

Rhino killings for horns rapidly rise in S. Africa (Update)

November 28 2012, by Jon Gambrell



In this photo taken Friday, Nov. 22, 2012, a carcass of a rhino lays on the ground at Finfoot Lake Reserve near Tantanana, South Africa. South Africa says at least 588 rhinos have been killed by poachers this year alone, 8 rhinos at the Finfoot Lake Reserve, the worst recorded year in decades. The number has soared as buyers in Asia pay the U.S. street value of cocaine for rhino horn, a material they believe, wrongly, medical experts say, cures diseases. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

(AP)—By the time ranchers found the rhinoceros calf wandering alone in this idyllic setting of scrub brush and acacia, the nature reserve had

become yet another blood-soaked crime scene in South Africa's losing battle against poachers.

Hunters killed eight rhinos at the private Finfoot Game Reserve inside the Vaalkop Dam Nature Reserve this month with single rifle shots that pierced their hearts and lungs. The poachers' objective: the rhinos' horns, cut away with knives and popped off the dead animals' snouts for buyers in Asia who pay the U.S. street value of cocaine for a material they believe cures diseases.

That insatiable demand for horns has sparked the worst recorded year of rhino poaching in South Africa in decades, with at least 588 rhinos killed so far, their carcasses rotting in private farms and national parks. Without drastic change, experts warn that soon the number of rhinos killed will outpace the number of the calves born—putting the entire population at risk in a nation that is the last bastion for the prehistoric-looking animals.

"This is a full-on bush war we are fighting," said Marc Lappeman, who runs the Finfoot reserve with his father Miles and has begun armed vigilante patrols to protect the remaining rhinos there. "We here are willing to die for these animals."

Unchecked hunting nearly killed off all the rhinos in southern Africa at the beginning of the 1900s. Conservationists in the 1960s airlifted rhinos to different parts of South Africa to spread them out. That helped the population grow to the point that South Africa is now home to some 20,000 rhinos—90 percent of all rhinos in Africa.

From the 1990s to 2007, rhino poachings in South Africa averaged about 15 a year, according to a recent report by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC. In 2008, however, poachers killed 83 rhinos and by 2009, the number hit 122, the report says.

The killings grew exponentially after that: 333 in 2010, 448 in 2011 and as of Tuesday, at least 588 rhino killed this year alone, according to South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs.

"That the year-on-year rhino poaching losses have continued to grow in the face of heightened awareness, constant media attention and concerted law enforcement effort is testament to just how pervasive and gripping the rhino crisis in South Africa has become," TRAFFIC wrote in its August report. "If poaching continues to increase annually as it has done since 2007, then eventually deaths will exceed births and rhino numbers in South Africa will start to fall."



In this photo taken Friday, Nov. 22, 2012, Miles Lappeman, owner of Finfoot Lake Reserve near Tantanana, South Africa, and his son Marc, right, walk past the carcass of a rhino. South Africa says at least 588 rhinos have been killed by poachers this year alone, 8 rhinos at the Finfoot Lake Reserve, the worst recorded year in decades. The number has soared as buyers in Asia pay the U.S. street value of cocaine for rhino horn, a material they believe, wrongly, medical experts say, cures diseases. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

Most of the killings, according to government statistics, occur in South Africa's massive Kruger National Park, covering 19,400 square kilometers (7,500 square miles) in the country's northeast abutting its borders with Mozambique and Zimbabwe. There, the impoverished slip across the park's borders, largely from Mozambique, to kill and dehorn rhino, earning the equivalent of months' wages in a single night of hunting. South Africa has deployed soldiers in the park with dogs to sniff out poachers, but their small force can't sufficiently cover a park that's roughly the same size as New Jersey.

The horns are sold by criminal gangs and smuggled into Asia. While poachers have been shot dead and hundreds of suspects arrested this year, the rhino killings continue unstopped largely because the trade is transnational and worth millions of dollars, said Julian Rademeyer, a journalist in South Africa who wrote "Killing for Profit," a book on rhino poaching that came out this month.

"The problem with law enforcement strategies is they end where our border ends," Rademeyer said.

And law enforcement can't always be trusted in South Africa, where corruption eats away at the nation. There have been several cases of rangers assigned to guard parks being arrested for aiding poachers.

With both South Africa and Swaziland allowing rhino to be hunted legally, criminal gangs have obtained hunting licenses under false pretenses. Gangs have hired prostitutes and the poor from Asia and Eastern Europe to pose as big game hunters with licenses to kill a single rhino apiece, Rademeyer said. Their "trophies" end up shipped back to Asia, where the horns are removed and sold.



In this photo taken Friday, Nov. 22, 2012, Miles Lappeman, owner of Finfoot Lake Reserve near Tantanana, South Africa, walks past the carcasses of a rhino and its calf. South Africa says at least 588 rhinos have been killed by poachers this year alone, 8 rhinos at the Finfoot Lake Reserve, the worst recorded year in decades. The number has soared as buyers in Asia pay the U.S. street value of cocaine for rhino horn, a material they believe, wrongly, medical experts say, cures diseases. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

Rhino horn is made of keratin, a tough protein found in human fingernails. Doctors have repeatedly said the material has no medical value. In Asia, however, demand for rhino horn has jumped dramatically. Experts blame it partly on a widespread rumor in Vietnam that rhino horn cures cancer, though some elite Vietnamese grind up horn and take it as a hangover cure or as a fever reducer.

The ever-increasing demand saw Vietnamese poachers kill the last of Vietnam's rare Javan rhinoceros last year for its horn. The World Wildlife Fund ranked Vietnam as the worst country for wildlife crime in Asia and Africa in July. The country is seen as having lax laws on importing horns. Diplomats at the Vietnamese Embassy in South Africa's capital Pretoria have also been linked to trafficking. Earlier this month, a South African court sentenced a Thai national to 40 years in prison for selling rhino horns.

With high-level officials involved and a strong demand, Rademeyer said poaching "will probably get a lot worse before it gets any better."

Rhino poachers have gone beyond Kruger and are targeting private farms and reserves. Poachers likely watched the Finfoot Game Reserve, which breeds rhino for game viewing, for days, Lappeman said. Workers caught a man in ragged clothes lurking around the park with more than 1,000 rand (\$115) in crisp hundred rand bills and a new mobile phone in his pocket around the time of the killings, Lappeman said.

The poachers fired on the rhino far from the game lodge, probably moving methodically closer as no one came to investigate the shots, he said. Lappeman said he and his father only found the dead rhinos the day after seeing the lost calf.

One wounded mother rhino walked all the way to the property's edge, finally dying on a dirt road to be found first thing that morning.

"She had physically come to the road to die, to say, 'I'm dying, come fetch my calf,'" Lappeman said.

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