

UP vets' quest to save our heritage

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Three rhinos per day are lost to poaching in South Africa. At this rate there will be no more wild rhinos left in the country by 2020. The world should realise this has far surpassed a poaching problem. This is no longer about the person who trespasses to kill an animal so that he can feed his family. This is organised crime and a war we are losing.

Rhino horn per kilogram is worth more than platinum, making it the most expensive commodity today. While rhino horn was originally wanted in the Asian market for cultural reasons, it is now about status and greed. When such big money is at stake, corruption and dodgy practices will always be present.

It seems disturbingly ironic that we are losing an animal we know very little about. Before two veterinarians working in the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Veterinary Science, Drs Gerhard Steenkamp and Johan Marais, started treating rhinos that had survived poaching attacks, very little research had been done on these prehistoric animals. Their anatomy, their response to medication and even what equipment and instruments to use when treating them were unknown.

In 2012, they started a project called [Saving the Survivors](#). Poaching in South Africa had escalated exponentially when they were called to treat a rhino called Thandi that had survived a brutal poaching attack. Thandi's story has a happy ending in that she not only recovered well, but is now in calf. Together, Steenkamp and Marais formed a formidable pair, with Steenkamp specialising in maxillofacial surgery and Marais in equine surgery. Marais explains that of all mammals, the rhino and horse are probably the most similar. His equine expertise is therefore of great value as is Steenkamp's background in treating facial traumas as a result of horns that had been hacked off. However, they soon realised how much more needed to be done in order to save this species.

Because they work in the Faculty of Veterinary Science, Steenkamp and Marais are in the fortunate position that they are encouraged to do research. They are currently the only veterinarians in the country capable of performing certain procedures on rhinos that have survived attacks and other injuries. Much of their research is guided by the questions that other veterinarians are asking them. The South African Veterinary Association (SAVA) holds an annual rhino workshop in all nine provinces. This is an opportunity for veterinarians working on rhinos to come together to share their experiences and expertise. 'Our work is clinically driven. Everything we research can be applied in the field tomorrow and will benefit other vets. We want to train others so that there will be more hands to treat this huge problem,' says Steenkamp.

They have worked on about 60 rhinos since starting Saving the Survivors, with most of the cases resulting from gunshot wounds, snare wounds and facial trauma. It is very important for these rhinos to be treated as soon as they have been wounded in order to prevent infection and other complications. Having successfully treated seven rhinos for facial trauma, they now have a protocol that works. The treatment for a typical face wound where the horn has been removed consists of cleaning the wound and applying wound material. A fibreglass-based dressing then has to be screwed into place so that the rhino cannot get rid of the cover by rubbing it against the nearest tree. Although rhino tissue heals incredibly well, large gaping wounds take a very long time to heal. Since

it is impossible to treat a wounded rhino every day, they had to find material that would only need to be changed every six weeks. They do, unfortunately, have to make the difficult decision at times to euthanise a suffering animal whose injuries are untreatable.

Reflecting on the current situation, Marais questions whether the world realises what is happening to South Africa's rhino and expresses his doubt that it does. The big dilemma we face is that at the current poaching rate, there is simply not enough time left before we will have lost all our wild rhinos. The awful truth is that when rhinos are no more, man's greed will look to other animals. SanParks already released a statement earlier this year saying elephant poaching is going to hit us like an avalanche. Soon other wildlife, such as lion and pangolin, will also become victims of this war. Steenkamp wonders how, if we cannot save something as big as a rhino, we are going to conserve anything else. This is not simply about saving rhino. It is about the conservation of our heritage, he emphasises.

From an economic point of view, conservation is imperative. Tourism in South Africa is one of our biggest job creators. If the Big 5 becomes the Big 4 and then the Big 3, it is the people of South Africa who will suffer. Steenkamp emphasises that by conserving South Africa's species, we are preserving the heritage of our country and ensuring potential job creation for the future. This war demands the attention of every South African who claims to love this country, not just those working in conservation.

The biggest challenge South Africa's rhino face today is the lack of money and time. More money must be put into research, treatment methods and equipment to make treatment possible, as well as education, but with time rapidly running out, Steenkamp and Marais are gravely concerned for the future of this majestic creature.

Every cent donated to Saving the Survivors goes towards treating and caring for rhinos injured in brutal attacks. SAVA and UP cover all administrative costs involved in the project.