



# The plight of the rhino in South Africa

*Are they being poached to the point of extinction?*

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One of the main highlights for a tourist traveling to South Africa is a visit to a game park. The Kruger National Park, situated approximately 400 kilometers from Johannesburg is the oldest and most established. The area of this park comprises almost 19,000 square kilometers. As a comparison, pre-1967 Israel was 21,000 sq. km!

Abutting the Kruger Park is the privately owned Sabi Sand Game Reserve, which occupies an area of 650 sq km. The Kruger Park forms its eastern and southern borders. Since there is no separating fence, animals are free to roam back and forth from Kruger to Sabi Sand.

Sabi Sand is divided into several individual, privately-owned large estates which have established high-end luxury lodges on their properties to accommodate an increasing number of affluent local and foreign tourists.

Many of these properties have reciprocal arrangements with each other allowing vehicles to traverse from one to the other. The advantage of the private reserves is that game drives in open 4x4 safari vehicles are manned by a game ranger and tracker and can move off the roads.

Despite this intrusion into the bush, wild life is carefully protected and no more than two vehicles are allowed concurrently at each sighting. In contrast, animal viewing in the Kruger Park is almost always done in private vehicles traveling on established roads.

We stayed at Kirkmans Kamp which is operated by the upscale travel company, "Beyond." The lodge was originally built in the 1920's as a private home-stead. Its rolling lawns overlook the Sand River.

Although it has been modernized, this luxury lodge still retains its old world charm and rustic atmosphere which is especially evident in the cozy and elegant sitting, dining and bar areas.

Displayed prominently on the walls are old photographs and other mementos rich in history which impart a very special ambience.

Breakfasts and lunch were served on shady verandas, and dinners in romantic candle-lit bush settings. The food was excellent and the experienced chef catered to all dietary requirements. The colonial atmosphere of gracious style and luxury has been retained in the 18 air conditioned suites. Each has a veranda and en suite bathroom.

The experienced staff is trained to ensure the guest's every need. Hot water bottles are even supplied for the early morning game drives. Guests are also treated to champagne breakfasts in the bush.

Sabi Sand is home to a high density of a variety of animals. Nevertheless the huge herds of wildebeest, buffalo and zebra commonly seen in the Ngorongoro and Serengeti Game Parks in Tanzania are rare here. Sabi Sand does boast to be the home of the so-called "big five," a name coined by hunters over a century ago and refers to the lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino.

Traditionally these were the most difficult and dangerous animals to hunt. It is not uncommon to spot all five in a single game drive. Our guide and ranger, Mark, had 6 years experience and was a mine of information.

Our tracker, Colin, had been in the business for 15 years. He was from the Shangaan tribe who are renowned for their tracking and hunting abilities.

With their combined experience we were set up to see great game. However game viewing is a hit and miss affair. Luck as well as experience is required. This area is reported to have the highest density of leopards in Southern Africa. Some of us viewed these magnificent animals on every game drive whereas others were less fortunate.

Of the big five, perhaps the most interesting is the rhinoceros, commonly abbreviated to rhino. These animals are still found in the wild in central and southern Africa, India, Nepal, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Thousands of years ago rhinos also roamed Europe and are depicted in the Lascaux cave paintings (which date from 17300 BCE) as well as on mosaics from the Roman Empire.

In 1515, the famous German artist, Albrecht Dürer made a woodcut based on a description and sketch by an unknown artist. Since Dürer never saw the animal, his representation is not very accurate.

The name rhinoceros is of Greek origin and is derived from two words; "rhino" – nose, and "ceros" – horn. Today there are five species. The Indian, Sumatran and Javan are native to Asia. The two remaining species, the white and black rhino, are found in Central and Southern Africa. The name white is a misnomer.

It is derived from the Dutch "weit," which means wide and refers to the wide squared upper lip of this particular species which is especially adapted for grazing. This name was then transposed into the Afrikaans language as "wit" meaning white; the other species was subsequently named black. Black rhinos are far rarer than their white counterpart and their upper lip has a pointed shape.

This is because they are browsers and feed on leaves and fruit from tree branches. Both species are in fact dark grey in color and it is their lip shape which distinguishes them. The white rhino is also much larger, more gregarious and moves around in groups. The black rhino, in contrast, is smaller and solitary.

The weight of a white rhino may exceed two tons and its life span is approximately 35 to 40 years. The females have a gestation period of 16 months and reproduce only every two and a half to five years. Although they have relatively poor vision, rhinos have a keen sense of hearing and smell. The rhino has a symbiotic relationship with the tick bird or oxpecker. The bird eats ticks it finds on the rhino and when there is danger, these birds emit a sharp alarm call.

Without question, the most unique characteristic of rhinos is their horns. The African species have two, the longer of which is at the front of its nose and averages 90 centimeters in length and can reach 150 cms. These horns grow as much as 8 cms annually. The average pair of horns weighs about 6 kilograms.

Females use their horns to protect their young, while males use them to battle attackers although in the wild, the adult rhino has no true natural predator.

The horns of the rhino consist predominantly of keratin which is also the key structural component of fingernails and hair. Recent studies have revealed that in the core of the horn, there are also deposits of calcium and melanin. The rhino horn should be contrasted to elephant tusks which are composed of ivory. Deer antlers and antelope horns consist of bone. Horns also have an outside keratinized covering.

The horns have been the rhino's downfall since they are bought and sold on the black market. At one time thousands of these animals roamed the plains of Southern Africa. Since 1970 the world rhino population has declined by 90 percent.

ACCORDING TO recent estimates, there are currently approximately 18500 white rhinos spread across national parks, game reserves and private farms in Southern Africa.

Although international agreements forbid trade in rhino horn, it is valued in North Africa and the Middle East as an ornamental dagger handle. The main market, however, resides in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam.

In these countries, the horns, in powdered form, are coveted for pseudo-scientific medicinal uses including fevers, convulsions and even cancer. Traditional Chinese medicine practitioners consider the horn to be "life saving." It may also be used as an aphrodisiac.

None of these indications has been proven by evidence-based medicine and scientific studies have shown that the keratinized rhino horn has no proven medicinal value.

The rising prosperity of the peoples of the East means that traditional cures previously out of reach of the vast majority of the population are now affordable. This has increased the demand resulting in a sharp increase in rhino poaching.

In South Africa, 13 rhinos were poached on private farms and in national reserves in 2007 compared with 122 in 2009. In 2010, this reached a total of 330. By May of this year, it has been estimated that 150 rhinos had already been killed.

The irony is that today rhinos are worth more dead than alive. The current black market price for a kilogram of horn is approximately \$55,000 which is equivalent to cocaine and three times that of gold.

Because of the lucrative black market, most of the large scale poaching is controlled by cartels and international syndicates. The animals are often tracked by helicopter, shot with a tranquilizer dart and the horns sliced off with a chainsaw.

This operation is often done by trained veterinarians and takes less than 10 minutes.

In less sophisticated situations, poachers come armed with hunting rifles and pistols. Many are from neighboring Mozambique and often have a military background. They track and shoot the animal in the knee to prevent it from running away. Sometimes an Achilles tendon is severed or the spine is chopped. Horns are then roughly removed with an axe.

What can be done to stem this carnage? Attempts to tackle the root cause by targeting the poachers have not been helpful and only about 3% of poachers are successfully intercepted.

The South African National Parks, private rhino owners and other organizations are working to improve security at borders, game reserves and farms but with little success to date. Better policing and more vigorous prosecution of offenders would go a long way to curbing the trade. To date 10 poachers have been killed this year and many others arrested.

Another suggestion is to legalize the trade in rhino horns. This would drive the black market prices down. A legal trade would also provide an economic incentive to ensure the rhinos' survival. There are a growing number of private rhino farmers in South Africa who own approximately 25% of the local white rhino

population. Many of these have permits to legally dehorn the animals. Once immobilized and anesthetized, the rhino horns are removed humanely above the root line, which enables the horn to grow back naturally. This dehorning also acts as a potential deterrent to poachers.

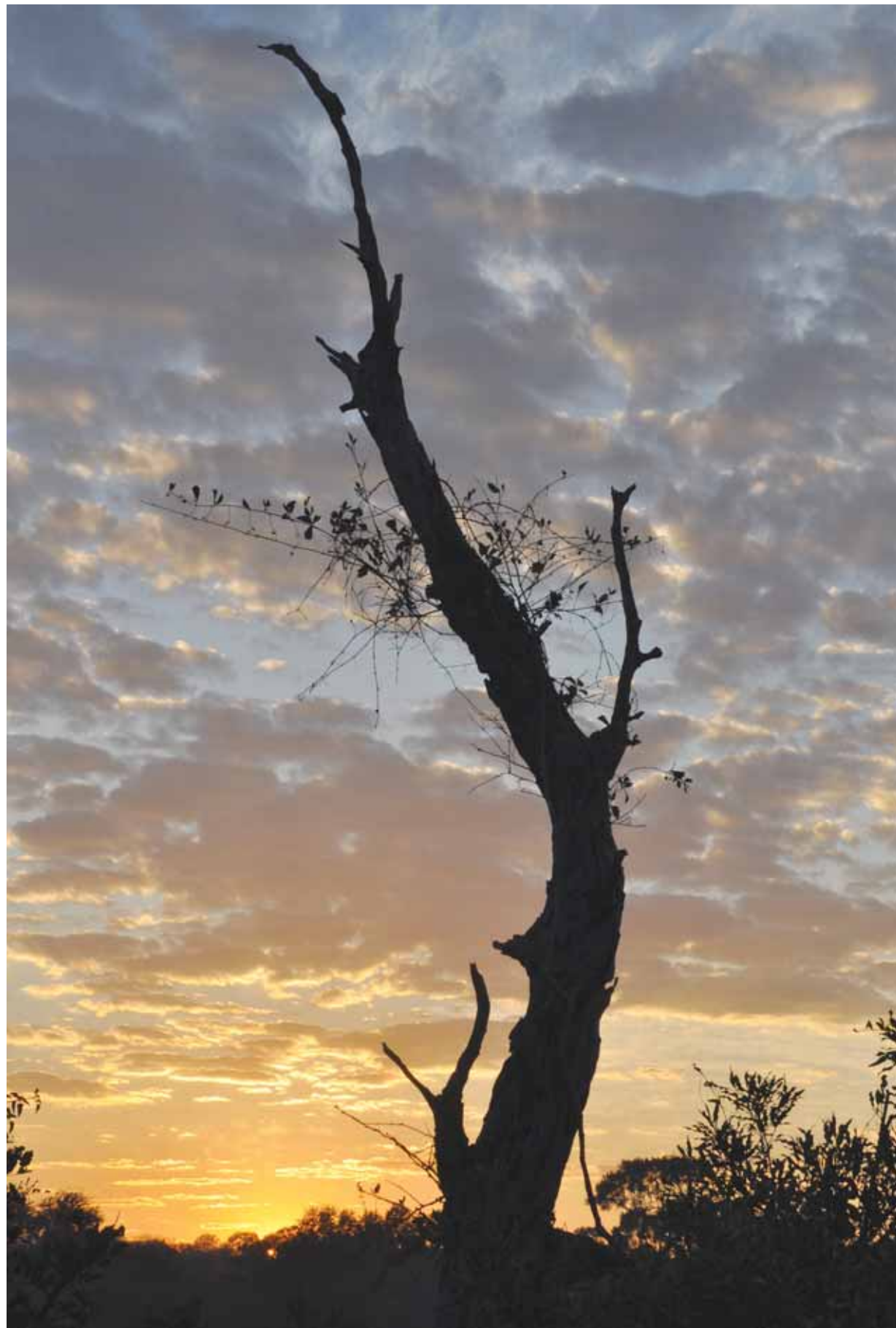
It has also been suggested that chemists could synthesize an artificial keratin, the main component of the horn. This material could then be released into the market which would also drive the prices down.

A more radical but unacceptable suggestion would be to anesthetize the animals, drill a small hole in the horn and implant a poison, for example cyanide. This

would not harm the animal but would be lethal to anyone swallowing the powder. This drastic situation has been condemned by wild life associations and is not a realistic option.

Unfortunately, to date, efforts to protect the rhino remain increasingly ineffective. The rhino poaching epidemic in Southern Africa has reached the point where one animal is lost daily.

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LUXURY LODGE. Sunrise in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. (Irving Spitz)



MAGNIFICENT GAME. Male and female rhinos with a calf. (Irving Spitz)