

*Save the Rhino International: Grant report for Kiezebrink
Protecting the rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), South Africa,
by supporting rangers' welfare*

Save the Rhino International: Grant report for Kiezebrink

Project title: Protecting the rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), South Africa, by supporting rangers' welfare

Location of project: Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Project start and end dates: The project is ongoing, though this report focuses on the 12-month period below

Reporting period: 1st January 2025 to 31st December 2025

Report submitted: 12th May 2026

Background

Since 2014, a gradual decrease in rhino-poaching losses throughout South Africa has occurred due to the ongoing interventions and collaboration, resulting in increased anti-poaching efforts and capabilities. However, poaching pressure in terms of incursions remains very high and 2023 saw poaching increase in South Africa by more than 10% compared to 2022 (*Table 1*). Therefore, ongoing investment into rangers is required to ensure that any successes are maintained and built upon.

The original project **Goal** was: To help deliver the goal of the Strategy for the Management of Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis minor*) in KwaZulu-Natal (Conway and Goodman, 2013), namely: "To conserve and sustainably manage a free-ranging meta-population of black rhinoceros comprising at least 740 individuals throughout its historical range in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), supported through a shared commitment on Private, Community and State land".

The original project **Objectives** were:

- 1.) Reduce annual poaching levels by enabling increased patrol coverage and decreased reaction time
- 2.) Reduce annual poaching levels by improving ranger welfare while on duty in HiP

Activities

Park rangers are vital to ensure the integrity of conservation areas and the safety of rhinos within these landscapes. The pressure on rangers, and risk to their personal safety, has been immense during the >14 years of the South Africa rhino-poaching crisis, and continues while they are drawn into law-enforcement responsibilities (*Table 1*).

Table 1: South African poaching statistics from 2012 to 2025.

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
668	1,004	1,215	1,175	1,054	1,028	769	594	394	451	448	499	420	352

Law enforcement

During the 12-month reporting period January-December 2025, there was an overall reduction in poaching attempts in comparison to previous years. This can be directly attributed to the dehorning operations that took place during 2024 as well as the roll out of an integrity management plan. All other law-enforcement initiatives, such as the security cameras and K9 Unit, are still highly valuable and necessary to continue alongside such operations.

*Save the Rhino International: Grant report for Kiezebrink
Protecting the rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), South Africa,
by supporting rangers' welfare*

During 2025, dehorning of rhino continued throughout the Park. Several rhinos received maintenance dehorning during a three-month period, an endeavour led by the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) Game Capture Unit. All immobilized rhinos were resampled (faecal, blood and DNA samples) for research purposes.



Figure 1: Field Rangers during patrols in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. Image credit: HiP



Figure 2: Black rhino shows its ear notches to the pilot in the fixed-wing aircraft during a Rhino Monitoring patrol in HiP. Image credit: HiP
Biological monitoring and management

As part of the implementation of the *Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Guardianship Strategy for Rhinoceros 2023-2032*, EKZNW (with the financial and technical support of Save the Rhino and the Rhino Recovery Fund) has been undertaking "Project FIRE: HiP", to critically evaluate the cost, effectiveness, and lessons learnt from all the anti-poaching interventions (e.g. dehorning, detection cameras, K9 Unit, tracking devices, rhino monitoring, etc.) used in HiP during the last 10-15 years. Project FIRE: HiP commenced during July 2025, with results due to be compiled and the final report completed by July 2026. It is intended that the Project will inform future investment by donor agencies into rhino conservation efforts by EKZNW in HiP, other rhino reserves in KZN, and beyond.

*Save the Rhino International: Grant report for Kiezebrink
Protecting the rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), South Africa,
by supporting rangers' welfare*



Figure 3: Crash of white rhino near a dry water pan in iMfolozi Game Reserve. Image credit: Michael Langley

In 2024, rhinos were dehorned with support from WWF-South Africa (WWF-SA) and funding and coordination provided by Save the Rhino and Wildlife ACT. Tracking pods (VHF / LoRA) deployed in the 2024 dehorning operations have continued to provide extensive data on individual and population-tracking and insight into population trends. The fixed-wing aircraft sponsored by Save the Rhino continued to operate effectively within the Park. It has remained instrumental to black rhino monitoring and will also be used during dehorning operations.

Funding from NGOs supports not only the protection of the Park's two rhino species, but also the effective management of the wider environment. Several ongoing monitoring programmes are in place within the Park, including the collaring and tracking of lion (*Panthera leo*), wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*) and elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). This technology allows managers to better understand species distribution and movement patterns, and to respond rapidly if animals move beyond the Park's boundaries. These capabilities are essential for locating and returning animals when required, protecting both animal welfare and ensuring the safety of neighbouring communities.

HiP supports a wide range of other large mammal species, including cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), hippo (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) and numerous antelope species. Ranger equipment and patrols therefore serve a broader purpose than rhino protection alone, helping to safeguard wildlife from meat poaching and the illegal targeting of animals for traditional medicinal use. The upkeep of vehicles, ranger camps, roads and fences is fundamental to the integrity of HiP.

Beyond its flagship species, the Park also supports a remarkable diversity of smaller fauna whose survival depends on the protection of intact habitats. This diversity extends to the Park's flora, which includes scarp forests, savannah grasslands and woodland thickets. Active management protects these ecosystems, preserving representative habitats that are rapidly disappearing beyond protected areas.

Capacity building

Staffing levels are currently being replenished, primarily with Senior Field Rangers and a few Training Field Rangers. Such efforts have significantly strengthened HiP's on-the-ground presence. Field Rangers trained during 2019 but not hired due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have now been re-evaluated and retrained as of December.

Some staff members have completed Environmental Management Inspector training to better handle crime scenes and have participated in team building and effectiveness workshops. Finally, towards the end of 2025, the K9 Unit recruited a new Coordinator, Tristan Patrick, who brings extensive tactical experience that is expected to significantly enhance the Unit's effectiveness.

*Save the Rhino International: Grant report for Kiezebrink
Protecting the rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HiP), South Africa,
by supporting rangers' welfare*

"There is no Park without the staff. The field rangers who patrol large sections daily to protect wildlife; the general assistance staff who are there to ensure roads are fixed, fences are repaired and accommodation maintained [to] a good standard. The Leadership teams who co-ordinate and make sure that all operations, despite their challenges, continue to ensure the integrity of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park."

Dirk Swart, Section Ranger, Manzibomvu Section

Future plans

There is an initiative within the Park to encourage management to develop revenue-generating activities that directly support conservation efforts. Programmes have been established to promote team cohesion and ensure that field staff are well-supported. These efforts aim to prevent staff from working in isolation and instead foster collaboration to address ongoing challenges. NGOs continue to play a vital role in supporting the Park's operations, a role that is more crucial than ever given the persistent threats facing HiP and the constraints on internal operational budgets.

Progress towards Project Objectives

Objective	Actual outcome by the end of 2025
1. Reduce annual poaching levels by enabling increased patrol coverage and decreased reaction time within HiP	A total of 352 rhinos were illegally killed in South Africa from January-December 2025, including 97 in KZN.
2. Reduce annual poaching levels by improving ranger welfare while on duty in HiP	

Thank you to the donors of Save the Rhino International

The team at HiP would like to thank you again for your generosity. The situation on the ground is incredibly difficult but support such as this provides a much-needed boost for the teams working to conserve HiP's rhinos.