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Poaching war is escalating - official

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Mbombela - Five days after the rhino was gunned down, its carcass had been picked apart by scavengers while the poachers who killed the threatened animal had probably taken its valuable horn over the South African border into Mozambique.

All that was left of its calf was a skull swarming with flies and a few other bones collected by crime scene investigators at the Kruger National Park for DNA tests that may one day be used to link the poachers to the stolen horns.

South Africa, home to almost all rhino on the continent, has deployed its military, diplomats and police to protect the animals from legions of poachers.

But that has not been enough to put rhino on the brink of species decline, whereby more of the animals are being killed than are being born each year.

"We are fighting a counter-insurgency now. The war is escalating. It is more aggressive and there is more firepower," said Johan Jooste, a retired army major general tasked with militarising Kruger's park rangers.

South Africa is on pace to lose 812 rhino this year to poachers. Most of them come over the border from Mozambique and sell the horn to international crime syndicates to feed rapidly rising demand in Southeast Asia, where the horn is thought to cure cancer and tame hangovers.

That figure would set a record although it would still not be enough to lead to species decline.

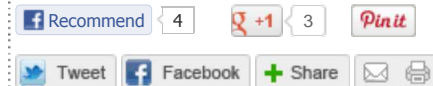
However, more than 1 000 rhino would be killed in 2014 if the poaching rate increases at its current pace. That would mean about 5% of the country's rhino population would have been gunned down for horns sold to the newly affluent at pharmacies in places like Hanoi at prices higher than gold.

"The rate of poaching continues to rise and we are getting ever closer to that dangerous tipping point," said Jo Shaw, the rhino co-ordinator for the global conservation agency World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

One rhino expert, Richard Emslie, sees the tipping point coming in 2015 under current trends. The environment ministry forecasts from 2016, and once that happens, wild rhino could be wiped out in the country a decade after that.

Devils

Rhino horn has been used for centuries in Chinese medicine, where it was ground into powder to treat a range of maladies including rheumatism, gout and even possession by devils.



KNP ranger

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is no basis in science to support the claim.

Kruger is at the front line of the battle, but its enormous size has played into the favour of poachers.

To reach the carcasses of the mother and calf required a two hour hike from the nearest dirt road. It is hard to find a poacher in a vast expanse where disappearing in tall grass is as easy for a leopard as it is for a man with a high-powered rifle.

"Once the poachers fire a shot, they are detected and they have to get the horn across the border as soon as possible," said Frik Rossouw, an environmental management inspector for the park leading the investigation on the rhino cow and calf.

Poachers are usually from poor border villages lured into the trade by crime syndicates, which then transport rhino horn out of Mozambique along the same routes used to bring in drugs from Southeast Asia.

Poachers come in groups of about two to five, with enough food and water for the trip and enough firepower to gun down the animals as well as battle rangers with military assault rifles.

Some poachers try to hide the sounds of their rifles with silencers, but that can reduce accuracy and make it more likely they will go home with nothing.

"The horn on the calf weighed about 1kg, not all that much, but it doesn't matter for the poachers. Any rhino is fair game for them," Rossouw said.

Dirty and smelly

His investigation is a dirty and smelly business, searching for bullets with metal detectors and reaching into the carcass to rip ribs out of the decaying animal for DNA tests.

The idea is to find the poachers before they find the rhino. To do this, the National Park Service has enlisted the help of police, customs agents and ex-members of the military to train new rangers to fight in the bush.

Once fresh signs of a poacher incursion are found, the park dispatches an armed interception team by helicopter. Rangers with a search dog are dropped off on the ground while the helicopter with a sniper on board keeps watch overhead.

If rangers are lucky, they can arrest a member or two from a poacher gang. Most poachers escape to try again while a few are shot every month in battles with rangers.

South Africa has been imposing stiffer sentences for poaching, with recent convictions leading to 10 to 15 years in prison.

However, in Mozambique, poaching is still a minor crime where prosecutions are rare.

South Africa and Mozambique started knocking down sections of the border fences in Kruger about a decade ago to give animals more area to roam.

There are voices in South Africa now calling for it to be rebuilt to protect the rhinos on its side.

"We are dealing with people at the bottom," anti-poaching commander Jooste said of the poverty that drives people into arms of international syndicates for the rhino horn trade.

"They are treated as cannon fodder and they are unlimited."

- Reuters

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