

OUTRAGEOUS Rhino Warfare

Night vision equipment, international crime syndicates, gun silencers, secret aerial support, professional marksmen, military precision – sounds like warfare? It is and a bloody one at that. There is a battle being waged between wanton rhino killers and rhino warriors who will do everything to put a stop to this outrageous wildlife crime.

Jennifer Crawford investigated rhino poaching and found uncomfortable facts and perplexing debates. Remarkable people and organisations have been galvanised into action tackling the war on poaching at every level giving hope to saving this iconic animal which is one of South Africa's world renowned Big 5.

1 RHINO IS KILLED IN SOUTH AFRICA EVERY 20 HOURS. Experts are talking about rhinos being wiped out in South Africa in 15 years, and extinction within 40 years if the poaching continues unabated. South Africa holds 93% of the African populations of near threatened southern white rhino *Ceratotherium simum simum* and critically endangered black rhino *Diceros bicornis*. The black rhino was slowly recovering from a 90% decline in the 1970s - but, rhino poaching in South Africa has escalated rapidly since 2008 and now spread from protected areas to privately owned populations.

WHY THE INCREASE IN POACHING?

Rhino populations have largely been decimated in Africa and poachers turned their attention to South Africa a few years ago with a marked increase in poaching of rhinos for their horns from 2008. Some attribute this increase in poaching to a rapidly increasing middle-class in the Far East, with an insatiable desire for rhino horn because of a belief that the horn is medicinal, and an aphrodisiac. Although science has shown that rhino horn has no medicinal effects, myths persist. In China and Vietnam, rhino horn is promoted as a remedy for nearly everything, from fever to cancer.

There is another more sinister suggestion for the increase in poaching in the past few years. A 2008 proposal from the China Institute of Science and Technology Research, Beijing, entitled Proposal for Protection of the Rhinoceros and the Sustainable Use of Rhinoceros Horn – funded by the State Soft Sciences Project, Development for Traditional Chinese Medicine Research – contains disturbing information indicating that China is already farming rhinos in order to use rhino horn in traditional Chinese medicine. (www.savingrhinos.org).

However, Albi Modise, spokesperson for the South African Department of Environmental Affairs said that “The latest seizure of rhino horn in Hong Kong is an example of the increased cooperation between the People's Republic of China and South Africa. This follows a September meeting between officials to discuss issues relating to CITES and law enforcement between the two countries. This was followed by another meeting between the Minister of Environmental Affairs in South Africa, Ms Edna Molewa and her Chinese counterpart from the State Forestry Administration in November 2011.” Further, Mr Modise condemned the continued illegal killing of rhinos and assures the public that interventions have been put in place to address.

CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international agreement between governments of various countries, which aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival of which South Africa and China are signatories.



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