

UP vets receive Rhino Conservation Awards for their research

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On World Game Ranger Day, 31 July, the Game Ranger Association of Africa (GRAA) held its annual Rhino Conservation Awards Ceremony to acknowledge the committed efforts of individuals and organisations involved in the protection of our endangered species. Those honoured during the ceremony included Drs Gerhard Steenkamp and Johan Marais, two outstanding veterinarians from the University of Pretoria.

GRAA is dedicated to the protection, conservation and restoration of Africa's biodiversity and wilderness for the benefit of present and future generations. It is a non-profit organisation and many of its more than 1 500 members across Africa are rangers who are actively involved in anti-poaching activities.

Steenkamp and Marais won the award for Best Science, Research and Technology for the impressive work they have done through Saving the Survivors, the organisation they started to treat rhinos injured as a result of poaching and other traumatic incidents. Despite the time-consuming nature of this work, they remain committed academics in the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences. Their work has contributed greatly to our understanding of the anatomy and physiology of rhinos, on which very little research had been done previously.

The gala dinner awards ceremony was held at the Monte Casino Ballroom in Johannesburg and was attended by international guests, government officials and conservation dignitaries. His Royal Highness, Prince Albert II of Monaco, whose Foundation is committed to and supports the protection of species dangerously close to extinction, was the patron for the evening. The keynote address was presented by the Minister of Environmental Affairs, Ms Edna Molewa.

The annual awards ceremony is aimed not only at recognising the tireless efforts of those active in rhino conservation, but also at raising awareness of the atrocities that occur during rhino poaching. In addition, it offers the general public an opportunity to become involved as the nomination process is open and anyone can vote for a deserving candidate, after which a panel of adjudicators identify the winners in each category. Nominations are invited from African Rhino Range States in five categories, namely Best Field Ranger, Best Conservation Practitioner, Best Political and Judicial Support, Best Science Research and Technology, and Best Awareness, Education or Funding.

UP is exceptionally proud and honoured to be associated with Drs Marais and Steenkamp, both as academics and as conservation pioneers. When asked how they felt about the award, Dr Marais replied: 'It would have been impossible to do this work without the support of the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences and the numerous private veterinarians who assisted us.'

Dr Steenkamp added: "Saving the Survivors is seated within the South African Veterinary Association's Veterinary Rhino funds and hence it is important to acknowledge their tremendous efforts as well in supporting us, together with a multitude of companies that helps making this the success it is".