

HOPE FOR RHINO

THE WATERBERG'S ONGOING COMMITMENT



White Rhino
image by Fem Vincken
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WATERBERG
LANDSCAPE ALLIANCE

WORLD RHINO DAY
2025



Every rhino saved, every global trafficking ring dismantled, and every extra space available for rhinos brings us closer to a future where they can thrive in the wild.

White Rhino
image by Wynand Uys
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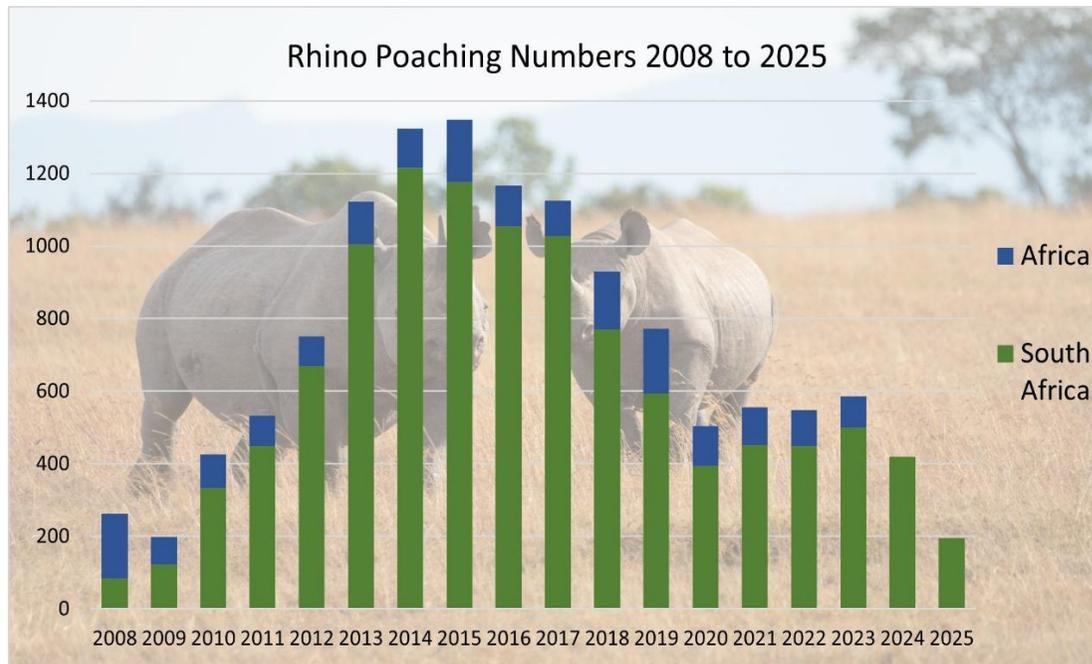
On World Rhino Day 2025, the Waterberg Landscape Alliance (WLA) pays tribute to the extraordinary efforts that have enabled rhinos to survive against the odds. The story of rhinos in the Waterberg is more than one of survival; it is a story of hope, resilience, and the power of collaboration across an entire district. It is also an opportunity to reflect more broadly on conservation: to celebrate progress, to acknowledge the immense challenges that remain, and to recommit to the urgent actions required to ensure rhinos continue to roam Africa's landscapes.

This document has been prepared to mark and celebrate World Rhino Day 2025. It provides an overview of the status of rhino populations across Africa, outlines the persistent threat posed by poaching and trafficking, and highlights the Waterberg's emergence as one of South Africa's strongest rhino strongholds. In addition, it examines the challenges ahead, including climate change, small and fragmented populations, and the pressures of organized crime, before setting out key recommendations for the years ahead.

This report is dedicated to the committed individuals in the Waterberg and across Africa working to secure the African rhinos in the wild.

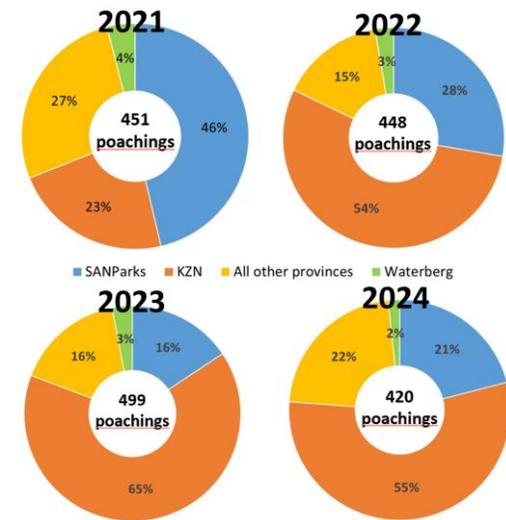
Over the past fifteen years, **rhino poaching has escalated into one of the most pressing conservation crises** of our time. In 2007, South Africa recorded just 13 rhinos poached. By 2014, that number had surged to 1,215 in a single year. Although numbers have since declined, an estimated 550 rhinos are still killed annually across Africa, representing approximately 2.5% of the continent’s population each year — **equivalent to one rhino lost every fifteen hours.**

The drivers of this illegal trade are complex. Rhino horn continues to be sought after for use in traditional medicine and decorative items, despite having no scientifically proven health benefits. This demand is fueled by cultural beliefs, economic pressures, and the operations of sophisticated, organized crime networks. **South Africa, home to 69% of Africa’s rhinos, has borne the brunt of poaching, accounting for 85% of all losses on the continent over the past decade.**



Graph showing annual rhino poaching data from for both South Africa and the rest of Africa as reported by the IUCN SSCs African Rhino Specialist Group. Only South Africa has reported poaching figures for 2024 and 2025 so far.

Within South Africa poaching patterns have shifted over time. Kruger National Park historically accounted for the highest losses, with 209 rhinos poached in 2021 alone. More recently, KwaZulu-Natal has emerged as the epicenter of poaching, particularly in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. Despite relentless pressures, rhinos survive thanks to decades of coordinated efforts by reserves, rangers, law enforcement, communities, and conservation organisations.



Data source: Stoprhinopoaching.com

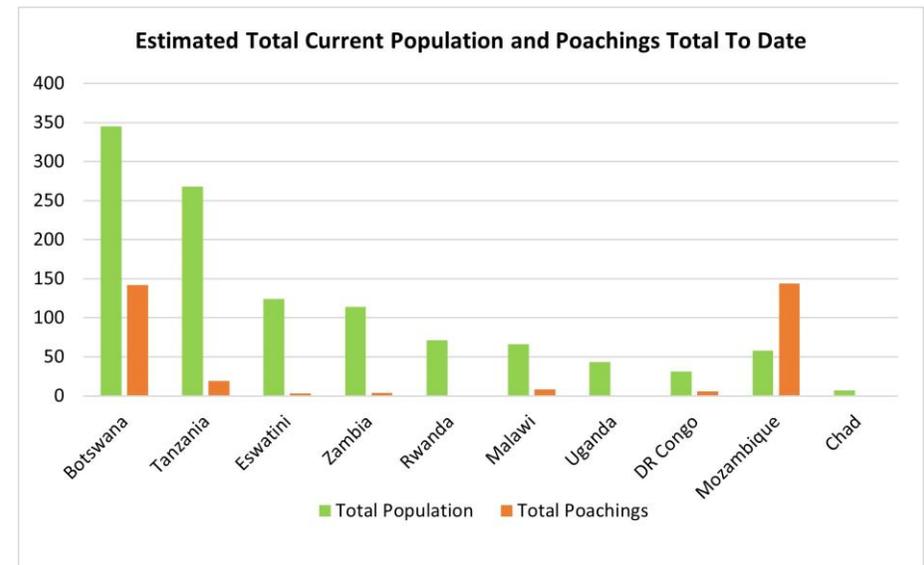
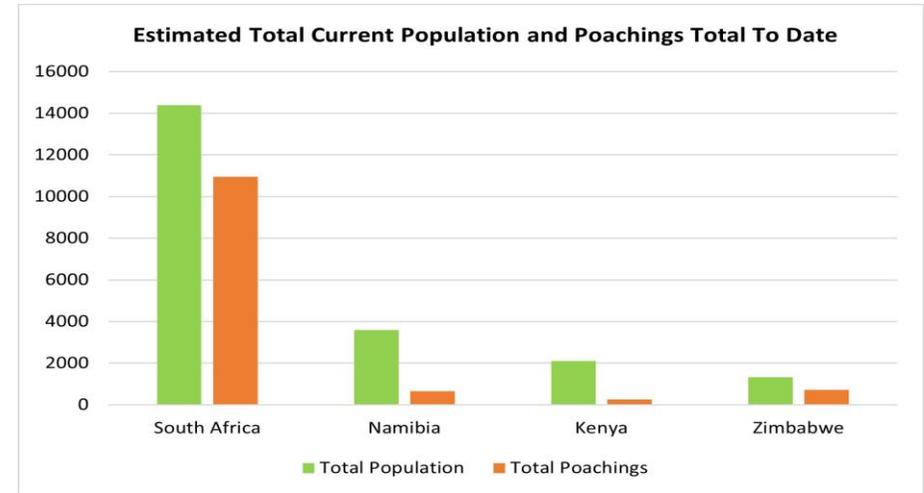
Africa has two species of rhino – the black or hooked lipped rhino and the white or wide mouthed rhino. Both occur in the Waterberg.

Black rhino are found in 12 African countries and the white rhino is found across 13 African countries. However the majority of these countries only hold small populations. **Only four African countries have populations of more than 1000.**

South Africa holds significantly more rhino than any other African country and therefore plays a pivotal role in the survival of Africa’s rhinos. South Africa along with the three other top rhino-hosting countries, holds 96% of the continent’s rhino population, yet these countries have also borne the brunt of the crisis, **experiencing 97% of all poaching losses.**

South Africa alone is home to 69% of Africa’s rhinos and has suffered 85% of the continent’s poaching-related deaths over the past decade, underscoring both its importance as a stronghold for the species and the immense conservation challenges it faces.

By the end of 2024, Africa was home to an **estimated 22,540 rhinos** — a number strikingly similar to the 22,137 last official rhino estimate recorded at the end of 2021 and reported at CITES CoP19. This indicates poaching is continuing to have a major impact on rhino limiting the natural increase rates and recovery of the species across Africa.



Rhino population figures are drawn from the latest statistics of the IUCN Species Survival Commission’s African and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups, while poaching data is sourced from StopRhinoPoaching.com and Save the Rhino International.



The African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade Report has been released for World Rhino Day and the upcoming CITES Cop20 later in the year. The following are key points from the report. The full document can be found at www.cites.org.

Status of Rhinos

- End of December 2024 – Africa had an estimate of **22,540 rhinos**.
- Black rhino population had changed from 6,195 in 2022 to 6,788 by end of 2024: **increase of 5.2%**.
- White rhino population had changed from 15,942 in 2022 to 15,752 by end of 2024: **decline of 11.2%**.
- In addition to illegal killings, African rhino losses also came from extended droughts, management limitations, poor population reporting and population corrections to previous surveys.

Trade Dynamics

- Between 2021 and 2023 an estimated 676 to 856 rhino horns were sourced into the illegal trade annually.
- A total of 921 horn seizures were reported in the CITES and TRAFFIC's trade databases.
- From 2021 to 2023 seizures relating to rhino horn **totalled 1.8 tonnes** (equivalent to 716 whole horns).
- The largest seizures were **160kg from South Africa to Malaysia and 139kg from South Africa to Viet Nam**.
- Malaysia had the highest number of illegal trade links followed by Viet Nam.
- South Africa accounted for 66% of the global seizure weight (90% among African range States.) **Making South Africa the country most affect by and involved in rhino poaching.**
- An emerging illegal trade link has been found between South Africa and Mongolia.

Incidents of Poaching

- During the **2022 to end of 2024 period a total of 2,212 rhinos were poached** (1849 white rhinos and 363 black rhinos) across Africa.
- For 2024, a total of 516 incidents were recorded compared to 540 in 2021.
- The average poaching rate dropped to 2.15% for Africa – **the lowest rate since 2011**.
- In early 2025, there appeared to be an increase in the rate of rhinos being lost to poaching.

Enforcement Issues

- Challenges in curbing rhino poaching and trafficking include **corruption, limited resources, slow prosecutorial processes**, and the presence of organised, well-armed poaching and trafficking networks.
- While many range states have improved laws and anti-poaching strategies, they still struggle with corruption, coordination, cross border crime, prosecution and community engagement.
- Addressing the above requires better **political will, more funding, modern tools and community involvements** with increased benefits.
- Best practices indicate planning, cross-border **cooperation and teamwork** with motivated, committed and competent players as being key.

Concern for South Africa

- The finding that the median population size for rhinos in South Africa is 11 individuals for black rhino and 7 individuals for white rhino has raised concerns for inbreeding and loss of long term evolutionary potential.



Black Rhinos - *Diceros bicornis*

Black rhinos are found in 12 African countries, with a total estimated population of 6,788 individuals by the end of 2024. The species is divided into three surviving subspecies:

- South-western black rhino (*D. b. bicornis*) – 2,597 individuals
- Eastern black rhino (*D. b. michaeli*) – 1,471 individuals
- South-central black rhino (*D. b. minor*) – 2,720 individuals
- A fourth subspecies, the western black rhino (*D. b. longipes*), was declared extinct in 2011, with the last confirmed sighting in Cameroon in 2006.

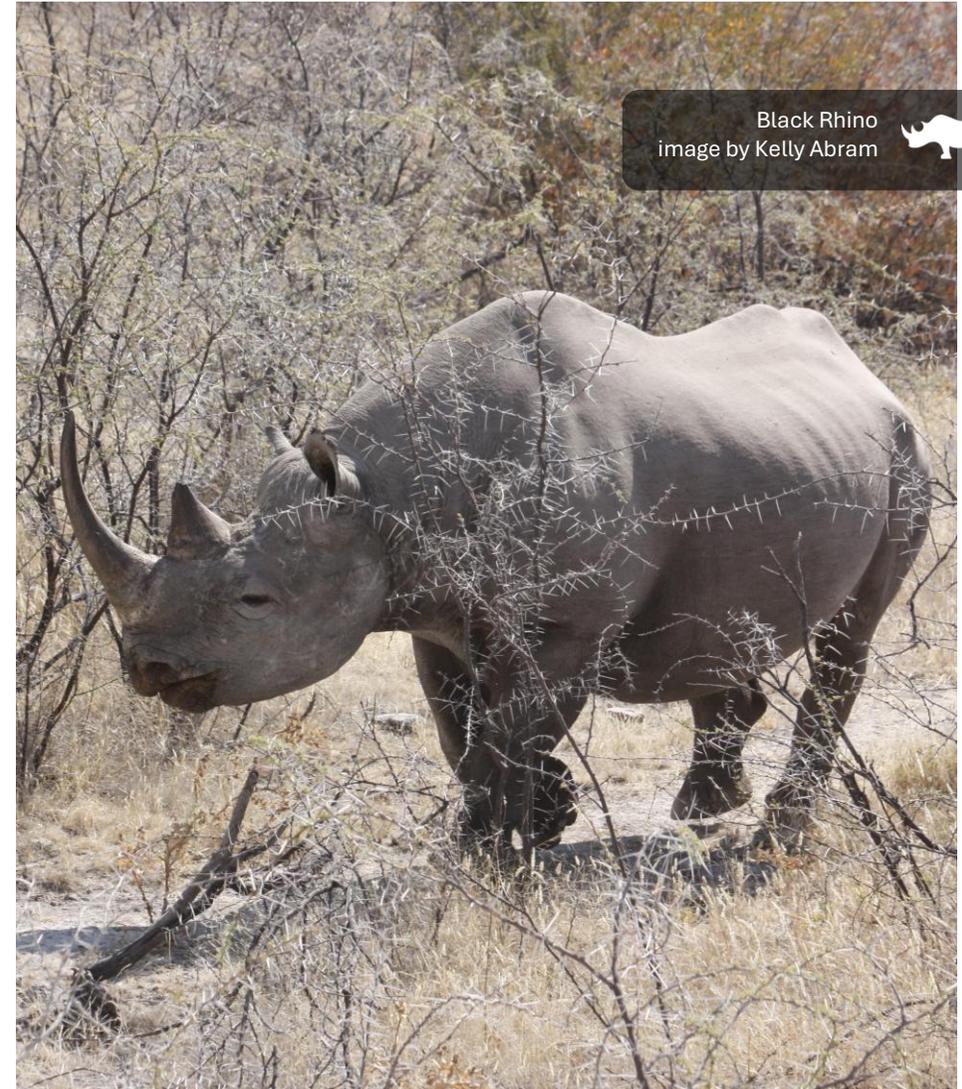
Historically, black rhinos were once the most numerous rhino species in the world, with as many as 100,000 across Africa in 1960. Poaching, however, caused catastrophic declines: by 1970, numbers had fallen to around 65,000, and by the mid-1990s, the population had collapsed to just 2,300 individuals.

Facts from - The African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade Report

- **Current African Population (as of end of 2024): 6,788**
- **Current South African Population (as of end of 2024): 2,307**
- Total Poaching's in Africa 2022 to 2024: 363
- % change since 2023: Increase of 5.2%
- **IUCN Status: Critically Endangered**
- Median group population size found by IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group for South Africa: 11

Other Facts

- Reintroduced into the Waterberg: 1990
- Black rhino date back 5 million years in their current form.



White Rhinos – *Certotherium simum*

White rhinos are the most numerous of the five rhino species, with an estimated 15,752 animals across 13 African countries. The species is divided into two subspecies: the southern white rhino (*C. s. simum*), which makes up nearly the entire global population, and the northern white rhino (*C. s. cottoni*). With two surviving females remaining, they are considered functionally extinct.

At the start of the 20th century, fewer than 100 white rhinos remained. Through concerted conservation efforts, the population rebounded to more than 21,000 by 2012 — one of the most remarkable recoveries of any large mammal. However, their numbers also made them the primary target of poachers. Between 2012 and 2021, intense poaching caused a 24% decline, reducing the population to around 15,942.

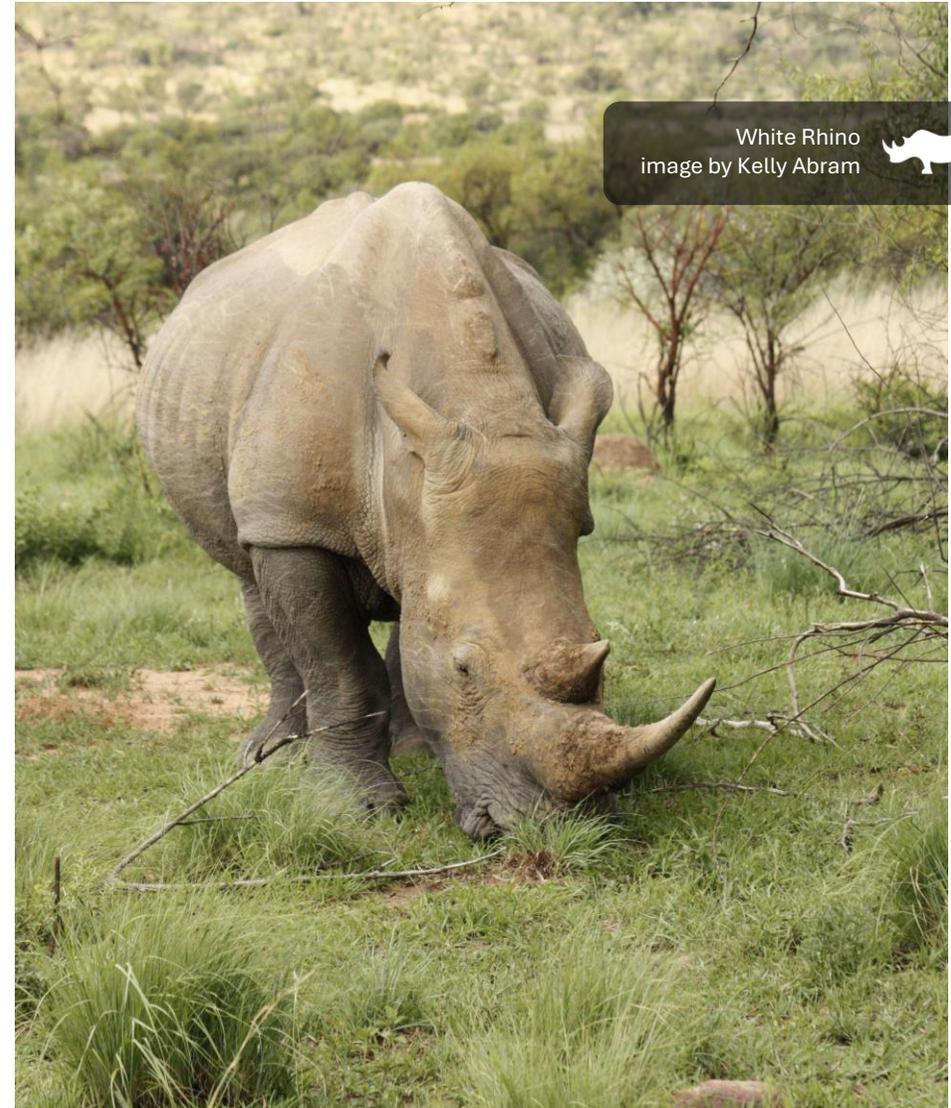
Encouragingly, a brief recovery followed: numbers rose to 16,834 in 2022 (a 3.5% increase) and to 17,464 in 2023 (a further 3.7% increase). Yet this progress was not sustained. By the end of 2024, the population had dropped again to 15,752.

Facts from - The African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade Report

- **Current African Population (as of end of 2024): 15,752**
- **Current South African Population (as of end of 2024): 12,082**
- Total Poaching's in Africa 2022 to 2024: 1849
- % change since 2023: Decline of 11.2%
- **IUCN Status: Near Threatened**
- Median group population size found by IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group for South Africa: 7

Other Facts

- Reintroduced into the Waterberg: Early 1980s
- White rhino date back 2 million years in their current form.



The Waterberg, spanning over 4.5 million hectares in Limpopo, has a deep and enduring connection to rhinos. San rock art scattered across cliffs and caves depicts rhinos alongside elephants, giraffes, and antelope, illustrating a time when these animals roamed freely across the landscape. For the San, rhinos held spiritual significance and were an integral part of their cultural heritage.

By the early 1980s, however, no rhinos remained in the Waterberg. The modern conservation story began with the **reintroduction of white rhinos in the early 1980s, followed by black rhinos in 1990**, when Lapalala Wilderness purchased the first privately owned black rhino from the Natal Parks Board. Over subsequent decades, **rhinos became a keystone of both ecological and economic restoration**, contributing to the development of eco-tourism and making the Waterberg one of the most reliable destinations in Africa to see wild rhinos.

When poaching surged across South Africa in the late 2000s, the Waterberg was not spared and the rising security costs forced some properties to disinvest in rhino – losing valuable space and habitats for these animals. But many others — especially the large conservation areas and committed private reserves — stood firm. They invested in security, strengthened collaboration, and refused to give up. With the support of partners, NGOs, and donors, the Waterberg has remained a stronghold for rhino. This cooperative model gave rise to the Greater Security Network, a district-wide system now spanning nearly the entire 4.5-million-hectare landscape.

In South Africa, **more rhinos are now privately owned than state-managed**, and the Waterberg mirrors this trend. Over 40 years, private landowners have created a connected network of conservation reserves, forming a vital safe landscape for rhinos and other wildlife. The WLA supports these efforts by providing coordination, resources, and a shared platform for landscape-wide protection.



Black Rhino San Art
image by Kelly Abram
In the Waterberg

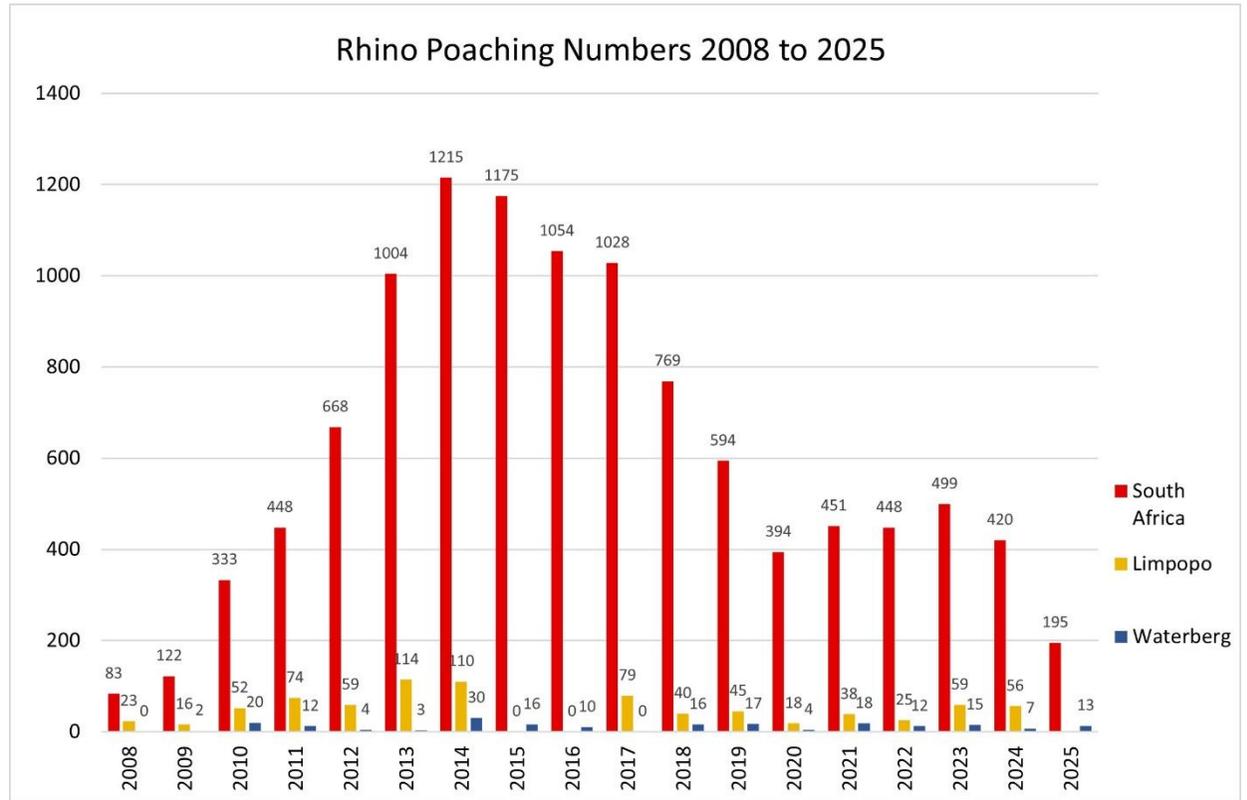


The results of the Waterberg’s approach have been remarkable. Despite hosting roughly 12% of South Africa’s rhinos, the Waterberg accounted for **only 2–4% of poaching losses over the past decade**. In 2024, only seven rhinos were lost in the Waterberg compared with 56 across the rest of Limpopo. The first half of 2025 saw 13 rhinos lost, all on properties that lacked adequate security and were not fully integrated into the Network, underscoring the importance of district-wide collaboration.

The effectiveness of the Waterberg’s security approach is also reflected in enforcement outcomes. Poachers in the Waterberg are more than **ten times more likely to be arrested and convicted compared with other hotspots**. A landmark case occurred in 2024 at Lapalala Wilderness, (see success stories). These outcomes demonstrate the power of coordinated field operations, intelligence sharing, and strong partnerships with the SAPS Endangered Species Unit (ESU).

Rhino Poaching Summary

Rhino losses	- 2023	- 2024	- 2025
South Africa	499	420	195
Waterberg	15	7	13



The graph provides a breakdown of rhino poaching in South Africa, with national totals alongside comparative figures for Limpopo and the Waterberg. Data sources: StopRhinoPoaching.com (South Africa and Limpopo) and SAPS Endangered Species Unit (Waterberg).

At the heart of the Waterberg's success is the **Greater Security Network: a collaborative, district-wide security system** uniting private landowners, community reserves, NGOs, and state authorities. Covering over 4.5 million hectares, the Network operates as a multi-layered shield, using technology, information sharing, joint patrols, and rapid-response teams to prevent poaching before it occurs.

The Network's strength lies not only in its scale but in its **cooperative ethos**. Instead of fragmented, property-by-property defenses, the Waterberg has cultivated a culture of collaboration that has made it one of the most difficult landscapes for poachers to infiltrate. It is this integration of resources, expertise, and vigilance that has allowed rhino populations to recover and thrive.

By making the Waterberg safer, this system delivers far-reaching benefits. **Rhinos are better protected, communities gain resilience, and large landscapes contribute to international conservation targets.** Residents experience greater security, while the wildlife-based economy—on which jobs and livelihoods depend—becomes more stable. These co-benefits ensure that rhino protection is not seen in isolation but as part of a stronger, more inclusive, and resilient rural economy.

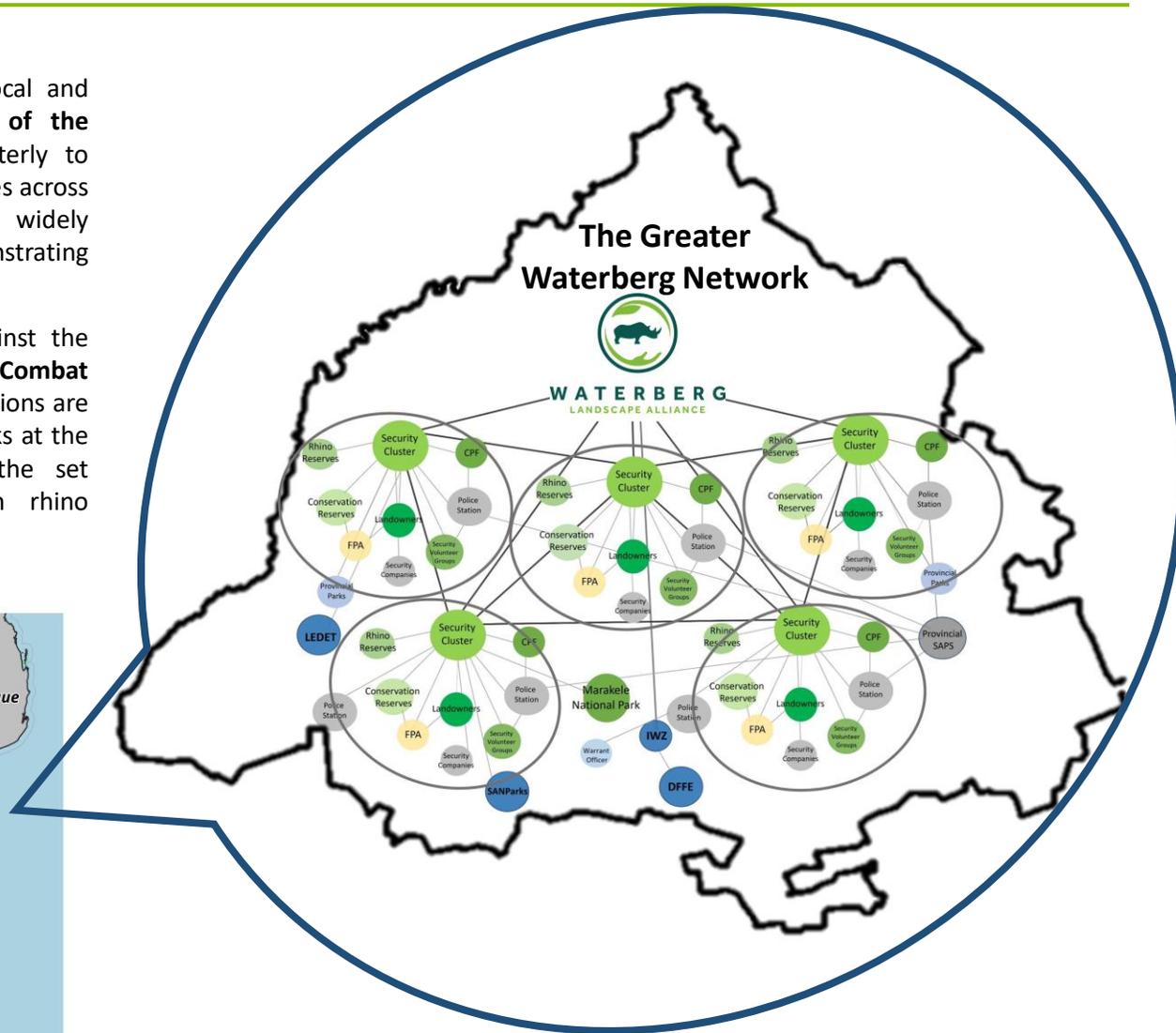
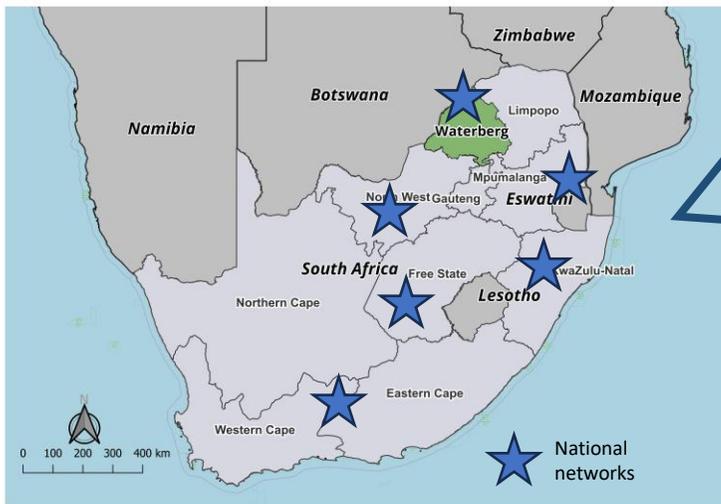


This map illustrates the Waterberg and the extensive conservation reserves distributed across the district. The Waterberg Landscape Alliance's reach extends across almost the entire region, underscoring the comprehensive scope of our conservation work and collaborative efforts.



The Waterberg plays a leading role in integrating local and national rhino security efforts as a **key member of the Integrated Wildlife Zone (IWZ)**, which meets quarterly to review progress, assess incidents, and address challenges across the country. Within this structure, the Waterberg is widely recognised as a model for others to learn from, demonstrating effective coordination and proactive management.

The Waterberg’s performance is also measured against the objectives of the **National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking (NISCWT)**, where regional contributions are regularly assessed. Time and again, the Waterberg ranks at the top, consistently achieving and often exceeding the set objectives, highlighting its exceptional impact on rhino protection at both a regional and national level.



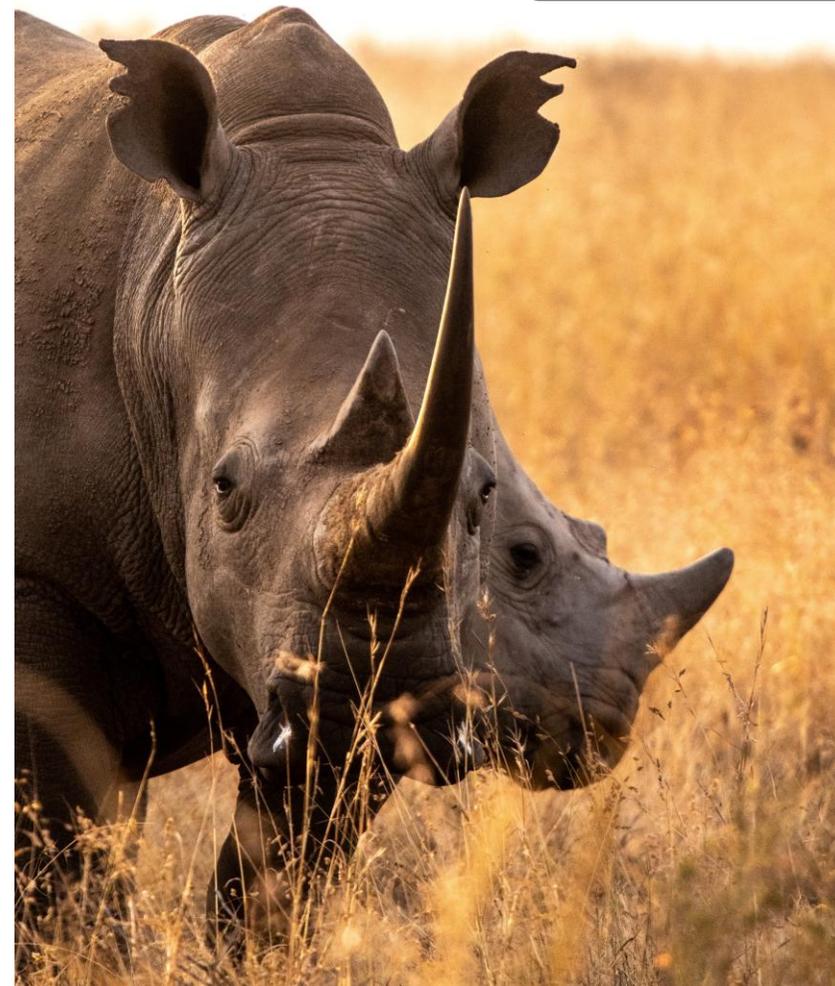
Poaching Statistics

- **2024 Waterberg:** 4 poaching incidents, 7 rhinos lost.
- **Rest of Limpopo 2024:** 39 incidents, 56 rhinos lost.
- **Affected Waterberg jurisdictions:** Rooiberg, Thabazimbi, Dwaalboom, Villa Nora (outskirts of the district).
- **2025 incidents (so far):** January: 3 attacks → 9 rhinos killed, 4 wounded
 - Steenbokpan (west): 3 killed, 1 wounded
 - Marken (north): 5 killed, 3 wounded
 - Alma (central): 1 killedFebruary: Tinmyne (northeast): 1 cow killed, 1 bull injured
- Subsequent Tinmyne: 2 more rhinos poached
- Additional loss: 1 bull died from stress in a boma
- **Common factor:** All affected properties had minimal or no security, highlighting vulnerability.
- **2025 total Waterberg losses:** 13 rhinos.
- **Protected core areas:** Fully integrated WLA security clusters remain highly effective, with no poaching in the last three years.

Arrest Statistics

- **Total arrests (2021–2024):** 24 cases, including 7 in 2021, 5 in 2022, 4 in 2023, and 8 in 2024 (resulting in 14 individuals arrested in 2024).
- **Scope:** Covers both direct rhino poaching and proactive interventions where evidence of potential poaching or threats was acted upon to prevent crimes before they occurred.

White Rhino
image by Sam Power
Unsplash



Waterberg Stands Strong Amid Rising Provincial Wildlife Crime

In 2024, Limpopo province faced widespread wildlife crime affecting multiple species, including rhinos (56 poached), pangolins (19 possession cases), elephants (12 illegal hunts, 2 tusk possession cases), vultures (128 poisoned), lions (8 illegally hunted), leopards (7 illegally hunted), hippos (9 illegally hunted), crocodiles (2 illegally hunted), numerous cycads as well as other species. **A total of 111 wildlife crime incidents highlighted the presence of organized, transboundary criminal networks operating across species and borders.**

Amid this provincial pressure, the **Waterberg stood out as a beacon of resilience.** Over the same period only seven rhinos were poached, there were eight cases of pangolin possession that involved animals taken from outside the district which resulted in arrests of 14 people. Additionally, a truck was intercepted transporting abalone and more than 11 tonnes (24,587 pieces) of abalone was seized. The arrest also resulted in sentencing of 8 years for abalone possession and money laundering.

In the Waterberg, wildlife criminals are **consistently apprehended, resulting in high arrest and conviction rates** that demonstrate the success of the region's protection efforts.

Success Story: 2022 Lapalala Wilderness Rhino Poaching Conviction

In 2024, four poachers responsible for a 2022 incident at Lapalala Wilderness Reserve were successfully convicted, **each receiving 20-year sentences.** A fifth suspect, the driver, is still awaiting trial. One convicted poacher had a prior offense, resulting in a **combined 39-year sentence,** sending a strong message against repeat offenders.

The arrests followed a 20-hour tactical operation in December 2022, coordinated by Lapalala, local security clusters, and the SAPS Endangered Species Unit (ESU). **Exceptional collaboration, rapid response, and meticulous evidence handling underpinned the successful convictions.**

This case highlights the effectiveness of integrated field operations, strong partnerships, and technology-enabled networks in bringing rhino poachers to justice.



White Rhino
image by Nikolaos
Anastasopoulos - Unsplash



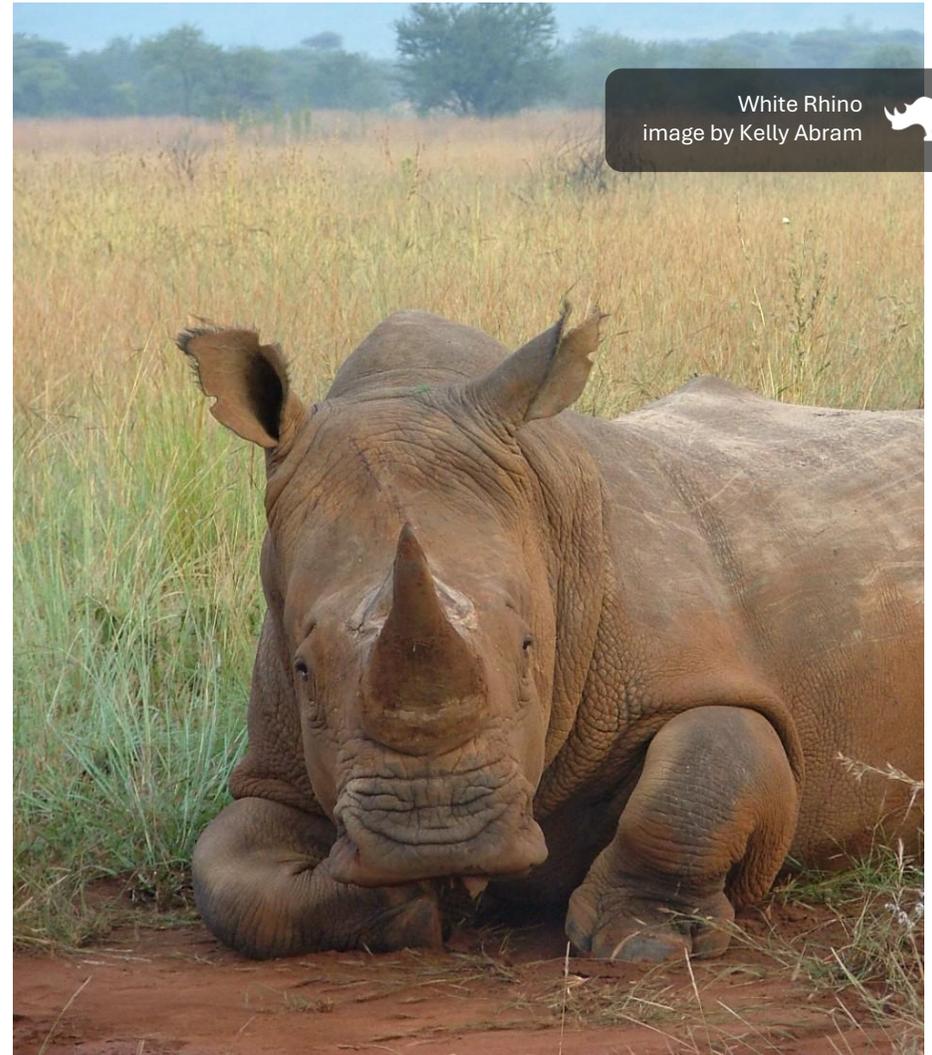
Climate change is also **emerging as a serious threat to Africa's rhinos**, compounding the ongoing risk of poaching. Rising heat and shifting rainfall are undermining key habitat features rhinos depend on, such as shade, water, and grazing. As heat-sensitive animals unable to sweat, rhinos rely on trees, wallows, and waterholes for cooling — resources increasingly under pressure.

In the Waterberg, the impacts of climate change are already visible, with more frequent bushfires and major flooding events. **Projections to 2050 indicate temperatures will rise by 2–3.5 °C**, with the Savanna biome — which dominates the region — facing some of the highest increases in South Africa. Rainfall is expected to come in shorter, more intense bursts, heightening flood risks while accelerating the drying of vegetation due to intense evaporation rates and generally disrupting ecosystems already under pressure.

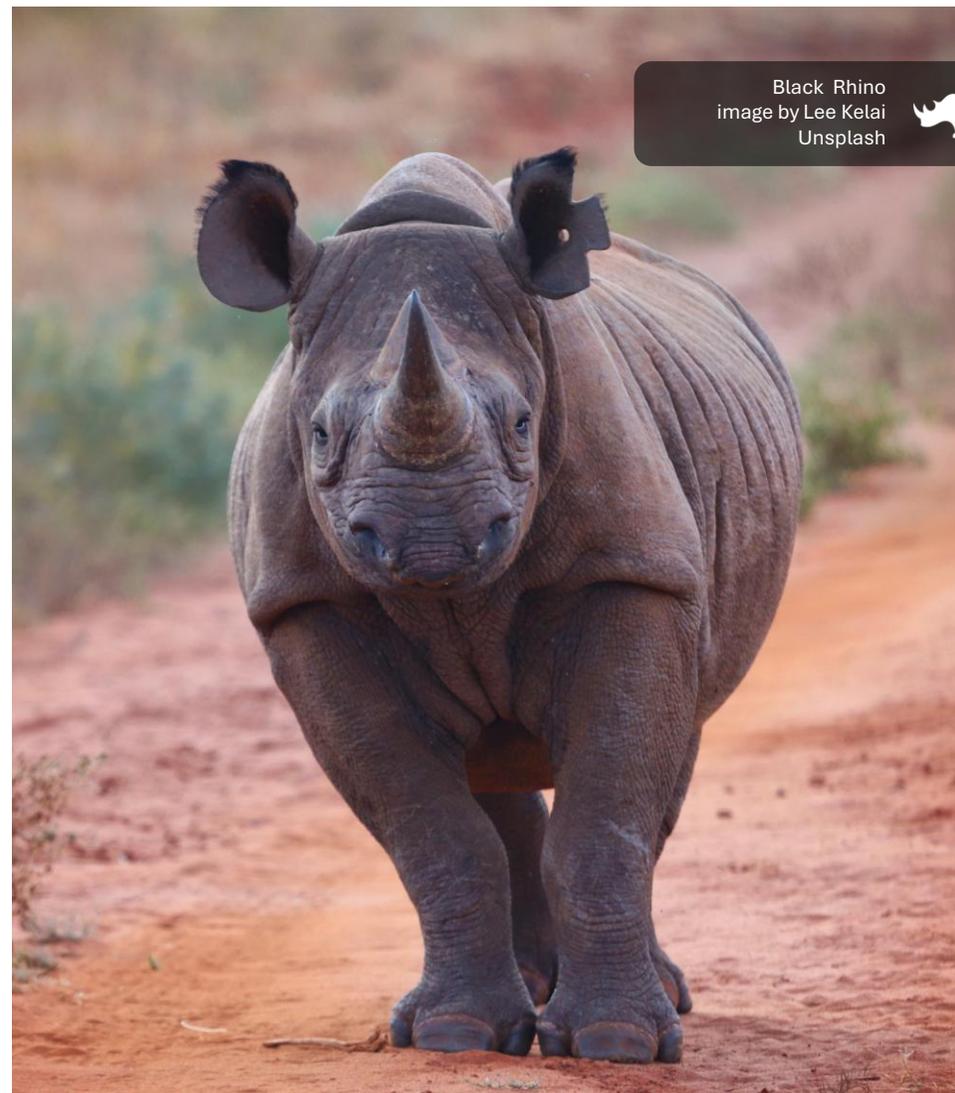
For rhinos, these changes mean greater heat stress and declining habitat suitability. Landowners and conservation managers in the Waterberg will need to adapt by:

- Restoring and protecting **shade cover**.
- Securing and managing **reliable water sources** and mud wallows.
- **Reducing fire risks** through proactive management.

These strategies are critical to ensure rhinos not only survive but can thrive in a hotter, more unpredictable future.



- To secure the future of rhinos in the Waterberg, action must intensify on several fronts. **Security remains paramount.** The Greater Security Network should continue to expand and strengthen, ensuring vulnerable properties are fully integrated and equipped with relevant technology and tools. High conviction rates must be maintained through strong partnerships with law enforcement and the judiciary. National and international frameworks also provide vital support.
- The Waterberg should **remain actively engaged in the Integrated Wildlife Zones and in implementing the National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking**, sharing lessons and strengthening wider conservation networks.
- Equally important is improved data and knowledge. **Private rhino owners should be encouraged to be connected to the network** and to share accurate and secure information on rhino numbers within secure networks. Reliable data is essential for security planning and to manage rhinos effectively for population growth, genetic diversity, and long-term resilience.
- **Climate adaptation must be embedded in conservation practice.** This includes restoring or ensuring habitats with greater shade, managing fire risks, securing sustainable water sources and wallows, and creating more safe areas for rhino.
- Finally, conservation must align with global incentives. Mechanisms such as **biodiversity credits should be investigated to offer opportunities to reward landowners for protecting habitats and expanding wild space.** By positioning itself at the forefront of such initiatives, the Waterberg can demonstrate how private conservation contributes not only to species survival but also to broader societal goals.



The Waterberg today represents one of the great strongholds for rhinos in South Africa. Here, rhinos are not only surviving but also reproducing, with the potential to produce 80–120 calves annually. Each calf represents the success of collective action — a tangible symbol of conservation at work.

Every technology deployed, every patrol coordinated, and every poacher intercepted increases the likelihood that these calves will reach maturity. In a world where poaching, organized crime, and climate change pose constant threats, the Waterberg stands as a model for how collaboration, persistence, and innovation can secure a future for rhinos.

In a country where poaching pressure remains intense, the Waterberg continues to stand out as a place of resilience.

Every rhino saved, every global trafficking ring dismantled, and every extra space available for rhinos brings us closer to a future where they can thrive in the wild.

Sources and Further Reading

IUCN Species Survival Commission’s African Rhino Specialist Group, Asian Rhino Specialist Group and TRAFFIC (2025): African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade. Report prepared for CITES Secretariat: COP20 Document 84. Document can be found at www.cites.org

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White Rhino
image by Gregory Fullard
Unsplash





WATERBERG LANDSCAPE ALLIANCE



OUR VISION

A well protected and conserved Waterberg that is valued locally, recognised globally and sustains a nature based future.



OUR MISSION

To actively undertake, facilitate and support the promotion and enhancement of the conservation and biodiversity value of the area.



AREA INTEGRITY AIM

To support and facilitate systems and networks for conservation resilience and sustainability of the area thereby providing a safe haven for the Waterberg's people and wildlife.



RHINO AIM

To provide a safe and secure environment for both species of rhino and to support and facilitate rhino conservation in the Waterberg.



The Waterberg Landscape Alliance NPC (WLA) was founded in 2012 as a non-profit company under the name *Save the Waterberg Rhino* and was formally incorporated in 2016 (Reg No. 2016/163270/08). Since 2015, WLA has concentrated on strengthening area integrity to reduce crime and ensure a safe, secure Waterberg for all, with a particular emphasis on rhino protection.

As a community-based coordination and support organisation, WLA has successfully facilitated the establishment of a strong and effective security cluster network that now spans more than four million hectares. This collaborative network, supported by WLA, has played a critical role in combating rhino poaching and other forms of wildlife crime, while also helping to reduce broader criminal activity across the region through proactive approaches and the strategic use of resources.

WLA's mission is to coordinate and support security stakeholders in the Waterberg to effectively prevent and respond to crime and threats against people, property, and wildlife through collaboration, technology, a proactive unified approach, and shared resources — in alignment with national efforts to combat wildlife trafficking.

By leveraging over ten years of experience, a credible network, and trusted partnerships, WLA and its collaborators are working towards a safer, more resilient Waterberg—where people, wildlife, and conservation economies can thrive together.

www.waterbergla.org.za

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