



Above: Skulls of rhino that were poached clearly showing the bullet holes.

networks that stretch to Johannesburg and beyond. We were told about the shadowy ‘middle-men’ who coordinate the work of spotters, shooters and transporters, moving the horn from live animal to superiors in the international organised crime chain.

Poachers earn up to R40,000 per kg. As a rhino’s horn can weigh 6 kgs, they can net R240,000 for a night’s work. Spotters get paid up to R50,000. At the end of the chain, powdered rhino horn is selling for upwards of R480,000 per kg on the international market.

We learned of the heroic efforts of each reserve to stop poaching in all its forms including: building and maintaining relationships with communities; education programmes in neighbouring schools; detective work to help the SAPS and state prosecutors build a solid case; maintaining informant networks and paying for information: from R2,000 reward for information on firearms used in wildlife crime, to R30,000 for information on rhino poachers. There’s an

arsenal of anti-poaching efforts but it costs a crippling amount of money that reserves are scraping to find.

Death threats

The human cost factor must be included: nearly every person we met had received death threats. One committed APU leader knows he could be targeted any day. Fear of ambush is not uncommon; “They’ll make it look like a botched hijacking though – not a rhino hit,” said one ranger.

The APU experts said that paramilitary-style training was top of their needs list now. Six months ago, it was basic equipment and aerial support: now, they’ve added training teams in advanced tracking and armed combat, supported with high-tech equipment to keep up with the poachers.

Aerial surveillance is still key, and every reserve sang the praises of the Bateleurs – the pilots who voluntarily fly over reserves involved in Project Rhino

KZN. It was heartening to see how the camera traps we purchased from the 2011 Skydive for Rhinos proceeds were being put to good use. Installed in several reserves, they are beneficial for monitoring rhino, threatened species and capturing images of smaller game injured by snares. Poachers have been caught on camera which aids the reserves in identifying culprits.

The problem is catching poachers red-handed. It’s easy for arm-chair activists to moan about low levels of arrests and prosecutions: but you try catch a highly mobile and determined group of poachers in a 30,000ha reserve at night, with only a small team to patrol fences that stretch 20Km and more, when your every move is being watched.

We moved onto another reserve arriving in the late afternoon. Once in the reserve, the manager walked us to an outcrop of rock overlooking a beautiful river. As the sun sank, elephants meandered into the shallows to drink, buffalo grazed peacefully near reed beds and a