

OPEN LETTER

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Rhino Killings

So the experts say that the two African rhino species have less than 13 years left to extinction, at the current poaching rate. In 13 years' time, the rhino will be fondly remembered by us. We will still have the photos and some memories. We are the generation who will have the honour of snuffing out the candle for these majestic animals.

At the beginning of the previous century there were about 850 thousand of these animals roaming freely around Africa. Since then, our greed for hunting trophies and ignorant desire to clear land for farming brought both species to its knees, as hunters shot them by the hundred. At one stage at the beginning of the last century, we had only about 20 white rhinos left in the wild here in South Africa. When we eventually wiped the snot out of our eyes, it was touch and go whether the white rhino would survive at all. Lucky for us today, we still have the Big 5 rather than the Big 4.

If the dodo could have been wrested from the brink of extinction, do you think this would have helped the tourist trade on the Indian Ocean islands? Yes, I should think so. And what would we do to have some Cape lions and quaggas to enjoy? In the bigger picture do we actually care much? Or does Joe Public just shake his head and continue driving to work. It is fact that there are far more burning issues, which our nation needs to attend to. What would the Australians do to turn back the clock to save their Thylacine - the Tasmanian tiger? Scientists are trying to put remaining DNA into other species cells to recreate this extinct animal - sounds virtually impossible and rather costly.

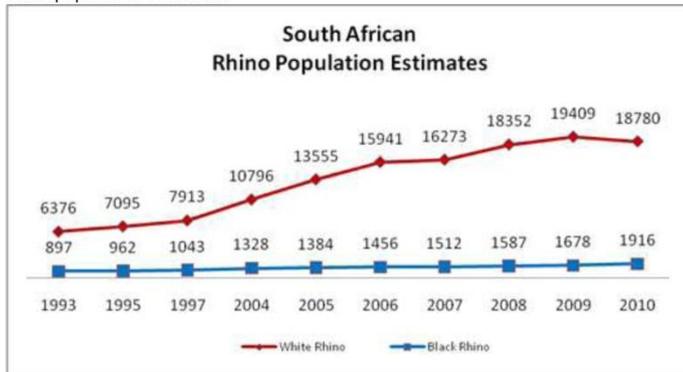
As the last country in the world with a reasonable number of rhinos left, the ball is firmly in South Africa's court to save these animals. This is a monumental responsibility which sits on our shoulders alone and the clock is ticking!

What is the world doing about the rhino issue? CITES have banned the trade in rhino horn except for the restricted, condoned and authorised trophy hunting. CITES has recently voted to continue with the ban on all rhino horn trade. It sounds like a sensible decision under the present situation - but is it?

Our esteemed government is undoubtedly 100% behind CITES and is at present doing everything in its power to prevent the imminent extinctions. They have changed the letter of law to enable judges to meter out harsher sentences to poachers and persons found in possession of illicit rhino horn are receiving heavier sentences. They have disbanded the Green Scorpions and they have sent the army into the Kruger National Park. What else.....? Oh yes, way back we repealed the death sentence, so poachers prefer to be caught by our Police rather than by authorities in any neighbouring country where the death sentence still applies.

What is the present status? We have all seen the poaching statistics:

Rhino population estimation:



2010 – 333 Poached

2011 – 448 Poached

2012 – 668 Poached

2013 – 1004 Poached

2014 – Over 1000!

I find it strange that the killings of rhino seemed to have stopped briefly during the Kruger National Park Staff strike. Or was that because no one was out looking then?

To ensure that our own park officials and staff are honest, I believe that anyone working with or close to wild life should take an annual voluntary lie detector test. All weapons used in national parks and reserves should undergo ballistic testing – just for the record. These measures may not seem to achieve much, but this would go a long way to keep up staff morale and confidence. This would also help to weed out any potential criminal intent.

Now that I have upset all the reserve personnel, let's ask CITES what they intend doing to help us in our hour of desperation. Will they vote again to uphold the ban? Early last century the USA banned alcohol. What happened as a direct result of that legislation is well known and documented. It created a thriving black market which spawned the greatest underworld syndicates the world has ever seen, which still persist to this day in that country. Does anything sound familiar here? The ban has not saved one single rhino and you can see from the statistics that we are losing the battle.

The gangsters will get them all in time. The horns legitimately taken from rhinos which die from natural causes are collected and stored. When the location of any such "store" is revealed to our syndicate friends, they go over and collect them. Not even museum exhibits are safe and even wall trophies have been stolen. Farmers and game reserves are particularly at risk, when it comes to horn storage. They may not sell the horn and are obliged to keep them or hand them over to authorities. They have invested hundreds of thousands of rand to buy rhino to stock their farms and reserves, which are now costing them dearly.

The rhinos they have invested in are now almost worthless and in some cases could cost them or their staff their lives – if they happen to get in the way of the poachers.

I visited a reserve recently where the two remaining rhinos are followed night and day by armed guards. That is sick. Nothing on the world's agenda is going to do anything to halt the slaughter. Nobody has a plan!

Typically in South Africa today, if you have a national crisis, you appeal to the citizens to dig in deep for donations. If the hospitals fall into wrack and ruin, you are wasting your time asking government to rectify a situation which is their responsibility to begin with! Luckily for the patients, the public have paid a second time to rectify the situation through their own donations, as happened recently. There will always be lots of excuses, talks, declarations and nothing will happen from the powers that be. We accept and expect nothing to happen, but we always live in hope that something will be different - this time. Does this also sound familiar?

So we get on the radio and TV and we implore the public and business to donate generously. Please, please give generously to the rhino cause! I have done my bit. I have bought the bangle and got my bumper sticker – I even have the water bottle! Where does all the money go? Hopefully some of it will end up buying some night vision binoculars which can be used by anti-poaching personnel, or for a new 4 x 4 Bakkie for the team. God bless South Africa – we have the patience of Job and the generosity of saints. This creates public awareness, however does not solve any problems as such. So is there anything else we can do to save the rhino from extinction in the next 13 years besides treating the symptoms?

We have tried from the bottom up through our public campaigning, but nothing will help unless we also have co-operation from the top down. I see heads shaking as I write.....are we yet again wasting our time?

No war has ever been won without profound action. It is now time for us to take profound action! We could set 60 tons of elephant ivory on fire to get the world's attention – like Kenya did (or a few tons of rhino horn for that matter) but that, I believe was a mistake and would be a waste.

Africa is notorious for allowing the rest of the world to exploit its resources and raw materials, making off with any added value. History is unfortunately repeating itself here too. As always, our precious resources are being spirited away without any benefit to the South African people – except our criminals of course!

When it comes to greed, anyone can be guilty. There is no way of knowing who is involved – poacher and syndicate members come from all walks of life. From the corrupt government officials who sign dubious hunting permits to the condoning of bogus diplomatic passport holders from Asian Countries. From the dishonest vets and bribe taking law enforcement officers, we have to worry about the very personnel who are supposedly caring for the beleaguered rhino – the anti-poaching units themselves along with reserve and farm staff, to the farmer who is selling his stock of rhino horn illegally - what can we do?

If you are stupid enough to be caught in the act, the law is on your side. The law will ensure that you get bail and proceedings will drag on for enough time for you to cover up evidence, for files to disappear and get the case thrown out of court. Do criminals prefer to be caught in South Africa, as there is more “justice” here, than in neighbouring countries?

If we could stop the demand overseas, the trade in illegal horn would stop overnight. But with the value for this commodity being higher than cocaine and precious metals, no wonder it is a target for gangsters.....”Just walk out into the bush and collect it – please. Thank you very much! “

In Yemen the horn is used to make ceremonial daggers for their youth, but have in recent years been encouraged to make the hilts out of alternate raw materials of construction. This only constitutes a fraction of all the horn poached. By far the majority of illicit rhino horn is smuggled into Vietnam, China and other Asian countries. There appears to be total apathy and a lack of will to enforce any international laws in respect of endangered species imported products or the subsequent use or possession thereof by these governments.

The whole world is up in arms about African elephants being poached for ivory. They have every right to be upset about this, however there are hundreds of thousands of these animals on our continent and they are far from endangered at this point in time. They are going to go soon also.

We shake our heads in amazement at the international greenies who seem to think that the demise of a relative few elephants as a global catastrophe. And we watch our last rhinos being wiped out – our hands remain tied. Our rhinos may stand some chance if the international community were as concerned about rhinos as they are about the elephants.

Much like the wiping out of shark populations throughout the world by Asian fishing fleets, these countries just carry on trade with impunity. A prominent Vietnamese politician declared that he has been cured of cancer from using medicine made of rhino horn. No wonder the gentry of Hanoi are lining up to get some of this wonder muti. The learned people of the world will declare that “education” is the only solution! Yes, in time. This is what has to happen and will....in time. But we do not have any time!

Can we stem the demand for rhino horn any time soon? The obvious answer is NO. The poachers will continue with their unspeakable cruel work, the price will rise as we clamp down on them and the commodity will become scarcer. I have a viable solution, but it will take all the best efforts of our authorities, professional nature conservation groups, associated professionals, public pressure, media and our local pharmaceutical companies.

To save both rhino species from inevitable extinction, South Africa must mass produce the required homeopathic medicine which is in such demand in Asia. We have all the raw materials right here in South Africa under lock and key. We have the expertise and pharmaceutical factories right here to produce the medicine. All we have to do is establish in what shape or form this medicine must be. In the ancient Chinese texts we read that by just drinking from a rhino horn chalis, a fever can be cured. The cures are performed with minute powder shavings mixed with other herbs. This is homeopathic medicine. As we know, most traditional medicines fall into this category. The Vietnamese are using the rhino horn powder as “babalas muti” after a good night out on the town.

CITES can come to the party if they want, but we have to do what we have to do! We must wrest the rhino horn trade from the criminals. We must manage and control the whole trade ourselves up to the point of export. The Asians are welcome to buy finished medicines of their choice on open auction from the country of origin – South Africa! A portion of profits will be used to build up rhino stocks, for their protection and to manage our rhino population.

What will happen when the present stock runs out? Horn can be harvested from live rhinos every 2 to 3 years, without causing any undue stress or discomfort to the animal. To the greenies and bunny huggers, this may seem unacceptable but it beats the hell out of being shot in the near future.

Research needs to be done into what form the medicine will take, which will be acceptable for personal consumption. The information needs to be formulated in each of the recipient countries with the assistance of the traditional healers who require the medicine.

We will send medical researchers over to the Asian countries in question to find out more about traditional medicine and its formulation. If the Asian market knows that the medicine will be manufactured by a reputable company - such as one of our local pharmaceutical companies, that purchase prices will be reasonable and the product legal, the Asian public will surely support this industry. The representatives of traditional healers will be invited out to inspect the pharmaceutical factory to witness the medicine manufacture, so they can give the required stamp of approval. If prepared homoeopathically, there will be enough horn for the whole of China.

The Asian consumers of rhino horn should be reminded that at least ¾ of all so called rhino horn remedies presently dispensed by traditional healers are not actually rhino horn at all, but buffalo horn and fake substitutes!

Once the rhinos have been ironed out, the next species to go will be our big cats of Africa. And our elephants! Just like the Asian tiger, our lions are next in the triad's sights. Although lions are not endangered in South Africa yet, we better start considering our options before we have a repeat fiasco.

Unfortunately we have only deferred the problem temporarily and our follow-up of public education within the Asian countries will have to be done with the aid of the international education system, namely TV documentaries, radio shows and school level education.

For the plan to come together all participants need to benefit – I ask forgiveness from the rhinos for any short term indignity suffered. It is feasible to fit false horns of various sizes to replace the real McCoy, once the top part of the horn has been harvested. Who will know the difference?

I have purposely not included statistics and specific information which I know is not common or public knowledge and which could be used to scupper our current achievements in the fight against rhino poaching.

Personally, I am a director or shareholder in various companies, but in my spare time, I spent as much time as I can in the bush and do various duties for local game reserves and volunteer groups. I am an honorary officer with the North West Parks and Tourism Board, but I am speaking in my private capacity only, and not on behalf of any organisation.

Ed Lemke