

Rhino Revolution: Searching for new solutions

Clive and Anton Walker

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The late Dr Esmond Martin inspecting rhino horn. © Michael Gunther, p. 65

The focus of Clive and Anton Walker's recently published book *Rhino Revolution* is mainly on South Africa's rhinos—this is where the current serious and high-scale poaching problems are occurring. Whereas Kenya lost just 10 rhinos in 2016, Zimbabwe only 30, Namibia 60—South Africa lost a staggering 1,054! This averages to three rhino being killed on a daily basis, mostly in Kruger National Park (KNP). By the time the Walkers' book went to print 6,994 rhino (both black and white) had been slaughtered in just eight years in South Africa.

This sequel to *Rhino Keepers*, is an eclectic read: part passionate plea, part autobiographical travelogue, and includes detailed descriptions of the five African and Asian rhino species and an explanation on the etymological theory behind the white rhino name by Jim Feely. Rather out of context, however a case study of black rhino monitoring carried out by Lucky Mavrandonis and Sue Downie is informative. From their regular and intensive monitoring over a 14-

year period of natural black rhino behaviour in four project areas we learn for instance how social black rhinos actually are. Certainly, the Walkers revere the rhino, the beautiful images and sketches testify to that.

Concerned by population crashes elsewhere on the continent the Rhino and Elephant Foundation (REF) was established in 1988 by Clive Walker, Peter Hitchins and the late Anthony Hall-Martin, with Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi as the president. While futilely observing the escalating poaching starting in central Africa, moving to Uganda and the east coast (Somalia), Kenya and Tanzania

to Zambia and Zimbabwe—the REF were equally apprehensive that it was about to spill over into South Africa. Sadly, how right they were. Where numbers began to stabilise and even recover elsewhere, they began falling in SA.

The book sets out at least to ask, if not to answer difficult questions; such as how South Africa is going to manage the paradigm of conservation and development, and how South Africa is going to sustain the costs of securing rhino while the enemy is located in South (sic) East Asia. A recurring refrain in the first four chapters is the provocative idea of a legal rhino horn trade. From despairing at finding an easy solution to the dire poaching crisis, it is the “new” solution the Walkers argue for and no doubt what the authors mean by their title reference.

It is a well-known fact that all species of rhino tread a very fine line between extinction and survival. The retail price of rhino horn exceeds the price of gold. Has it ever decreased since the 1980s poaching crisis when it suddenly spiked from \$550 per kg in 1979 to approx. \$35,000 per kg today (2015 figures)? “The

dynamics have changed” say the authors, “and so too have the international criminal syndicates where environmental crime ranks alongside that of drugs, arms, human trafficking and diamonds”.

Additional factors mentioned in the poaching dynamic are the human population increase, 50% unemployment, immigration, a bloated civil service and crippling corruption and greed. The authors bemoan the fact that lynchpins have not been brought to justice. They explain that the situation in SA has come about because of the lack of political will and government commitment, “cosying up” to the new Chinese colonialists, and the “faceless individuals who drive the illegal trade”. Former head of the anti-poaching unit in KNP, General Johan Jooste complains that it is due to “governmental failure”. While, the Walkers comment on healing apartheid injustice, perhaps they understate historical and political dimensions. The fate of the black rhino was far from certain at the turn of last century, having been exterminated by hunters and settlers alike.

Other solutions proposed by the authors to curtail poaching in SA include strong community engagement and tourism development, together with political will, security and environmental education. While Sam Ferreira, SANParks large-mammal ecologist advocates, “Disrupt[ing] organised crime”.

Private Rhino Owners Association (PROA) chair Pelham Jones requests “...adequate budgets to handle the security of rhinos”, actively lobbying for lifting the ban on rhino horn trade.

The authors point out that the prohibitive costs of securing rhino will result in more being poached, and loss of rhino on private land as landowners sell their rhino, arguing that owners should be able to “harvest” rhino horn and sell the horn in open trade; (pp. 120-1). However, PROA members may be tempted to stock rhino with the sole purpose of “harvesting” horn, which takes the issue into the arena of animal welfare, as the best interests of rhino become secondary to profit.

Surely, it is naive to believe that harvested horn is going to be the only horn sold in markets for TCM and on the table in affluent Vietnamese circles as a status symbol. Or that horn from the other ten range states would not end up being passed off as harvested horn. Since *Rhino*

Revolution was published, South Africa unilaterally lifted the moratorium in place since 2009 and reinstated domestic trade in harvested rhino horn. If it is a well-known fact that the main trade is in China and Vietnam, whom does this ultimately benefit?

Moreover, there is a diametrically opposed side to the consumptive vs. non-consumptive use debate, Save the Rhino (SRI) are just one of the NGOs advocating demand reduction strategies and behaviour-change campaigns. SRI will also be supporting the innovative ‘Rhino Impact Investment’ project where payment by results aims to spark a new paradigm (See Jeffries et al. in this volume).

The authors speak only from the South African perspective and fail to explain that there are different land rights and wildlife ownership rights across African range states. In Kenya for example, wildlife is owned by the government, not by landowners. The possibility of opening up the trade in South Africa may well result in Kenya and neighbouring countries losing their hard-earned gains in rhino anti-poaching to a new war as illegal traders try to pass off Kenyan rhino horn for South African. For the last five years, down from a high of 59 in 2013 Kenya’s record remains encouraging.

Rather than presenting any new information, *Rhino Revolution* details known facts. What is interesting is what specialist NGOs established to save the rhino from extinction, already know: that this charismatic and endangered ungulate ignites huge interest from the international community who contribute millions of dollars annually to preserve the rhino. Rhino are highly desirable viewing for tourists visiting protected areas, attracting significant revenue and forex. Combatting rhino—and elephant—poaching is seen as an international priority with a debate and stakeholders far beyond SA’s borders and in the public domain.

I think the authors would have been better placed doing a coffee table glossy than trying to tackle the more serious debate and complexities of the consumptive use of rhino horn, in a book appealing to the general public.

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