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# WESSA POSITION STATEMENT: Rhino Poaching



This position statement is based on the principles of ecologically sustainable development, and reflects the Vision; Mission; Aim; Style and Values of WESSA.

**This position statement recognises that the socio-economic and environmental landscapes are complex and so must make space for continuous change and emergence.**

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**Position statement review date: June 2013**

**This position statement replaces any other WESSA Position Statement on Rhino Poaching written before December 2012.**

Reg No. 1933/004658/08 (Non-Profit Company)

Registration Number in Terms of the Non Profit Organisation Act 1997: 000-716NPO Tax Exemption Number: 18/11/13/1903

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## INTRODUCTION

South Africa has two rhino species namely the black rhinoceros (including the two subspecies *Diceros bicornis bicornis* and *D. bicornis minor*) and the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*). Both species have been brought back from the brink of extinction within the last century, and South Africa can be very proud of this past conservation success. Today ninety three percent (93%) of the world's remaining white rhino and thirty nine percent (39%) of world's black rhino are presently protected in South Africa. The KNP alone is home to about 60% of South Africa's rhinos and it accounts for 40% of the world's rhino population.

Since 2007, South Africa has seen an unsustainable exponential increase in the levels of rhino poaching. The poaching is widespread across the country, with both state and privately owned rhinos being targeted. These ancient species that have survived many ages are now being pushed towards the precipice of extinction, primarily because their horns are in high demand.

## POSITION STATEMENTS

### POSITION STATEMENT ON RHINO POACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA

WESSA abhors the continuing annual increase in the level of poaching incidents and the numbers of rhinos being killed in South Africa. WESSA believes the country's rhinos need to be conserved for the following reasons;

- Protect our natural heritage, for current and future generations.
- Protect our nature-based tourism, which creates a significant numbers of sustainable jobs and livelihoods whilst bringing in foreign exchange.
- Ensure the survival of rhinos for their role as large herbivores in contributing towards natural ecosystem functioning
- As custodians of natural heritage, we have an obligation to protect, conserve and prevent the loss of such a species
- Ensure that the interventions, as far as possible, provide benefits to broader wildlife conservation in South Africa.
- To maintain an increasing rhino population in order to act as a source for population expansion and re-establishment in African range states.

WESSA is concerned that if unchecked, rhino poaching could result in the following:

- A decrease in South Africa's and therefore the global Rhino population
- A loss of genetic heterogeneity within the species
- A decrease in tourism and related reliant economies
- The increase in the illegal trade of other threatened, high value species
- The off-loading of rhinos due to increased risk and cost of owning them, meaning a reduction in rhinos populating suitable habit, leading to range contraction.
- A loss of natural capital and heritage
- A loss of a key species which plays an important role in driving ecological processes in the natural environment

One of WESSA's objectives, is to as far as possible, address the underlying causes of species loss in South Africa as well as ensuring their continued survival for future generations. In saying this, WESSA is also supportive of the sustainable utilization of wildlife where such utilization is based on well-founded information and it is carried out in an ethical and

legitimate manner. The benefits that are derived from such utilization must accrue to a net benefit for the species and a broader wildlife community.

WESSA believes that there will be no single cure for the current upsurge in poaching and so a multi-pronged approach is required that includes both proactive and reactive measures. WESSA has identified the following key areas which need to be strengthened at all levels (government and the private sector) in order to see a shift in the rhino poaching tide. These are to have;

- more coordinated and focused efforts and use of resources to fight poaching (i.e. less fragmented and more efficient approach),
- increased investment into the acquisition and access to more reliable information – this includes information from research, experiences and intelligence that leads to more informed decision making, increased preventative results and higher arrest and conviction rates.
- Good selection process – people are employed with the right qualification, skills and attributes for their job
- appropriately trained and resourced people in place to deal with this information,
- increased capacity to deal with the situation at all levels - from field rangers through to forensic specialists,
- a more efficient judicial system where rhino poaching is elevated in significance in terms of prosecution time and sentences,
- better prepared prosecutions – this includes better trained legal personnel who are better prepared as a result of better crime scene management and investigations,
- improved monitoring and legal enforcement,
- increased and continued public action and support,
- greater political will to bring rhino poaching to an end
- an accurate and well managed database of South Africa's rhinos,
- increased awareness and education

WESSA realises that we will not be able to effectively cover every angle acting alone, and with there being a limited pool of resources, we need to ensure that it is employed optimally to prevent duplication and to achieve maximum conservation benefit. WESSA's aim and challenge is to keep the public involved and informed through communication and actions that are in line with WESSA's mission of empowering the public to participate in caring for the Earth. WESSA encourages collaborative action and is working with a number of other credible and like-minded organizations for maximum impact.

WESSA continues to investigate new measures that can be added to our recommend suit of interventions. The ability of the poachers to be flexible in their *modus operandi* must be reflected in our aptitude to adapt timeously and creatively.

#### **POSITION STATEMENT ON AWARENESS AND FUNDRAISING FOR RHINOS**

Awareness-raising is still an important aspect in the fight against poaching. It provides a necessary platform for the provision of information to civil society to enable supportive action.

WESSA respects and supports the involvement of many organizations that are looking to make a difference, small or big. WESSA believes that strong collaborative efforts are critical to optimizing any available resources. However people need to be more aware and have access to the correct information in order to decipher for themselves whether a fund raising cause is credible, transparent, is well informed and has long-term conservation value.

WESSA is concerned about the numerous organizations that are involved in anti-rhino poaching campaigns for marketing benefits and fund/sales generation rather than for true conservation motives. WESSA thus advocates that corporate and

other supporters work collaboratively with credible and established conservation organizations. At the same time, WESSA cautions those that act illegally or misrepresent credible and trusted organisations in an effort to defraud conservation of valuable funds. This is taken very seriously as it is a criminal offence.

Another area of concern for WESSA is around voluntary support fatigue. Taking the above into account and adding a lack of information, misinformation, an overabundance of organizations raising funds for rhinos and a lack of political will, could potentially result in donor fatigue and disillusionment. WESSA thus cautions against this and will work hard at trying to mitigate some of these threats. This matter is serious as the job for both the public and private sector will become very difficult without strong and continued support.

### **POSITION STATEMENT ON RHINO EDUCATION**

WESSA has identified the need for a long term investment into the current rhino crisis through effective education to all but with a focus on tomorrow's generation and current decision-makers. Rhino education needs to instil an appreciation of these charismatic animals as natural heritage and the full range of values that they offer.

### **POSITION STATEMENT ON DEHORNING OF RHINOS**

WESSA does not support the act of de-horning of rhino as a primary method of trying to prevent rhinos from being poached for the following reasons-

- *Ethics and Natural*- The horn is a natural body feature on a rhino and should remain as such
- *Mortality risk* – in order to de-horn a rhino it has to be immobilized chemically, which puts the animals life in danger.
- *Social Behaviour*- depending on the environment in which the rhinos are in, their numbers and sex ratios, the horn is used for interspecific and intraspecific reasons.
- *Alternative value* – although yet to be conclusive, initial indications are that tourists put a higher value on seeing rhinos with horns than those that are dehorned.

Dehorning will only prove to be successful when used in conjunction with other conventional anti-poaching measures. In addition to this, it would only be viable on smaller free ranging populations due to the cost of the exercise. History has also shown that even rhinos that have had their horns removed are not immune to being poached.

### **POSITION STATEMENT ON SECURITY AND INVESTIGATIONS**

South Africa's National Parks and reserves are home to the largest remaining populations of rhinos on the planet. WESSA feels strongly that it is within the mandate of the government (both National and Provincial) to ensure adequate resources are provided to guarantee the security of our rhinos. This is in terms of investing in both skills, capacity development and sufficient financial resources. Treasury needs to recognize this new and growing threat and allocate the necessary budget towards it.

1. It is also the responsibility of the government through the Ministry of Defence and International Affairs to secure our rhino populations from poaching due to the fact that South Africa is experiencing incursions of armed (current or previously trained) foreign personnel (who have potential military training) into South Africa, which constitutes a threat to National Security.

2. WESSA is also in favour of seeing the centralization of all operations relating to rhino, in order to promote better coordination, governance and maximization of resources. These include permit centralization and the creation of a National Rhino Horn and Ivory stockpile which is properly quantified, audited and securely stored.
3. The current poaching tide will start to threaten tourism in South Africa unless it is brought under control. This will not only be through the direct impact of the decrease and potential complete loss of rhinos from a number of reserves, but by virtue of the fact that armed gangs of poachers, that do not hesitate to resort to violence, are infiltrating the countries key tourism destinations and posing a major threat to the entire tourism dependent sector.
4. The cost of securing rhino (both financial and security risk) is not only impacting on private rhino ownership but also on the potential population growth. This disinvestment is extremely concerning and WESSA recognizes the need for urgent measures to be deployed to prevent this.

#### **POSITION STATEMENT ON TRADE IN RHINO HORN**

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is charged with regulating the trade in rare and endangered species. All rhino species are currently included under Appendix I, which prohibits international trade in specimens of these species except when the purpose of the import is non-commercial, such as scientific research. However the white rhino population in South Africa is under CITIES Appendix II and is controlled by the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, Act 10 of 2004 (NEMBA) and its subsequent Threatened or Protected Species Regulations (TOPS) as well as the National Norms and Standards for the Marking of Rhinoceros Horn and the Hunting of White Rhinoceros for Trophy Hunting Purposes.

WESSA recognizes that the current ban on the trade in rhino horn is not preventing the poaching of rhinos. Thus WESSA considers the legalizing of the trade in rhino horn as exactly that- an option and one of a many that require thorough investigation and robust information, in order to make a more informed decision. WESSA supports the current processes which have set out to explore the viability of trade.

The next window of opportunity to submit a proposal for the legalization of the trade in rhino horn will be will be in 2016. Thus in the meantime this debate should not distract us from what needs to and can be done now.

#### **POSITION STATEMENT ON CONSERVATION AGENCIES AND THEIR ROLE IN RHINO CONSERVATION**

WESSA calls for Conservation agencies to be better supported, better funded and capacitated in order to be more effective. Such agencies should also strengthen their relationships with civil society organizations and private rhino owners for additional support and knowledge sharing to combat poachers.

WESSA is very supportive of many of the government interventions and congratulates those that are putting their lives on the line to save our natural heritage.

#### **POSITION STATEMENT ON THE ROLE OF LEGISLATION IN REDUCING RHINO POACHING**

WESSA believes that there is still room for improvement in the legislation to improve the way in which rhino poaching is viewed and handled. Since 2009 there has been an increase in the severity of sentences that have been imposed on convicted poachers or rhino horn traders. This is welcomed and WESSA would like to see this upward trend continue. In addition to this, WESSA calls again for the inception of "Green Courts". The reason for this is that we as a country need to

send out a strong message to poachers and illegal traders and so trials that are dragged out or delayed due to a congested court role are hampering this.

## **POSITION STATEMENT ON RHINO POACHING AS A POLITICAL IMPERATIVE**

WESSA welcomes the elevation of rhino poaching in South Africa to being a crime of National Priority Status. WESSA also commends the constituting of the National Wildlife Crimes Reaction Unit (NWCRU) within the Department of Environmental Affairs in 2010. However WESSA would like to see a greater effort in the further resourcing and capacitation of this Unit so that it can adequately deal with the situation.

WESSA calls on the politicians of South Africa to take a firm stance on the situation. This would be through ensuring the:

- Adequate resourcing of the conservation agencies and NWCRU
- Committed, meaningful and decisive political action (regionally and internationally) to stamp out rhino poaching
- Setting up binding trade conditions with the primary rhino horn consuming Asian countries in order for them to take action and responsibility for the prevention and prosecution of illegal rhino horn or rhino horn product traders.

## **CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION**

In Africa we have witnessed the methodical and calculated reduction of rhino numbers in their natural habitat. The number of poached numbers has been escalating year-on-year over the past 5 years. It is true that we have experienced severe poaching pressure before, and defeated it. However today, because of the insanely inflated price being paid for rhino horn, the poachers are now employing a diversity of methods which no longer fall within the traditional poaching mould. Banked-rolled by substantial finances, the modern day poacher can now afford the latest technology and buy the services of skilled people and influential officials.

The extermination of rhinos has been rapid across Africa in a general North to South direction. The West African Black Rhinoceros has officially been declared extinct and more recently the Northern White Rhino can no longer be found in the wild (only seven individuals remaining). In 2007 South Africa lost 13 rhinos. This was already an increase in the number lost since the turn of the century. Subsequently the situation got significantly worse; 83 in 2008, 122 in 2009, 333 in 2010, 448 in 2011 and 670 in 2012. The countries overall population is reaching a tipping point where the death rate exceeds the populations replenishment rate.

So what are the driving forces behind the poaching of rhinos? Below are some of the accepted drivers which have been identified;

- The demand for rhino horn emanates from a few Asian countries (east and south East Asia). There are many apparent reasons for the need for rhino horn, but it is used mainly as an ingredient in traditional medicines and not as an aphrodisiac as is often widely reported. In more recent times it is being marketed to cure non-traditional conditions such as cancer.
- Rhino horn is valuable because of the simple economics of the situation – demand far exceeds supply.
- South Africa has the largest rhino population in the world of both white and black rhino. We have traditionally been seen as a difficult environment within which poachers could operate. As the easier targets (i.e. other countries) have lost all their rhino, so the demand has shifted to South Africa. We also know that crime of all types is rampant in this country and rhino poaching is an extension of this.

- Law enforcement relating to wildlife crime has certainly not received the requisite attention. While South Africa has commendable legislation, it unfortunately is not well enforced in terms of implementing the law as well as achieving sentences that send out a strong message to would-be poachers. As a result of the rhino situation, we have seen positive progressive moves by government to improve systems and sentences. However we are in a lag phase where it will still be some time before we see the large scale benefits of this progress.
- The current economic crisis hit at a time when the incidences of rhino poaching were low. We have seen exponential increases in these incidences as the global recession gained momentum. One of the concerns is that private landowners (as well as public departments) may have cut back on security measures as a result of budget cuts. This would then expose increased opportunities for the criminals.
- Banked-rolled by substantial finances, the modern day poaching syndicates can now afford the latest technology and buy the services of skilled people and influential officials.

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