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The Mechanics of Extinction: Rhino Poaching in Mozambique

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gx7d9g2>

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### **Publication Date**

2018-02-12

### **Supplemental Material**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gx7d9g2#supplemental>

UC Berkeley Graduate School of School of Journalism  
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Master's Thesis  
Spring 2016

***Abstract:** A two-part project: first, a photo essay about anti-poaching in Sabie Game Park. Second, a reported essay on the Rhino War in Mozambique, the rhino horn trade, anti-poaching at a game park in southern Mozambique, a group of ex-military intelligence officers working in innovative ways to disrupt the rhino horn trade, and ultimately, what the future looks like for one of Africa's most famous and endangered species.*

## **The Mechanics of Extinction: Rhino Poaching in Mozambique**

**By Martin Totland**

### **PART 1: THE UPHILL BATTLE**

We sit in a circle of chairs on the green grass and red dirt of Sabie Game Park, a private wildlife park in southern Mozambique, on the border of the famous Kruger National Park in South Africa. The men around me are dressed in earth-toned fatigues and leather boots. They have the kind of deep brown suntan you get from working outdoors in the unforgiving African sun for years on end.

As the sun sets we share beers and talk about the only topic possible at this point in time: rhinos are going extinct, Mozambique is on the frontline of the Rhino War, and the fight to save them feels hopeless, but you do your part anyway because it's the right thing to do.

The men around me all fight this uphill battle in different ways. Ferdie Terblanche, a tall, lanky man with dark brown skin, is the head ranger and manager at Sabie. He built two schools and several boreholes, improving water supply in the surrounding villages to better relations between the park and locals.

Cade and Thomas, two twenty-something trainees working for Ferdie, spend their days patrolling the 30,000-hectare property looking for poachers, caring for wildlife, and looking after tourists. Richard is a business owner and pilot who flies patrols over the park, looking for signs of poachers.

To my left is Jackson (not his real name). He did not start tracking poachers like most of these men. He worked for the South African National Defense Force intelligence services from the late 1980s and retired in the early 2000's to do private security

contracting with a few of his old military colleagues. He spent eight years in Iraq guarding employees of multinational corporations, did oil field security in Somalia for a year, and then crisscrossed the African continent as head of security for a traveling sports tournament. Since 2013 he and his colleagues have used their military experience to make a dent in the rhino horn trade. They joined the fight at a time when demand had been sharply increasing every year since 2007.

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Only 13 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2007. In 2015, at least 1,338 rhinos were poached across Africa, the majority in South Africa. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature listed three of the five remaining rhino species as “critically endangered” in its annual Red List of Endangered Species, denoting “an extremely high risk of going extinct in the wild.”

The black rhino, the most endangered rhino species in Africa, has seen its population shrink by an estimated 97.6 percent since 1960. Today, the remaining population hovers around 5,000. The southern white rhino fares slightly better with a “near threatened” designation and an estimated population between 19,600 and 21,077. The last three species, found in different regions of Asia, are doing even worse.

Roughly 3,300 greater one-horned rhinos live in pockets of India and Nepal. The Sumatran rhino population teeters around 300, scattered across western Indonesia and the island of Borneo. The Javan rhino, possibly the rarest of all large land mammals, has an estimated population of only 58 mature individuals.

The outlook is not good for our horned friends.

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A South African journalist who covers wildlife crime introduced me to Joe van der Welt, Jackson’s boss. Joe is a burly, bearded man who looks like he could take a shovel to the back of the head and shake it off. He agreed to host me if I withheld the full names of his men and certain identifying details about their work.

The work requires strict security protocols. Poachers and criminal syndicates that traffic horns are often ruthless criminals for whom millions of dollars are at stake. If someone gets in the way people can, and do, die. Joe and his men have made it their business to do just that.

So, how do these ex-military intelligence officers do just that? To understand the novelty of their *modus operandi* it's worth examining how the rhino horn trade and anti-poaching work first.

## **PART 2: THE PYRAMID MODEL OF RHINO EXTINCTION**

Anti-poaching initiatives like the one Joe and Jackson are associated with, Focus Africa Foundation, use a five-tiered pyramid model to describe the rhino horn trade. It looks like this:

**Level 1**, the base of the pyramid, consists of poachers who go into the bush armed with guns and machetes. They are mostly impoverished and unemployed young men in their 20s and 30s who grew up in the bush. Their upbringing makes them expert animal trackers and survivalists.

Joe's colleague, Harrison (not his real name), a man who's survived four stabbings, says too many people makes the mistake of underestimating them and calls poachers "tough motherfuckers."

**Level 2** is comprised of local crime bosses. They finance poachers, supply them with firearms, and are the first to receive the horn. In poacher-run villages they're the ones with money and often show off their wealth.

**Level 3** is the second receiver of the horn, generally Vietnamese or Chinese nationals working in South Africa, Mozambique, or Zimbabwe. They buy horns from crime bosses and organize transport to Asia.

**Level 4** is the receiver of the horns. They sell them either whole, segmented, or as powder to end-users.

Finally, **Level 5** is the consumer base. Since the mid-2000s they're mostly young, wealthy Vietnamese consumers.

The Vietnamese demand for rhino horn is multifaceted and not easily summarized, but there are a few major reasons why it exploded around 2006-2007.

Previous demand came mainly from Yemen and China, where horns were used for dagger handles and as an antipyretic, respectively.

Around 2005 rumors swept Vietnam about an unnamed politician whose cancer was cured by rhino horn, according to a 2011 report by The Guardian.

The unsubstantiated rumor fueled a demand and, as Vietnam's economy grew, more people could afford it. Data from Trading Economics shows that Vietnamese consumer spending more than doubled between 2008 and the end of 2012, going from \$57 billion to over \$115 billion annually. This hints at the speedy growth of the Vietnamese economy.

Moreover, a belief in horn-powder's ability to cure all sorts of ailments, including hangovers, drove up demand since more Vietnamese could now afford hard-drinking lifestyles.

A senior police officer from Vietnam was quoted by the Agence France-Pressé in 2012 as saying, "I can drink a lot of alcohol but I am still sober and strong. I don't have a headache and I do not feel tired. It has some effects, I believe." The police officer also admitted that possession of rhino horn is illegal but that with enough money, you "can buy anything in Vietnam."

Rhino horn, of course, does none of this. It's made of keratin, the same protein that makes up human fingernails and hair. It has zero medical properties, according to a 2003 paper by Dr. Raj Amin at the Zoological Society of London.

In 2012, the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) compiled a comprehensive report on the supposed medicinal properties of rhino horn. The report, titled "Assessment of Rhino Horn as Traditional Medicine," describes rising wealth in East and Southeast Asia as "inflating a bubble of demand for rhino horn." The study also cites horns' rarity as an explanation for its desirability as a luxury item.

Flimsy reasons for its popularity notwithstanding, the rhino horn trade has grown immensely lucrative. A set of two rhino horns can weigh 5-8 kilograms, fetching \$65,000-80,000 per kilogram - making it more expensive than gold, platinum, and cocaine.

The demand has gotten to the point where, according to NPR, some pharmacies falsely advertise buffalo horn as the real thing. The high demand also led to

the Javan rhino being wiped out within Vietnam in 2010, remaining only in the Ujung Kulon National Park in Indonesia.

Predictably, the increasing demand expanded the search for an ever-diminishing supply, and since South Africa is home to the majority of the world's remaining rhinos...well...you can imagine the rest.

### **PART 3: 'AFRICA IS NOT FOR SISSIES': ANTI-POACHING AT SABIE GAME PARK**

Traditional anti-poaching efforts focus on area protection, animal tracking, patrolling high-risk areas, and if a kill has been made, detective work to find the culprits and hand them over to the police, who'll hopefully play ball. In reality it's a lot messier and more convoluted than that.

Many African countries have popular national parks and protected wildlife areas that contribute greatly to the local economy through tourism. In the Virunga Mountains that sit in the borderlands of Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, park rangers take turns living in the forest with the famous mountain gorillas to protect them from poachers.

Jackson recently had the chance to visit these threatened animals. He first had to get a permit from Rwandan authorities, then hike for eight hours through the dense jungle to spend two hours with the gorillas.

The rangers in Virunga have very strong bonds with the gorillas and can get aggressively protective. They have names for every individual gorilla and know all their quirks and personalities. They maintain a graveyard, complete with tombstones with names on them, where they bury the deceased. Due to the threatened status of the gorillas, and their bond with them, the rangers *do not* tolerate intruders.

"If you are up there without a permit and the rangers see you, they don't ask questions, they just shoot you," Jackson said.

This stark example shows how passionate and defensive rangers can get. It also shows how anti-poaching works in the field: rangers track the animals, learn their habits and their habitat, and study how poachers operate to be able to counter them. It's a recipe implemented out of necessity, not because it's sufficient.

At Sabie Game Park the anti-poaching takes a similar form. The park is privately owned and funded through tourism and a few wealthy investors. It employs its own people for animal care, while the anti-poaching is handled by the International Anti Poaching Foundation (IAPF).

The relationship between Sabie and the IAPF is a symbiotic one: Sabie does not pay the IAPF but lets them operate on the property and showcase their work to support their fundraising and marketing. In return Sabie gets dedicated rangers protect to the remaining eight or nine rhinos that live there, very likely the only rhinos left in Mozambique.

The IAPF works in several places in Africa but Sabie is considered their prime effort. Their most recent poaching happened in February, the month before my visit. Compared to the average of 3.2 rhinos poached *per day* in South Africa in the previous year, a month without losing a rhino sounds like a success.

While it is much smaller than Kruger National Park, the IAPF and Sabie rangers still have their work cut out for them. They patrol the perimeter every day, hike through the bush looking for signs of poachers, be it footprints, discarded trash, or clothing items, and keep tabs on the few rhinos they have left. I was lucky enough to get a small taste of what a normal day is like for anti-poaching rangers.

Jackson and I joined Henk Bam, a South African IAPF ranger and former paratrooper in the British military, on a car patrol and a hike up to the border with South Africa and Kruger, to look for signs of poachers. I quickly realized it's not an easy job.

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We hopped in the bed of Henk's pickup truck and went hurtling along the ochre-colored dirt roads at 70 mph, trying to avoid getting hit in the face by the dirt flung up by the front tires. Next to me were Mick, an ex-military volunteer ranger from Australia, Thomas, the young trainee at Sabie, and a Mozambican ranger named Sergio. Jackson sat up front with Henk.

As we sped through the park Henk would occasionally stop the car and hop out to inspect animal tracks and footprints without saying much of anything. He'd follow the prints for a short distance down the road before hopping back in the driver's seat and take the car screaming down the roads again. How he saw footprints while going that fast I'll never know but his acuity was impressive.

After 30 minutes in the back of the truck, compulsively wondering what would happen if Henk lost control, we parked and geared up for our hike. Thomas told me “we’re doing area domination, showing our presence” in case any poachers were hiding out there. If they were, hopefully they’d see us and we’d scare them away.

We spread out with 10 meters between us and Henk and Sergio stayed on each end with their rifles. As we started walking, Henk gave me a sage tip: if you run into a buffalo, hippo, rhino, elephant, or any animal that can stomp you to death, run to the nearest tree and climb up as high as you can. At that point I figured it was a good idea to stay close to Henk and his rifle throughout the hike.

Henk told me to keep an eye out for footprints and anything that doesn’t belong: trash, water bottles, discarded clothing, anything. Poachers are normally on foot so they carry with them everything they need during an excursion. Anything left behind would be a clue. All rangers leave behind are footprints.

Poachers often hike for several days through the bush, mostly at night. Thanks to their skills in maneuvering through the bush, poachers can cover 35-40 km in a single night. They use moonlight to their advantage and full moons produce a noticeable spike in poaching. As a result, it’s often called a Poacher’s Moon. They will generally try to cross through Sabie to enter Kruger National Park, where the majority of the world’s remaining rhinos live.

If they find a rhino the rifleman will get as close as possible and shoot it in the head. Then the axe man has to hack off the horn, and quickly. Kruger’s rangers can easily pick up the sound of a rifle and will swiftly head towards the origin of the echo. To escape, they hurry back to Mozambique, disappear into their community, hand over the horn to their local crime boss, and collect payment.

The rangers’ task on days like today is to look for poachers who might be crossing through Sabie, or any signs of them. While poachers usually head for South Africa, possessing an unlicensed firearm is a crime in Mozambique so local law enforcement can arrest poachers even if no animals have been killed (assuming corrupt officers are not involved; stories abound of police renting out confiscated rifles or taking bribes to let people out of jail.)

Of course, the IAPF does not care only about Sabie’s rhinos. If they can prevent a kill occurring in Kruger by stopping poachers before they get there, and hand them over to local police, they will. And they do. I heard stories from the IAPF about poachers who were caught in Sabie and turned over to police in the nearest town.



Unfortunately, the story ended with the poacher being out on the streets again only a few weeks later after bribes had been paid.

As we hiked up the mountain we found several signs indicative of intruders. First, Henk spotted footprints in the dirt most others would have walked right past. Immediately calling up Mick on his radio, Henk asked if anyone in our party had passed through here. After a few seconds of silence, Mick confirmed that they had and that the footprints were from our own group. In the bush, the devil is absolutely in the details. Overlook nothing, double-check everything.

Soon, Henk and Thomas found a small cave in the side of the mountain. It would have been unremarkable if not for the fact that the opening had been obstructed with rocks clearly stacked by human hands. They immediately deduced it was for hiding weapons, so Thomas fished out his smartphone, turned on the flashlight and crawled in. He got about waist deep. Not big enough for a person but certainly big enough for stashing a few weapons, but there was nothing there. We kept walking up.

The winding paths often vanished in the underbrush on the long, sloping hillsides. Thorny bushes were everywhere and I dragged my bare shins through most of them. The thing was, all of us wore shorts but only I had to pick thorns out of my bleeding shins; everyone else was fine. I realized that doing these hikes every day quite literally hardens you up. It also reminded me of a saying I'd heard every time I visited this continent: *Africa is not for sissies*. Aye.

Eventually we made our way to the top and to the border with South Africa. A large fence post on the South African side had been tipped over the metal wires, pushing them down, and effectively becoming a ladder. It even had rungs. It would have taken us no more than five seconds to illegally enter South Africa. For poachers, the border security must appear as a complete joke.

In fact, the border itself presents an issue. South Africa's Kruger National Park, Mozambique's Limpopo National Park, and Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe were combined in 2002 to form the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, one of the world's largest wildlife preserves, roughly the same size as the Netherlands. Huge stretches of fencing were taken down to let the animals roam undisturbed across the borders. Of course, this meant *people* could cross the border too. But, rangers in the respective parks are not legally permitted to pursue poachers across the border, which presents a huge problem when trying to combat poaching.

Insufficient cooperation between conservation organizations and authorities in the different countries doesn't help either. There needs to be much more information sharing between NGOs and authorities across borders if conservationists want to

successfully combat poachers, Joe and Jackson said. For instance, in South Africa alone there are over 440 separately registered rhino conservation organizations, most of which don't share information or resources. Until they do, rangers just have to work with the information they collect themselves, and keep patrolling.

We had come halfway through our patrol when my body decided to take a break. I realized the ground was coming closer and closer without my legs telling me I was falling face first into the dirt.

It had been a strenuous hike up the mountain: I joined the rangers at the last minute with only two cups of coffee and some stale bread for breakfast. I brought half a bottle of water, not realizing we'd be hiking for five hours in the 100F degree weather, which Henk called "a cool day." I was later told that the IAPF rangers had called Jackson's office to make fun of my inadequacy. I absolutely deserved it.

We took a break in the shade of a tree next to the border so I could catch my breath. I wondered how this group of chain smokers - I was the only non-smoker - had the lung capacity to do this every day.

Henk, a 26-year-old former paratrooper who fought in Afghanistan for four years for the British military, moved like a mountain goat up the hillsides in the oppressive heat with a 14 lbs. rifle nonchalantly perched on his shoulder. At every rest break, he'd light a smoke and take a sip of water.

Jackson, in his late 30's, smokes so much he probably goes through a lighter every day. Something like half of his daily calorie intake comes from beer. He doesn't eat every day because he "forgets." He, too, beat me up the mountain, sweating profusely but never showing signs of slowing down, stopping only to light his cigarette, take a photo, or to wait for me. These guys made it clear that not all people are created equal. Some people are freaks.

After begrudgingly accepting that I'm not nearly in as good a shape as I thought, we got going again. As headed down in our original direction Henk picked up on something through the ether. I couldn't hear or see anything unusual but his the urgency in his step made me think he'd spotted poachers. Not so. Instead, we found several discarded backpacks, empty food cans, and a plastic jug of dark red liquid.

Poachers had slipped through undetected, likely in the last few days. Henk pointed out the distant remnants of an old house put up by the Portuguese during colonial times. Poachers use it as a hideout when trying to get to Kruger, and if they can make it undetected from there to the tree, they can hide from the aerial patrols before they hop the fence.

The bags themselves didn't contain much of note: scraps of paper, some clothes, empty food tins. Henk, Sergio, Thomas, and Mick collected all of it to take it back for analysis at the IAPF quarters. The yellow plastic can was filled with *moutie*, a potion made by local witchdoctors for poachers who drink it in the sincere belief that it makes them invisible to park rangers. It appears superstition in the rhino horn trade isn't limited to Vietnam.

After collecting the evidence we made our way back to the car. Early in the hike I asked Henk what his rifle was for. I had suspected self-defense; before coming to Mozambique I had read about poachers and rangers killing each other in shootouts. Henk said it *was* for self-defense, but against animals, not people. As a foreigner working in Mozambique he would get "in a shitload of trouble" if he ever shot a poacher, the endangered status of rhinos notwithstanding.

Not 20 minutes later, nearing the bottom of the hill we crossed paths with two elephants. Henk halted immediately and raised his rifle high in the air. The elephants hesitated. I began walking backwards slowly. Thomas immediately hissed at me to "*stop fucking moving.*" Sudden movements could startle them. The stand-off lasted several moments until Henk whistled a high-pitched tune. The elephants turned around and left the way they came. There was an obvious urgency in everyone's step as we left the clearing.

The full weight of exhaustion and dehydration settled in as soon as we got to the car. I found another bottle of water and drank it too quickly. Soon after, Henk had to pull over for me to throw up on the side of the road, in front of everyone. My earlier collapse had caused me to lose all my shame in front of these guys, so I didn't care.

Then, as a beautiful contrast to my pathetic retching, we suddenly spotted what we had spent the day protecting: one of Sabie's, and Mozambique's last, elusive rhinos walking next to the road. As we drove next to it, everyone, rangers and journalists both, pulled out their cameras and watched in silence.

The rhino trotted slowly on the right side of the road, occasionally turning its head towards the car. It weaved its way through the bushes, trees and dry, beige grass. Henk drove slowly to avoid startling it. The sun was setting and giving the hillsides a glowing orange fringe as the rhino crossed the road in front of us, picked up the pace, and looped around in a big U-shape in front of the car. We stopped and watched it disappear slowly into the bush.

It was a fitting way to cap off our last day before Jackson and I headed to Massingir, a town whose entire economy hinges on killing the majestic animal we had just witnessed.

## **PART 4: THE RED SHIRTS OF MASSINGIR**

“This place is *highly* fucking dangerous. Unless I say you can talk to this person, you say fuck-all about poaching.”

The tone in Jackson’s voice was unambiguous: watch your mouth when you’re in Massingir.

It was nighttime when we rolled into this small town that’s considered the poaching capital of Mozambique. I came here to get a sense of how Jackson and his cohorts work on their side of the trench in the Rhino War.

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The trip from Sabie to Massingir normally takes only a couple of hours. It took us nine hours. Several uncharted bush roads led to our car getting stuck in a patch of mud for six hours. A group of local people helped us try to dig our car out but the mud was too slick. We were getting nowhere. One of the locals who’d helped us with the car, Hermando, had called for backup and a man on a tractor soon appeared to tow us out. After some quick dispensation of cash a token of gratitude, we were on our way again.

As we were about to leave, a man named Ericson showed up in a 4x4 pickup truck with tinted windows. Someone had called him to ask if he could tow us. Since we didn’t need that any longer, he instead offered to escort us to the main road towards Massingir. At this point Jackson began to make the situation work to his advantage, and I got to see how a former intelligence officer adapted to the situation.

He immediately made friends with Ericson, carrying on a natural conversation meant to extract useful information. Ericson said he works in “public transport,” which was meant to explain to outsiders how he could afford his expensive truck in an area with almost no employment and high levels of poverty. Jackson had heard the “public transport” line many times and wasn’t buying it. Ericson was very likely involved in poaching, especially because his house in Mapulanguene, another poacher’s village, was much nicer and more expensive than the surrounding homes.

As we followed him, Jackson had me take a photo of Ericson’s license plate with my phone and send it to him. When we stopped at his house for a brief moment, Jackson saved the coordinates in his GPS. When we said goodbye and thanked him for his help, Jackson got his phone number in case he “needed to call and ask for more

directions.” With little effort, he now had his license plate number and car model, his address and phone number - information that could come in handy later on.

On our way through Mapulanguene we stopped to buy water. Two cops immediately pulled us over, asking what we were doing out here late at night. Suspicion towards white foreigners in South-Africa-registered, expensive-looking vehicles wasn't surprising; corrupt cops often try to line their own pockets with cash from the poaching trade and don't appreciate disturbances to their income. As a result they remain highly vigilant of suspicious outsiders.

We came prepared for this: we were going fishing at a large dam on the outskirts of Massingir and pointed to a box of tackle, bait, and fishing rods sitting in the backseat. They bought our cover story, and after checking our IDs, they let us go.

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There's a stark contrast between Massingir and nearby villages. In most of them the houses are made from clay, dirt, wood, and corrugated sheet metal. In Massingir there are dozens of houses made with concrete and bricks, with AC units and satellite dishes mounted on brightly painted walls. Ostentatious signs of wealth are on display and clearly visible from the streets. There are small shops, a few restaurants, several bars, and even a disco. Expensive 4x4 trucks and pickups with tinted windows rolled through the dusty, trash-strewn streets. Many of them had South African plates and were very likely stolen there and smuggled over there border, Jackson said.

Nearly 80 percent of people here are involved in poaching, either directly or indirectly, by offering auxiliary services like lodging for poachers, selling supplies, or officials and cops who take bribes to keep poachers out of jail, or rent weapons to them.

It is in towns like Massingir and Mapulanguene that Jackson and Joe gather intelligence. They come here undercover to make friends with locals, acquire information about the local poaching economy, who's who, who did what when, and, if they're lucky, what will happen next.

In places like Sabie, anti-poaching rangers fight against Level 1 poachers, of whom there will never be a shortage. Joe calls them “cannon fodder.” His comparison might seem cruel or heartless, but it is not inaccurate. Between 2010 and 2015, South African park rangers killed nearly 500 poachers, many of them Mozambican, according to a [Vice News report](#) from late 2015.

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Even if Henk and his cohorts detain a hundred poachers a week, there will always be more to replace them. Joe and Jackson go after the Level 2 and 3 players; if those guys go behind bars, it'll reduce the economic incentive for the poachers, hopefully driving them towards different pursuits, or so the thinking goes.

In Massingir, Level 1 and Level 2 poachers are everywhere. Despite the obvious influx of money, there aren't many jobs available aside from making and selling charcoal. It's common to see young men standing around drinking beer early in the morning. Even though they appear to have nothing to do, many of them show signs of having money, despite their surroundings.

It's a status sign among local poachers to wear red athletic jerseys, Jackson said. As we drove through town we saw tons of young men wearing them and drinking the local beer, 2M, walking around or driving in expensive trucks.

Everywhere we went, people were looking at us. I had assumed our skin color immediately gave away our outsider status. Of course it did. But, Jackson said, as soon as we rolled into town the previous night, the word spread. In a community where the economy hinges on illegal activities, locals pay close attention to who comes and goes.

The young men in red shirts are very likely poachers, and although they have more money than most rural Mozambicans, they're not the richest people in town. That would be the local crime bosses. Here in Massingir, the kingpin is a man named Navara.

Navara's real name is Simon Ernesto Valoi. He used to make his living in South Africa as a carjacker before he fled the country on multiple murder charges. He is the person Jackson referred to when describing Massingir as "highly fucking dangerous." Navara is locally infamous for killing his brother with a bullet to the head over a rhino horn. Two years ago he kidnapped a reporter and a photographer on assignment for the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, for asking around in Massingir about poaching.

The reporter described the incident in a story for the magazine. Navara took them to a police station to question them himself, while the police stood idly by. Only after they paid him, and the German embassy contacted the local police chief, did they get released.

This is the kind of power crime bosses often have. They provide jobs to many young, unemployed people and command a lot of respect because of it. The lawless

conditions made it prudent for me to keep my head down and just pay close attention during my visit.

On our second day there, Jackson introduced me to a man who lives in the village. I have to withhold identifying details for his safety: local crime bosses would probably kill him and dump his body in a nearby lake if they find his identity online, Joe and Jackson said.

This man - let's call him Horatio - lives in a dilapidated shack right next door to one of the local crime bosses. His neighbor has several mistresses and 10 children. Despite having millions in blood money, his kids suffer from *kwashiorkor*, a protein-deficiency often seen in young children who survive on grains and rice, with almost no animal protein in their diet. Greed took over to the point where he won't even spend money to properly feed his own children, who now come to Horatio's door, begging for food.

Those kids live at the intersection of greed and poverty. Their father has enough money to feed everyone in the entire village, yet they live a poverty-stricken life, walking around with swollen bellies, and ashen, discolored skin and hair, the symptoms of their deprivation on full display.

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After my conversation with Horatio, we joined Jackson again, who had spent the preceding hours with some of his local informants. If you want people in places like Massingir to become your friends and talk, there's only one reliable course of action: drinking.

We spent the remainder of the day throwing back beers, eating, talking, and laughing. With us the whole night was a reticent young man, not more than 25 years old. He said nothing, avoided eye contact, and kept looking around like he was looking for someone.

During a meal, I raised my camera to photograph all the food on our table, a pile of grilled pork chops and a dozen beer bottles. The young man, whom Jackson had been plying with booze the whole night, sat on the other side of the table. When he saw my camera, he tried to lean out of the way of my lens. When we dropped the young man off at his home at the end of the night, Jackson saved the coordinates for his house in his GPS. The young man was wearing a red shirt. Jackson was at work.

## **PART 5: ‘WE DO IT BECAUSE IT’S THE RIGHT THING TO DO’**

Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world. If you are lucky enough to have a full-time job it’s still likely you’re not earning enough money to properly provide for your family. For many living in poverty, poaching is seen as an alluring, adventurous way to quickly make a lot of money. For those who already have made lots of money from it, like Navara or Horatio’s unnamed neighbor, greed can easily take over and perpetuate the cycle.

A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of State, “Poaching Rhino Horn in South Africa and Mozambique: Community and Expert Views from the Trenches,” takes a comprehensive look at the driving factors of poaching. Among them are a lack of political will, marginalization and anger towards wildlife parks, fear, corruption, and economic incentives.

The report says locally available jobs, “like farming, animal husbandry, selling charcoal, or irregular work in neighboring cities simply cannot compare with ‘the gold in the horn.’” The report quotes several local people from poaching communities on both sides of the border, including Massingir.

One individual, a 46-year old unemployed man from Kabok, a town close to Massingir, is quoted on the connection between poverty, unemployment, and poaching - emblematic of the views held by many people in rural communities:

“If we had jobs, we wouldn’t even be thinking of poaching, because when you are working, you get home tired, take a bath, eat and go to sleep. Come payday and you are able to put food on the table.”

The people quoted in the report all emphasize how economic deprivation is a huge driving factor of poaching. Feeding your kids tends to take precedence over wildlife conservation.

Sometimes, income can show up in unexpected ways. Horatio told me his friend found a .458 caliber hunting rifle on the road to Massingir. Poachers sometimes tie them to the bottom of their cars for transport. Sometimes they fall off. He took the rifle and sold it to a crime boss in town for 150,000 Meticals, or approximately \$3,000 USD. That is a lot of money in a place like Massingir.



So, with little-to-no help from locals, wildlife conservation is left to the park authorities, but corruption and deep levels of distrust between authorities and locals complicate the effort.

During my time in Mozambique I heard, over and over again, that locals are unemployable, untrustworthy, easily corruptible, and hold attitudes antithetical to the parks' goals of wildlife conservation. Conversely, according to the State Department report, locals often feel excluded from employment opportunities, and that the parks value wild animals more than their livelihoods. I also heard that locals feel anger over alleged abuse of suspected poachers by rangers and police.

Their frustration was exemplified by controversial resettlement projects initiated in the last few years by the Mozambican authorities. The government tried to move 7,000 people – of the 27,000 total living there – out of the great Limpopo National Park that straddles the border to South Africa just northwest of Massingir.

Many of those affected either refused to move, or resettled but then later moved back to their old homes inside the park, ignoring the authorities' stated mission of improving nature conservation efforts in the park.

Further complicating the situation is corruption among law enforcement and government officials. An official government website lists the minimum wage for Mozambican public administrators, “including the defense and security forces,” as \$60 USD a month. When police make so little money, the temptation can be difficult to resist when a poacher offers hundreds of dollars to lease a confiscated rifle, or thousands to stay out of jail.

Of course, if only a few bad apples on the police force corrupted conservation efforts, it wouldn't be very hard to deal with. But it goes higher than that. On the South African side of the border, Vietnamese diplomats at the embassy in Pretoria have been repeatedly implicated in horn smuggling, sometimes using inscrutable diplomatic bags to avoid detection, according to a [2012 report by Traffic](#), a wildlife preservation organization.

The first known occasion happened in 2006 when Khanh Toan Nguyen, a Commercial Attaché at the embassy, was arrested by South African police for possession of two rhino horns, diamonds and large sums of cash. Nguyen confessed to using diplomatic bags in the past to smuggling horns back to Vietnam. This happened shortly before demand for rhino horn exploded in Vietnam, so it's reasonable to suspect it has happened again since.

So what can conservationists possibly do to improve the rhinos' chances of escaping extinction? How can they fight this war on multiple fronts, combating the poachers, superstition, corruption, distrust, poverty, and foreign influences that are edging rhinos closer to oblivion? Is there any hope at all?

The responses that kept coming up in my interviews revolved around increased political will, better employment opportunities for those likely to become involved with poaching, new legislation, improved cooperation between conservation organizations, and a change in the collective mindset of both poachers and consumers.

Dr. Leonardo Simão spends his days working on these issues as the Executive Director of the Joaquim Chissano Foundation, which runs the Chissano Foundation Wildlife Preservation Initiative. Dr. Simão served under President Chissano as Minister of Health between 1986 and 1994, then as Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1994 and 2005. At his office in Maputo Dr. Simão spoke about measures he thinks are important to preserve both rhinos and the communities affected by poaching.

He emphasized the primacy of creating more employment opportunities in rural communities, and providing job training and funding for locals to start their own small businesses, like fruit and vegetable farms, canning plants, arts and crafts outlets, etc. He also bemoaned the devastating effects on the communities who keep losing young men in the encounters with rangers and police.

Dr. Simão went on to explain that new laws are currently being implemented to change poaching from a misdemeanor to a felony and how it will help police to pursue poachers. Previously, if you were caught poaching, you could pay a fine and be on your way. But, laws can take a long time to come into effect. To create a more immediate impact on the rhino horn trade, change needs to happen on the consumer side.

A recent public awareness campaign in Vietnam attempted to change consumers' views about the medicinal properties of rhino horn. It appears to have had some success, leading some conservationist to express mild optimism.

Teresa Telecky, director for wildlife at the Humane Society International, said their information campaign showed it's possible to alter people's perception in a relatively short span of time. "The results offer a vital ray of hope for the survival of rhinos," Telecky said, according to a [2014 Guardian report](#).

The campaign took place in Hanoi and targeted businesses, universities, schools, and women's groups, A poll conducted by Nielsen for the Humane Society International

and Vietnam CITES, showed the campaign precipitated a 25 percent decrease in the number of people who believe rhino horn has medicinal properties.

These kinds of efforts are crucial if rhinos are to have a fighting chance. However, the people I spoke to were not all hopeful, partly because, as rhinos become more endangered, the more the price for their horn will spike, giving poachers an even bigger economic incentive.

Jackson repeatedly expressed his exasperation, saying he “wishes we could just kill all the rhinos already and be done with it.” He didn’t mean it literally, but it emphasizes the frustration conservationists and rangers often feel when they’re fighting an uphill battle. Others echoed Jackson’s view, including the pilot, Richard, from whose plane I saw the size and richness of the park they’re all working to protect.

As we sat on the red dirt and green grass, drinking beers, I asked if he thinks there’s any hope of stopping poaching.

“No. We can’t stop it. All we’re doing is slowing it down. But it’s a moral issue. We do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

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