



couple of white rhino emerged from the trees. It was Africa at its best.

Rifle shots shattered any illusions

We were looking forward to spending time around the fire later that night with their APU team. Then a cell phone rang with the news that rifle shots had been heard, shattering the illusion of an African game reserve at peace. The APU team sprang into action and we were left to a lonely braai, with a reserve manager worried about his team.

The poachers had timed their strike just before the sunset making it difficult for the APU to follow their tracks at night. We listened sombrely to the communication between the APU leader and his team, as they set up ambush sites along a section of the reserve's fence, and settled in for a long, night. These men had just worked a full shift in 40 degrees, and were now into a 12-hour watch and wait cycle. We were experiencing a rhino poaching as it happened.

It was a deeply sad evening as we sat waiting, also feeling a sense of rage, knowing that a rhino was surely at the mercy of poachers, a few kilometres away, and not a damn thing could be done.

We woke to the news that the poachers had slipped the APU's net and the reserve was on high alert for a rhino poaching. As the sun climbed, a chopper was sent up to scour for a carcass and the APU team spanned out into reserve.

Hours later, still no news and we were jolted into another level of understanding: from seeing efforts to proactively prevent poaching, to a leap in understanding what it takes to try and stop it as it happens and finally, experiencing the after-effects.

The work doesn't stop with the death of a rhino. It intensifies. Long hours



Above left: Miles and miles of road show how challenging it is to patrol a reserve. **Wildside salutes the courage and bravery of all anti-poaching teams in South Africa.** Working men and women, many of whom leave family and friends behind, only to place their lives on the line pushing back the tide of increasing illegal hunting and poaching of South Africa's fauna and flora. **Above:** An official anti-poaching team whose identities cannot be revealed for security reasons.

in the scorching heat searching dense bush for evidence, weeks following leads, cajoling officials to take your case seriously, and - if you're lucky - seeing poachers arrested and finally, in court. But, they often walk free or with a slap on the wrist, ready to poach again within days. Even if a rhino poacher is jailed, there are plenty more ready to step into the breach.

And underlying it all, dealing with a personal sense of failure for every rhino killed under your watch.

We were given a glimpse of what it means to fight for South Africa's rhinos and were humbled by the men and women on the ground. With new understanding of their proficiency and dedication, we asked what's the best role

for ACT to play besides raising funds. "Tell the story," said an APU leader.

As the need for funding grows, the goal to raise R10million is seen as a lifeline, a thread of support for the men and women fighting to save our rhinos. We also hear the resounding voices of South Africans, and from people all over the world that there will be a future for our rhinos.

Rhino poaching has become an invasion of our inherent sense of human decency, an attack on our identity, of all that it means to be African. To the men and women we met: thank you for putting your lives on the line to protect these precious icons of Africa. Africa's spirit lies in its people and its wilderness. We cannot let our spirit die. **W**