

# RHINO CONSERVATION ISN'T JUST ABOUT RHINOS



By Ben Carter

Executive Director

Dallas Safari Club

B&C Professional Member

“It’s God’s job to judge poachers. It’s our job to arrange the meeting.”

That’s what a South African game ranger told me last June as we followed rhino tracks—and boot tracks—through a remote area of Kruger National Park. I glanced up expecting to see a smile, but there was none. His eyes told me he wasn’t kidding. That face, those words, and the violence they suggested, are still chilling.

The ranger returned my stare and described the escalating trend of shoot-to-kill enforcement against poachers.

In Africa’s bloody war over rhinos and elephants, every lawman knows he might be murdered tonight. The International Ranger Federation website lists more than 30 African game wardens killed by homicide in 2013 and estimates the actual count was likely two to three times higher. Stressed, weary, undermanned and underequipped, frustrated by arrests that seldom end in prosecutions, more and more rangers are resorting to shooting on sight any poacher caught in the act. Deadly force is tolerated, even encouraged, by some agencies to help save the lives of their officers.

There’s tragedy on both sides of the badge. In impoverished countries, good people—including rangers—can be sucked into the temptations of poaching. Many pay with their lives.

Too much money dangles low. Powdered rhino horn is now two to three times more valuable per kilo than cocaine, and it’s in high demand by affluent Asians. Some believe it cures cancer. Research has disproven any actual medical benefits. But for the triggermen, black-market traffickers, drug cartels, organized crime syndicates, and even terror cells profiting from rhino poaching, the big paydays are worth wasting entire species along with anyone who stands in the way.

The ranger said if the war continued at the current pace, a thousand rhinos would be slaughtered in one year’s time, along with untold human lives that would never even be counted.

That dark prediction was still fresh on my mind in October when the government of Namibia asked our organization, the Dallas Safari Club (DSC), to help raise crucial funding for additional law enforcement and other rhino conservation efforts—by auctioning a permit to hunt a surplus black rhino in a Namibian national park.

We eagerly accepted, scheduled the auction as part of our January convention in Dallas, and announced that 100 percent of the proceeds would go into a special fund used to support the rhino conservation initiatives of the Namibia Ministry of Environment and Tourism.

We expected the idea of hunting a critically endangered species would generate surprise, even among some hunters, so we

began the auction explaining that most rhino poaching is in South Africa. Namibia is faring much better and intends to keep it that way. In fact, Namibia’s black rhino population is doing so well (increasing 5 to 7 percent each year), the country is allowed by science-based international treaties to sell up to five rhino permits a year.

Biologists say these hunts are partly responsible for increasing rhino numbers. Black rhinos are aggressive and territorial. Old, post-breeding males are known to kill younger bulls, cows, and even calves. They also consume food, water, and space needed to sustain the breeding animals required to sustain the species. Removing these animals improves herd survival and productivity.

But the people of Namibia also are part of the reason for thriving rhino populations.

The country is renowned for its unique conservation model. Local communities form and manage their own refuges, called conservancies, on surrounding lands. The citizenry is allowed to sustainably use the natural resources produced there. This community involvement helped build a nationwide grassroots commitment to conservation. Since Namibia gained independence in 1990, lands under sustainable management have increased from 13 to 44 percent of the nation’s surface area. Wildlife now abounds. And black rhino populations have doubled.

Hunting provides the majority of income for most conservancies. Revenue supplements every household either directly or indirectly through community projects. Meat derived from hunting is equitably distributed to the most needy, such as the elderly and schools. Without well-managed lands and hunting, many rural communities in Namibia would fail.

However, all the cultural rationale, all the biological and financial justification, all the credibility of scientists on the ground in Africa and around the world, was too often lost in the ensuing noise. Following our announcement, the media played up the hysteria and perceived shock value of a “rich American jetting off to Africa to gun down one of Earth’s last remaining rhinos.”

That image detonated anti-hunters and animal rights activists worldwide. The next weeks and months brought a torrent of death threats; via e-mail, Facebook and telephone messages, people threatened to kill me and my family, random DSC members, and particularly anyone who might buy the rhino-hunting permit. The FBI and Dallas police were quickly involved.

In the middle of it all, Boone and Crockett Club issued a statement supporting DSC and reiterating the science, structure, and strategy behind the hunt. The Club also reminded citizens of hunters’ historic successes in leading restoration of whitetail deer,

**BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB**

**RHINO AUCTION, HUNT PRAISED BY  
BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB**

MISSOULA, MONT. (JAN. 4, 2014) — Controversy surrounds an upcoming fundraiser and hunt for a black rhinoceros, but the Boone and Crockett Club is praising both as positive moves for the future of a critically endangered game species.

During its Jan. 9-12 convention, Dallas Safari Club (DSC) will auction a rhino-hunting permit prescribed by biologists in Namibia. The hunt will be for an old, post-breeding, aggressive bull known to charge and kill younger bulls, cows, and calves in Mangetti National Park. Removing these animals increases herd survival and productivity.

DSC expects the permit to bring at least \$250,000, perhaps up to \$1 million—with 100 percent of proceeds earmarked for Namibia’s rhino conservation efforts including anti-poaching patrols.

Animal rights activists are working to stop the fundraiser with petitions, media hysteria, and even death threats.

“Those who oppose hunting are entitled to their own opinions, but not their own version of the facts,” said Bill Demmer, president of Boone and Crockett Club. “The science behind this hunt is irrefutable. And the harvest of one animal for the betterment of a species, especially one as threatened as the black rhino, is conservation in practice.”

He added that complete protectionism is simply too narrow a view in today’s world where natural resources are too precious to be left to chance. In today’s human-influenced landscapes, letting nature take its course in all instances has proven irresponsible. Wildlife, especially those species targeted by illegal poaching does not thrive on its own. It requires law enforcement, habitat preservation, research and other active conservation measures. Someone has to pay for that management, and for many species, that someone is, and always has been, sportsmen.

Demmer said, “History shows repeated successes with hunter contributions to restore and sustain wildlife. Whitetail deer, elk, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep are just a few examples from North America. The black rhino is the newest example from Africa.”

The Club applauds the government of the Republic of Namibia, their biologists, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which agreed to cooperate with a qualified hunter on trophy importation), and DSC for their strong actions for the future of black rhinos.

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wild turkey, elk, and other species once on the verge of extinction. That model could work for rhinos, too. It was a valuable message—and a much-needed pat on the back for our weary outfit.

I wondered how South African game rangers ever adapt to life under daily threats of violence.

During our convention, Jan. 9-12, 2014, we saw even more death threats, protestors, an activist filmmaker and his kids attempting to disrupt our event, cyber-attacks on social media (on auction day, our Facebook page received a threat or profane comment every six seconds), hackers attempting to take down the DSC website as well as the site contracted to host online bidding for auction items, parking-lot vandalism of vehicles bearing DSC stickers, and global media attention. Even Al Jazeera sent a TV crew to cover our event.

The auction was held under increased security, and the rhino permit sold for \$350,000. Reportedly, that’s the highest price ever paid for a permit to hunt a non-North American species, \$127,000 more than the previous record for a rhino permit, and, most importantly, enough to pay the annual salaries of at least 70 additional game rangers in Namibia.

Of course, we’ll always wonder how much more our auction might have raised if not for the threats. But the good news is that \$350,000 goes a long way in Africa. Along with hiring extra manpower in the field, the agency may also use proceeds to supplement development of unmanned aerial patrol vehicles equipped with infrared cameras, electronic and specialized security equipment, helicopter surveillance, research, rhino relocation equipment, and more.

This wasn’t the first time our organization has supported such initiatives. Between 2006 and 2014, to South Africa and other nations, DSC granted more than \$175,000 for a variety of crucial efforts for rhinos. We’ve helped train ranger students, provided gear and fuel for rhino protection teams, funded the drilling of boreholes to supply potable water at ranger field stations, supported rhino research and habitat programs, and more.

Our January auction was merely the latest demonstration of safari hunters’ longstanding commitment to conservation in Africa.

And it is DSC’s fervent hope that with \$350,000 in additional funding, better habitat, science-based wildlife management and overwhelming law enforcement presence, more rhinos—and more people—will be spared. ■

