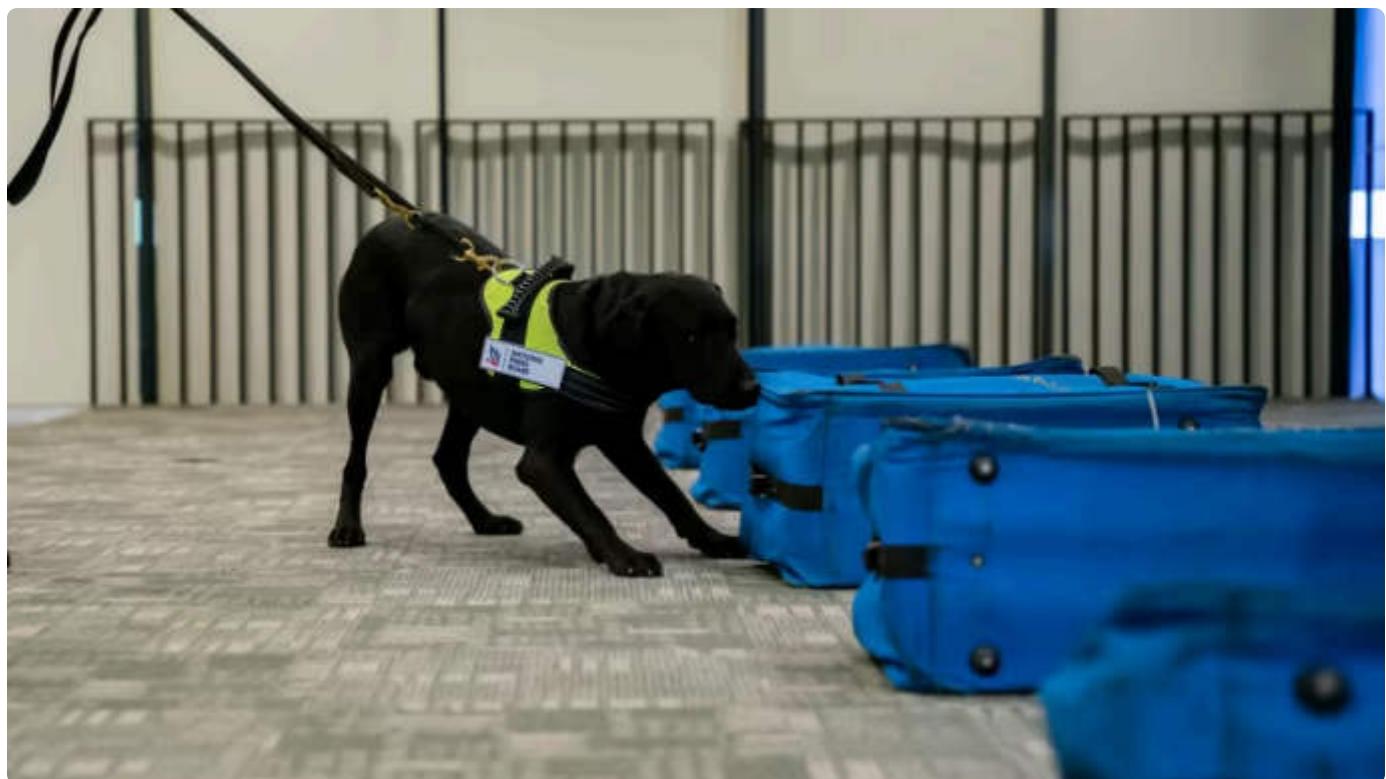
Singapore's emergence as a transit hub stems from geography and connectivity rather than intent.

“There are very few direct flights from Southern Africa to the Far East, so passengers are routed via these transit nodes,” Prof Larkin said, citing Singapore alongside Hong Kong and Dubai as transit points for smugglers.

Ms Priya Kannan, senior investigation officer at local wildlife non-governmental organisation Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), said that Singapore sits “at the heart of our region’s shipping route”, making it a hotspot for illegal wildlife trafficking through both air and sea cargo.

Recent cases underscore the challenge. In January 2024, South African national Gumede Sthembiso Joel was jailed for 24 months – Singapore's [heaviest sentence for wildlife smuggling](#) to date – after pleading guilty to transiting through Singapore with 20 rhino horns destined for Laos.

Ms Kannan said increased post-pandemic air traffic demands more resources at checkpoints. “This should also be paired with innovations in how we can better detect illegal



A dog from the K9 Unit undergoes training to check for wildlife and wildlife products in luggage. (Photo: NParks)

SINGAPORE'S MULTI-PRONGED DEFENCE

The National Parks Board (NParks) deploys the dogs at the borders, specially trained to detect wildlife and wildlife products such as elephant ivory or pangolin scales, said the agency's director for wildlife trade Xie Renhui.

The canines' sense of smell is estimated to be 10,000 to 100,000 times more acute than that of humans, which helps them locate items that may escape detection by radiographic scanners and visual inspections, she said.

The dogs were instrumental in detecting Gumede's 2022 smuggling attempt, she added.

NParks has a "zero-tolerance stance" on using Singapore as a conduit to smuggle in wildlife, Ms Xie said. The agency's approach combines legal enforcement, public education and collaboration with overseas enforcement agencies and NGOs.

Under the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act, trafficking CITES-scheduled Appendix I species without permits carries penalties of up to S\$200,000 per specimen and eight years' jail – identical for transit, import and export cases.



An NParks staff member shows the media a rhino horn out of the 20 pieces that were seized from a cargo flight bound for Vientiane in Laos on Nov 18, 2025. (Photo: Reuters/Edgar Su)

Border screening relies on risk assessment frameworks with profiles and indicators targeting illegal wildlife trade, which are "developed and refined regularly", Ms Xie said.

NParks' Centre for Wildlife Forensics also works with international experts using DNA analysis to gain deeper insights into seizures and identify trafficking patterns.

"The fight against the illegal wildlife trade is transnational, and requires strong cooperation on the bilateral, regional and international levels," Ms Xie said, noting the agency's close collaboration with INTERPOL and overseas experts for investigations and enforcement.

She urged the public to ensure purchases contain no endangered species parts and to report suspected illegal wildlife trade to NParks.

THE DEMAND THAT DRIVES DEATH

The trade persists due to unfounded beliefs about medicinal properties – including claims that rhino horn can cure cancer – and the horn's status as a luxury item demonstrating significant wealth, observers said.



A herd of rhinoceroses seen from a distance in the Greater Kruger area. (Photo: CNA/Fabian Koh)

“The end users seem to be able to ignore the effects of their actions, as they do not see the results of their demand for rhino horn, such as the devastation and destruction that the poaching of a rhino can cause,” said Prof Larkin.

The disconnect between consumer and crime enables the trade's continuation. “Poaching is not considered as that serious a crime in many parts of the world, particularly if the poachers and the end users are continents apart,” he added.

ACRES CEO Kalai Vanan Balakrishnan put it bluntly: “As long as people still see value in horns being used for anything other than being part of a sentient being, the killing will continue.”

Source: CNA/fk(cy)

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