

USFWS Meets with Rhino Experts from Across the Globe to Address Africa's Worst Rhino Poaching in Decades

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Well-equipped, sophisticated and organized poaching operations have killed more than 800 African rhinos in the past three years - just for their horns. With only 25,000 rhinos remaining in Africa, poaching is cause for grave concern and in early March the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service met with rhino experts from around the world to discuss what could be done to stem this devastating loss.

From March 5-10, 2011 The Service, in collaboration with SANparks, the World Wildlife Fund's African Rhino Program, the International Rhino Foundation and Save the Rhino International sponsored a meeting of the African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Species Survival Commission (SSC) at Mokala National Park in South Africa to assess the status of rhinos across the continent and identify strategies to combat the poaching crisis. Biologists and wildlife managers, as well as government representatives from Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe were in attendance.

The most serious poaching upsurge has been evidenced in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya. South Africa alone lost 333 rhinos last year, and so far this year more than 70 animals have been lost. Most rhino horns leaving southern Africa are destined for medicinal markets, especially in Vietnam, which is one of several Southeast and East Asian countries believed to be driving the poaching epidemic.

Black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*) currently number 4,840 (up from 4,240 in 2007), while white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) are more numerous, totaling 20,150 (up from 17,500 in 2007). Although these numbers reflect slight increases since the last experts' meeting in 2007, with the rise in poaching, there is still cause for concern due to inadequate funding to combat well-resourced organized criminals.

"We have seen modest increases in some rhino populations and we commend the courageous efforts of field personnel to protect these animals. However, additional resources are desperately needed to secure the survival of rhinos." said Dr. Michelle Gadd, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who oversees the African Rhino program, which currently supports rhino projects in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia.

The rhino experts are urging greater international cooperation to address the illegal markets for rhino horn, assistance and training for law enforcement, military, and judicial agencies, particularly assistance in developing new tools and technologies to detect and intercept poachers. In addition, there is an urgent need for higher conviction rates and severity of penalties for rhino-related crimes.

To learn more about the work the Service is doing to help protect rhinoceros in Africa and Asia, go to <http://www.fws.gov/international/DIC/species/rhino/rhino.html>

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