

# Brave team vows to protect rhino

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## Armed with weapons and operating on ground, in air

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**A**N ARMY of rangers, soldiers and police officers have vowed to save South Africa's remaining rhinos from poachers in the wake of shocking news that more than two rhinos a day have been killed so far this year, and over 1 000 rhinos were poached last year.

KZN rangers this year will be taking the fight against rhino poaching outside the parks, armed with weapons and operating on the ground and in the air.

"We are trying to distract the operations of the syndicates by working outside of the protected areas, and making it more difficult for the poachers to get inside," said Cedric Coetzee, KZN provincial rhino security co-ordinator at Ezemvelo KZN wildlife.

The official figures for the number of rhinos poached last year - 1 004 - were released by the national environmental department yesterday, and 85 of those were from KZN.

With a dwindling rhino population, and increased demand for rhino horn from the Far East, anti-rhino poaching organisations have solidified

their plans to stamp out poaching with the rollout of a provincial rhino management security plan and the creation of a joint operations communications centre which will bring together all resources.

"We are hoping that this would bring down and stop the number of rhinos poached, but we will only be able to gauge that as we go through the year," said Coetzee.

While security at game reserves and other protected areas had been beefed up, they would go out into and work with nearby communities to gather intelligence and avert poaching before it could happen.

"Before there wasn't enough put into following up leads, but this will be one of the focus areas this year," said Coetzee.

Lawrence Munro, rhino security operations manager and ZAP-Wing (Zululand Anti Poaching) co-ordinator at Ezemvelo KZN, said it was essential that KZN took the lead in fighting rhino poaching.

"We have international borders with Mozambique and Swaziland, a long coastline and many remote areas, but we have a dedicated team who want to stop rhino poaching, and not let it reach the numbers it had last year."

Munro said many relationships were forged last year with people involved in anti-rhino poaching initiatives and there was a unified stance to work together.

"We will be able to co-ordinate efforts and react quicker

to information we receive."

Kingsley Holgate, explorer and humanitarian, has led a concerted effort to educate children and communities about rhino poaching.

"We started last year with talking to children and getting them to draw what they saw happening in their communities, and the results were frightening, but we will continue with this work so that the children will be sensitised and educated about why rhino poaching is wrong," said Holgate.

Sheelagh Antrobus of the Project Rhino KZN Secretariat said all organisations working together in KZN would help.

"We have now started a campaign with international organisations to flight videos in countries such as Vietnam to show that rhino horn is not valuable and what the effect is on the animals here," she said.

National environmental department spokesman Albi Modise said 606 rhinos were killed in the Kruger National Park last year.

"Since 2008, 2 778 rhinos have been poached in South Africa. The number of rhino poachers arrested in 2013 increased considerably with 343 arrested, 133 of them in the Kruger National Park," he said.

This year 37 rhinos had been poached so far, and six people arrested.

Modise urged South Africans to report poaching and call the anonymous tip-off lines 0800 205 005, 08600 10111 or text Crime Line on 32211.

