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**SHOCKING DISCOVERY:  
GAME RESERVE IN LIMPOPO  
FOUND EMPTIED OF ALL  
RHINOS**

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# More questions than answers surround the findings at a Limpopo game reserve: Where have all the rhinos gone?

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In 2003, six white rhinos were released into the Makuya Game Reserve. But today, disturbing reports indicate that the reserve has no rhinos left.

According to intelligence sources, there have been no reports of rhinos illegally killed in the reserve, which is situated on the western boundary of the Makuleke region of Kruger National Park.

However, the latest ground surveys have found no living rhinos in the reserve – and no carcasses, either.

It was also reported that the reserve’s rhino “middens” (dung piles that rhinos use to communicate with each other) have not been used for at least two years.

*At this time there are no rhino left on the reserve. Middens are dead and have been so for the last couple of years.*

There are concerns that another “Letaba situation” could be developing, in which 18 (initially thought to be 17) rhino carcasses were found dumped near Tzaneen.<sup>1</sup>

At this time, there are still no definitive answers regarding the shocking discoveries at Letaba Lodge or Makuya Game Reserve.

Sources close to the situation suspect these findings are the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Mass graves, missing rhinos, and more questions sadly seem inevitable.

## **Illegal rhino horn trade driven by factors outside - and inside - South Africa**

In this year alone, the surge in rhino horn demand for use in traditional medicines has claimed the lives of nearly 300 rhinos in South Africa, more than doubling the reported 2009 figure of 122.

Neighboring Zimbabwe is now down to its last 700 rhinos.<sup>2</sup>

Illegal rhino horn is in highly sought after for use in traditional medicines in China<sup>3</sup> and Vietnam<sup>4</sup>, despite the fact rhino horn has been extensively analyzed<sup>5</sup> and contains no medicinal properties.

Research conducted by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC found that most rhino horns leaving Southern Africa are being smuggled to China and Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

It has also been noted that the spreading Chinese footprint in Southern Africa has placed the demand for rhino horn perilously close to the supply<sup>7</sup>, and counter poaching reports have linked the increase in rhino and elephant killings to a flood of Chinese weapons in the region.<sup>8</sup>

There are further concerns that a state-funded 2008 rhino horn research proposal from China served as one of the catalysts for the surge in rhino killings across Southern Africa by encouraging the use of rhino horn, and that the researchers are attempting to circumvent CITES research provisions by farming rhinos.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most nefarious developments in the escalating illegal rhino horn trade is the proliferation of apparent business alliances between members of the South African rhino conservation community and offshore crime syndicates.

In September, eleven alleged members of a rhino horn syndicate were granted bail by the Musina magistrate’s court and are scheduled to appear in court again on April 11th, 2011.<sup>10</sup>

The suspects included a well-known safari operator and game farmer, along with two veterinarians, and a professional hunter.<sup>11</sup>

Investigators later unearthed a mass grave of at least 20 rhino carcasses on the property of one of the suspects.<sup>12</sup>

The following month, a rhino horn syndicate case<sup>13</sup> involving two safari operators and a professional hunter was thrown out by the North Gauteng High Court (the State's star witness was apparently intimidated into not testifying).<sup>14</sup>

In both syndicate cases, multiple charges had been brought against the suspects, including racketeering, money laundering, various counts of theft, malicious damage to property, illegal possession of firearms and ammunition, and contraventions of the various provincial Conservation Acts, National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act, and the Aviation Act.

Another factor which has stimulated the appetite for rhino horn, is the intentional leakage of private rhino horn stockpiles<sup>15</sup> from South Africa into the illegal market.

There have also been cases in which rhinos were dehorned under the guise of protection, when in fact, the horns were removed in order to be sold to those dealing in illegal rhino horn.<sup>16</sup> One dehorning and dealing suspect apparently committed suicide while awaiting trial.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, a very troubling development is the increased discussion favoring legalized rhino horn trade emanating from certain factions within South Africa and China. Such speculation appears to be encouraging the "cheap" accumulation of illegal rhino horn (poaching), in anticipation of laundering the horn via new trade loopholes.



### Southern Africa's vanishing rhinos

- The number of rhinos killed in South Africa during 2010 has reached nearly 300 (289 as of December 3, 2010), more than doubling 2009's death toll.
- Between 2006 and 2009, Zimbabwe lost over a quarter of its rhino population.<sup>18</sup> Only around 700 rhinos are believed to remain in Zimbabwe.<sup>19</sup>
- Mozambique's entire rhino population was last estimated to consist of nine Southern white rhinos.<sup>20</sup>



**About the author:** Rhishja Larson is the founder of Saving Rhinos LLC (savingrhinos.org), which publishes news and information about the illegal trade in rhino horn. She is the author of the book *Murder, Myths & Medicine*, Editor of the blogs *Rhino Horn is Not Medicine* (rhinoconservation.org) and *Project Pangolin* (pangolins.org), and a writer for the environmental news blog *Planetsave*. Rhishja has been interviewed on *Mongabay.com* and on *The Wildlife with Laurel Neme* radio talk show, discussing the illegal trade in rhino horn. She was also a guest blogger on National Geographic's *NatGeo News Watch* ("Rhino horn: All myths, no medicine").

## NOTES

Article adaptation: “Game Reserve in Limpopo Found Emptied of All Rhinos”, *Rhino Horn is Not Medicine*, November 22, 2010. See <http://www.rhinoconservation.org/2010/11/22/game-reserve-in-limpopo-found-emptied-of-all-rhinos/>

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