

# A few well-aimed shots can stop poachers making rhinos extinct

The slaughter is surging, with a South African rhino killed every seven hours for its horn. Time is running out but Owen Paterson explains how Britain can help save the species, not least by withdrawing aid for countries where horn is traded



Owen Paterson, above right with a Kruger park ranger, says poachers can receive a year's income in one night for killing a rhino (Media Intelligence Partners)

Rt Hon Owen Paterson  
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Even at 200ft the smell is abominable. The helicopter lands and the first thing you see are vultures looming in the trees above, scared off by the helicopter but staying close. On the ground, the strange thing is a bubbling sound from liquid within the carcass, and the buzzing of huge numbers of flies. As you get closer, the ranger explains that in order to save money, only one shot is used, which rarely kills the rhino.

A second poacher with a sharpened axe hamstring the rhino before chopping it with as deep a gash as possible in the back to damage its spinal chord. Then,

if the animal is still thrashing around, they gouge out its eyes and hack off its ears, to allow other poachers to approach and saw off the horn.

I saw three rhino carcasses on Friday and six more were killed over the weekend. I was shown videos by park rangers that documented many of these rhinos lingering on alive despite horrific injuries. These videos make one ashamed to be a human being.

I was in South Africa's Kruger national park last week, home to nearly half the world's 25,000 remaining rhinoceroses. I met General Johan Jooste who has the responsibility of patrolling an area the size of Wales. A former major-general in the South African army, he has three helicopters, two fixed-wing aircraft and three microlights. He is well funded, with a proper control centre and a thoroughly professional staff of 700 rangers, and yet he is losing the battle.

The reason is simple. Rhino horn is now worth more than \$65,000 (£42,000) a kilo. A poacher on the ground will receive up to \$5,000 for killing a rhino, which is more than a year's income in one night. It is small wonder that rhino killing is accelerating. South Africa lost only 10 rhinos in 2006, but the figure exploded to 1,215 last year — about one every seven hours.

Last year, following my visit to sites of elephant killings for the illegal ivory trade in Kenya, Britain's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) organised the London conference on wildlife trade, chaired by the then foreign secretary William Hague. The conference included Princes Charles, William and Harry as speakers, and delegates from more than 50 countries.

It recommended a three-pronged attack to end wildlife crime: better law enforcement, better demand management and long-term economic development. All three are needed to end wildlife crime in Kruger. The rangers' most urgent priority is better and more immediate intelligence, which could be provided by the interception of mobile phone traffic.

Present, admirable, civil liberties measures make it laborious for rangers to apply for intercepts. This would give instant intelligence, helping rangers pinpoint and locate poachers in such vast terrain before damage is done.

Second, they need better rules of engagement: rangers are not allowed to discharge firearms unless in immediate danger, strictly in self-defence. In Kenya, rangers are able to discharge firearms if they are in a dangerous situation. A clever poacher, caught in the act, will throw down his gun and run.

Tracking poachers on foot is time-consuming, but they are investing more in dogs, which are effective in finding poachers. They are also looking at better firearms, better thermal imagery, and using drones.

But what I find most remarkable is that the rangers know who the kingpins are. They know their names, and where they live across the border in Mozambique. But there is nothing they can do to prosecute them. Wildlife crime is not perceived to be a major crime in Mozambique and it is apparent that there is room for much greater co-operation between the South African and Mozambican governments to tackle the poachers. The Mozambican authorities do not want to upset a booming micro-economy in a traditionally impoverished area.

One idea is to create a buffer zone within Mozambique, with better cross-border law enforcement. Rangers' jurisdiction ends at the fence between the two countries. As soon as the smugglers are through the hole in the fence, rangers have to end their hot pursuit. In essence, South Africa is paying lots of money to protect the rhinos and Mozambican citizens are profiting from them. One ranger went so far as to call it "economic terrorism".

As it is, there is weak enforcement in Mozambique. Corruption is endemic. And penalties are light.

The economic pressures the rangers are up against are immense. Poachers are celebrated as local heroes for transforming the local shantytown economy on the Mozambican border. For those who are poor, living in an area with no economic activity, poaching is worth the risk. There is no understanding of the long-term value of these animals. They are seen to be an indulgence for rich individuals.

Previously involved in vehicle hijacking, Mozambican poachers find smuggling rhino horn is far more lucrative. In the shantytowns on the border, such as Massingir in the southwest of Mozambique, there are now grand two-storey houses paid for by a small number of wealthy middlemen, and there are huge parties when a haul is brought back.

Sadly, smuggling rhino makes economic sense where there are no alternatives to making such money. An alternative economy is needed in Mozambique and safari tourism is ripe for development. But critically the demand has to be killed off at its source.

The primary market for rhino horn is Vietnam, China and other growing markets in southeast Asia.

A senior Chinese official looked me in the eye when I was last in Beijing and told me that rhino horn is an established cure for a high fever. Others use it for hangover cures. Yet rhino horn has exactly the same medicinal qualities as

toe nails. It is desperately urgent to see attitudes in these countries changed and such cultural shifts are possible.

The Chinese have done well in changing demand on shark fin soup. For centuries it was considered a crucial component of any prestigious banquet, until Communist party members in Beijing and sports celebrities decreed it was no longer an acceptable practice. The Chinese take the care of their own elephants and tiger populations immensely seriously— enforced with the threat of the death penalty. There has to be a concerted campaign by public figures in Asia to make people aware of the true medicinal nature of rhino horn and the catastrophic consequences of the trade.

This is such a dramatic and accelerating crisis that western countries must use every lever to apply pressure on the “demand” states and the “supply” states.

Britain has influence in both Vietnam and Mozambique, not least through the international aid it gives. Last year the Vietnamese government received £7m from Britain in aid. We must say bluntly to the Vietnamese authorities that consuming rhino horn as medicine is simply not acceptable to British taxpayers.

Mozambique received £68m in 2014-15 in cash and resources. This should now be made conditional on co-operating with the South African government in protecting the dwindling number of rhinos.

Not only are wild rhinos at risk of extinction, but Interpol estimates that international wildlife crime is worth up to \$20bn. An elephant is killed every 15 minutes for ivory worth \$750 a kilo as Asian buyers see it as a safe investment, knowing that elephant numbers are finite.

Already elephant numbers in Tanzania’s Selous game reserve have crashed from 100,000 in the mid-1970s to 40,000 in 2011 and 13,000 now. It is also in our own security interests to destroy this criminal trade. Profits from the illegal ivory trade have found their way to al-Shabaab, the terrorist group behind the Westgate shopping centre attack in Nairobi in 2013 in which 67 people died.

Britain has a proud record, with conservation charities led by Tusk, raising much-needed funds and public awareness of the plight of these animals. But this crisis is worsening dramatically and time is short. The British government must not flinch from using every lever, including the withdrawal of aid, from countries that do not co-operate to stamp out this practice.

Future generations will never forgive us if we allow these remarkable animals, which have been on the planet for more than 30m years, to be driven to extinction within one generation.

## **LINKS**

UK 2020 Wildlife Crime <http://www.uk2020.org.uk/policy/wildlife-crime/>

Article published on The Sunday Times website:

[http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto.newsreview/features/artcile1524807.etc](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/newsreview/features/artcile1524807.etc)

The brutal reality of poaching – videos of rhinos found attacked by poachers from Mozambique:

(WARNING: These videos contain very disturbing content.)

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOkh9VaoiPdlOCay-jDCZFQ>

Tusk – a pioneering conservation organisation

<http://www.tusk.org>