

S.Africa: Funds raised to fight rhino poaching

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(AP) -- A fundraising campaign aimed at putting rhino poachers in jail was welcomed Friday by a South African conservationist.

Michael Knight, head of park planning and development for South Africa's national parks department, said money raised by the Florida-based International Rhino Federation would be used to support such efforts as teaching park employees how to safeguard evidence at crime scenes.

More South African [rhinos](#) were poached - 341 - in the first 10 months of 2011 than in all of 2010, which was a record poaching year with 333 animals lost. The International Rhino Federation project is for parks in [South Africa](#) and neighboring Zimbabwe, which also has seen increased poaching.

An Asian economic boom in recent years is believed to be behind the spike in poaching, with a growing middle class in countries like China and Vietnam able to afford exotic purported remedies like powdered rhino horn.

"We're losing animals like crazy," Knight, who also chairs the rhino specialist group of the International Union for [Conservation of Nature](#), said in an interview. "But the prosecutions are falling way behind."

Knight said police in isolated areas of South Africa are not always experienced in investigating [environmental crime](#). He said rangers and

others would be trained to support police and prosecutors.

In court, he said, "You need to have the most up-to-date information, you need to have the most convincing arguments."

The federation launched its fundraising this week. Donations will fund training in collecting evidence and information. The federation also plans to distribute basic crime scene kits containing cameras, fingerprinting materials and evidence bags.

In an interview, federation director Susie Ellis said that an anonymous donor kicked off the fund with \$25,000. She said she spoke with South African security officials in March about how best to use the money.

"It's a small project that we hope will have a big impact," she said, adding that the first training session is set for early February in South Africa.

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