

TOWARDS A STRATEGIC PLAN TO HALT RHINO POACHING

Presented to Parliament January 2012

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1. WHY A STRATEGIC PLAN?

Under the current crisis conditions regarding rhino poaching it is of paramount importance that government comes up with a strategic plan to address all aspects of rhino management. The best example of what can happen in the absence of a strategic plan was the situation that has developed since the introduction of the moratorium and other related legal measures on hunting of rhino in South Africa. The rationale behind these policy measures, were, to say the least, uninformed, partly due to the lack of a consensus plan on which the measures should have been based. Vietnamese pseudo hunters came to South Africa to conduct legal hunts which were later on regarded as unethical by the Department of Environmental Affairs due to the fact that hunters took more than one 'trophy' per person out of the country. Superficially, the moratorium thus seemed justifiable, but the facts of the matter immediately emerged soon after the Asian market realized what the moratorium meant for them. Pre-moratorium legal (but unethical) hunts concentrated mainly on surplus bulls in the industry. Legal permits were issued, hunts were concluded and foreign exchange entered the legal economy (remuneration for professional hunters, game farmers, trackers, skinners, taxidermists, hospitality industry, PLUS the Receiver of Revenue). The post-moratorium situation, which lasts until the present day, is that hunting now became an illegal covert operation managed by crime syndicates and corrupt officials, where not only bulls are shot, but where an indiscriminate slaughter of both sexes and all age groups of rhinos takes place, including pregnant females which are our investment in the capital breeding stock of the future. The result is therefore that the country is being robbed, not only of an invaluable natural asset, but also of legal foreign exchange and that the total economy PLUS THE FISCUS suffer incalculable monetary losses.

Without a doubt, the moratorium was counterproductive and lead to the opening of a container of monsters which today seems to have evolved beyond the stage of controllability. It can thus be stated with confidence that the introduction of the moratorium and some other policy measures were the 'Biggest Blunder' of the relevant authorities to date, the consequences of which will take an effort of unprecedented magnitude to resolve. We are in dire need of creative solution seeking, teamwork, political drive and statement of will if we want to halt one of the most senseless eradications of valuable natural assets in the modern history of man.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Rhino poaching is threatening to behave like a runaway train. It is fired by the greed of crime and corruption in the absence of proper controls. Everyone knows the difficulty to try and stop such a massive body on a downhill, and concerned institutions and individuals have proposed various strategies to try and stop or even derail the runaway poaching train. Derailing in this case would be advantageous so as to incur minimum damage to the industry as a whole. Strategies proposed include actions and programs to either burn the horns, poison the horns, legalize trade in horns and finally increase security measures and step up anti-poaching operations. The pros and cons of some of these measures are summarized in the addendum to this document. However, the biggest stumbling blocks to all kinds of anti-poaching strategies are the following:

- The immense and ever increasing rate at which the evil grows, and
- The vastness of the battlefield, or range of rhino distribution, which combined with the guerilla tactics of the poachers, make counterinsurgent measures very difficult to establish.

3. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

The variety of anti-poaching strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph must essentially be seen as symptomatic treatment which only touches the surface of the malady. Of much greater and longer lasting consequence would an intervention at the root of the problem be. To treat the real cause rather than symptoms might take longer, but would probably bring about a lasting cure for the rhino poaching dilemma.

Obviously, the supreme authority to design the final strategy to cure the problem, namely government, has to build into the plan the following aspects:

- Security measures and intelligence
- Horn trade monitoring (customs, port of export, etc)
- Data base establishment (forensics, genetics, syndicates, international connections, etc)
- Networks (conservation bodies, i.e. CITES, SADC RMG, WWF, IUCN, EWT, farmers (WRSA), security services (SAPS, SADF, private companies).

These are the short term remedies for the symptomatic treatment approach. The long term treatment and rehabilitation program aimed at the cause of ailment should be directed at a much different level and place of operation, namely at the heart and soul of the Asian people.

A three pronged approach is suggested, namely

- Donation of horns to the Asians
- Diplomatic engagement with all Asian governments with rhino horn connections
- Information and education programs in these eastern countries.

Above mentioned approach is further explained as follows:

3.1 Donation of horns to the Asian people

This is the fastest possible way to apply brakes to the runaway train of poaching because it would certainly have a stunning effect on Asian consumer countries who would never have thought that something like this was possible at all.

The act of donating horns would be subject to stringent conditions contained in a well conceived treaty amongst stakeholder countries. The idea of donating horns should not be judged according to economic principles of supply and demand because the fuzziness of the illegal horn market is not conducive of sound scientific market research in any case. Donations should rather be viewed from a diplomatic perspective and the impact this would have on inducing Asians to enter into negotiations aimed at reaching long term agreements between the African and Asian countries and regulating the current chaotic situation. The source of donated horns should be a limited but substantial quantity from government stockpiles, the donation of which must be viewed as an investment to enhance sound African-Asian relations and as a tool to **buy time** until the poaching crisis situation has been stabilized. Certainly all African and other international stakeholders will need time to reach consensus on a strategic plan to manage rhinos and for CITES to be able to give the final go-ahead to rhino range states to manage their populations sustainably.

The effects of donations are likely to be the following:

- Confusion in crime syndicates and reduction in number of poaching incidents.
- Drying up of funds for the world of crime.
- Destruction of poaching, corruption and illegal horn laundering incentives.
- The mere public announcement of the donation plan should bring many Asian stakeholders to the envisaged negotiations table (the location of which needs to be indicated beforehand).

The duration and extent of the donation program will be determined by monitoring the effects it will have and whether the outcome will be favourable in the short, medium and long term to maybe warrant even further donations in a step-by-step fashion. No time limit can be put on the donation program as it will be completely results driven. The favoured outcome is of course to reduce poaching to manageable levels, or even to a complete cessation of illegal activities, but this could prove to be an unattainable objective knowing our world and how it operates.

3.2 Diplomatic engagement with Asian countries

A crystal clear plan for diplomatic intervention at highest level aimed at regulating rhino issues in the international arena should be conceived.

The following ideas could act as guidelines for the formulation of a diplomatic plan.

- Rhino poaching will soon have the potential to seriously embarrass diplomatic relations between African and Asian countries because of the magnitude of the disparity between those who gain (consumer countries) and those who lose (rhino range states)

- Poaching is a dividing factor in relations amongst countries, whereas a rhino treaty designed to create a win-win situation for all countries could become a uniting force.
- South Africa was recently accepted as a member of the BRICS countries. Three of these are serious stakeholders in rhino related issues:
 - India, where the highly endangered Indian Rhino is desperately clinging to a last stand.
 - South Africa, known to be the custodian of the biggest rhino population in the world and now being targeted by the poaching syndicates.
 - China, probably the biggest consumer of rhino products and biggest source of illegal finances for the poaching spree.

In view of the supposed goodwill amongst BRICS member states and the immense value of general economic cooperation for individual members in future, controversial issues like rhino poaching might start to cast shadows over diplomatic relations amongst stakeholders.

- **The Diplomatic Plan**

This plan should be a public private partnership initiative for the following reasons:
Public: to open up diplomatic channels and to provide resources and logistical support for the negotiating team.

Private : to provide professional inputs in designing a strategic plan and assisting in business related aspects of the long term ramifications of the plan like economic, marketing and information campaign initiatives.

- The diplomatic plan should be created as soon as possible by a task team called upon by government and private sector.
- The **task team** may consider the following points in drafting the plan
 - The donation plan could be the initial impetus to the diplomatic drive.
 - The ultimate goal should be the culmination of all efforts in the proposed African-Asian Rhino Treaty.
 - The task to manage the process of establishing the parameters of a treaty and negotiating it with all African and Asian stakeholder countries may be assigned to a Special Envoy.
 - The **Special Envoy** will be tasked to roll out those aspects of the strategic plan pertaining to African and Asian countries and the diplomatic drive planned to culminate in the Rhino Treaty.
 - If so conceived and accepted by the task team, the diplomatic drive might encompass actions like arranging a 'Rhino Summit' in Beijing, and even regular annual conventions on a rotational basis in all African and Asian stakeholder countries. The goal with these events would be to engage Asians more intimately with the plight of rhinos and their custodians in range states, to strengthen relations amongst stakeholders, build respect for each other's cultures and engage everyone in the search for long term solutions.

- The Special Envoy will be the link between the new African-Asian initiative and the existing rhino management bodies like the SADC Rhino Management Group, CITES, WWF, and the IUCN by providing regular feedbacks to all parties on progress made, the essentials of which will ultimately be incorporated into a proposed International Strategic Rhino Management Plan.

3.3 Information and Education Programs in Eastern countries

The best strategic plan in the world will be of limited or no value if the message it contains is not communicated to the relevant audience of role-players. It thus follows that the third step in designing a strategic plan to curb rhino poaching is the creation of an **Information Plan**.

Information dissemination aims at creating awareness, but in our case the aim would also be to help Asians to rid their societies of the ignorance of the plight of rhinos. Their conservation programs regarding their own endangered species, like for example the Giant Panda in China, are proof of the fact that they are inclined to do the utmost to prevent animals from becoming extinct, and therefore they should also be susceptible to hearing our plea regarding our list of endangered species.

The messages to be conveyed should, inter alia, contain the following:

- That poaching will lead to extinction, and that, when the last rhino has disappeared from earth and the last horn in stockpile consumed, no authentic rhino product will be left to satisfy the apparent dire need that the eastern cultures have for horns, and that it is easily calculable through observing current trends, when that point would be reached when they would have to go without horns forever.
- That it is not very gentlemanly to steal somebody else's crown jewels (which rhinos in fact are for African countries, judging the reverence the 1000 year old Mapungubwe culture had for rhinos as seen portrayed in masterfully crafted jewels and ornaments like the world famous golden rhino).
- That there is a possible way for us all to coexist by agreeing to jointly manage the world's rhino populations in a sustainable way, inter alia by stopping poaching, by conserving all 5 species and their natural habitats as good as is humanly possible, by privately farming and utilizing rhinos and their products wisely and by constantly conveying the message of the real value of our natural assets from generation to generation in all quarters of the earth.
- Those African countries might consider it to open themselves up for Asian involvement in conservation, farming and ecotourism projects in order for Asians to acquire stakes in the industry thereby starting to share responsibility and accountability with regards to rhinos. This might entail, for example, joint venture projects with public or private organizations, or merely acquiring shares in officially running businesses.

The task team might decide on a wide spectrum of methods to convey information, not only in Asian countries but also African stakeholder countries them being the future partners in the envisaged Rhino Treaty. These methods may include

- Regular events like summits and conventions
- Printed media
- Television and film productions
- Permanent and roving exhibitions
- Social networks
- Internet
- Interactive engagement at school and university levels and student exchange programs amongst countries.

4. CONCLUSION

The world is eagerly awaiting decisive action by those at the helm. This should inspire us all to get up and look further afield than our fears and failures and build on the successes of our forebears. The South African rhino case history is a prime example of successful teamwork resulting from a firm basic combination of passion, dedication, technical expertise and a systematic business approach. The ingredients for a success recipe are available today like they were fifty to a hundred years ago when the world was faced with the same calamity for the first time. The difference between what was then and what happens now, is that the world of today has experienced vast progress in ways to tap into the potential of human and natural resources guided by immense know-how and breathtaking technology. With brain power focused on our common goals there is almost nothing we cannot achieve.

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ADDENDUM

Comments on some other suggested strategies to curb poaching

1. *BURNING OF HORNS*

PRO: Annihilates value of stockpiled horns

CON: Increases value of 'live' horns
Increases poaching pressure on rhinos
Further disinvestment in live rhinos

RESULT: Certain extinction

2. *SECURITY AND MILITARY OPTIONS*

PRO: Visual and physical deterrent to poaching
Success in the short term

CON: Immense size of battlefield dictates a losing battle due to limited state and private resources and the unbeatable guerilla tactics of the poachers

RESULT: Likely extinction

3. *LEGALISATION OF HORN TRADE*

PRO: Regain control over our own rhinos
Foreign exchange stays in country, provides operating funds for custodians
Will invite bigger investments in time
Will lead to stability and sustainable growth of rhino populations

CON: Will take too long for world to reach consensus
This ongoing vacuum enhances uncontrollability
Opens channel to launder illegal horns

RESULT: Big rhino populations will lose substantial ground (i.e. numbers)

Small rhino populations will disappear (especially threatened species) while a paralyzed world watches on

By the time the world has reached consensus, rhino populations might perhaps stabilize and then resume growth but from a most likely dangerously low level

However: Increased chance of survival, perhaps a guarantee for survival of the species

4. POISONING OF HORNS

PRO: Powerful word of mouth deterrent to poaching
Success in the short term

CON: One crime cannot be cured with another crime.

Poisoning immoral, what if the Chinese Prime Minister dies for example?

Could be seen as an act of war.

RESULT: Diplomatic disaster.

Revenge measures and likely extinction of rhinos

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