

3 Tala rhinos attacked

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Durban - Swift action by a wildlife vet saved the life of a rhino after three were injected with powerful drugs by poachers using darts at a private nature reserve near Camperdown.

The other two, both females, were already dead in the attack, which was thought to have occurred within a two-hour window on Saturday morning when staff were busy elsewhere.

The incident occurred at the Tala Private Game Reserve. It was the first time the reserve's rhinos had been poached.

General manager, Derek Grose, said on Sunday the poachers had darted the three white rhinos, with drugs believed to be the same as those used by veterinarians to sedate large animals, before dehorning them.

Tala's wildlife manager and head ranger, Divan Vermaak, became suspicious while driving guests around.

He noticed that something was amiss when the rhinos, known as "Number 2" and "Number 3", were not around their regular place.

"I contacted Derek and asked him to have a look around. We then discovered the two carcasses which were close to each other. Our rhinos all have transmitter chips placed on their ears which makes us able to trace them," Vermaak said.

He said he had been at the reserve for the past three-and-a-half years and during that time he had built up a relationship with them.

"Number 3 was a large lady and a very impressive animal. I can see why the poachers killed her, he said.

She walked with the cattle, he said, and gave off a motherly air.



One of the two dead rhinos killed on Saturday at the Tala Private Game Reserve between Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

"It feels as though you have lost a part of your family," he said.

Grose said although he was devastated about the deaths, the rescue of the one was a relief.

"We got to the scene of the crime at around 1pm. The two females were lying on the ground motionless, about 50m apart. All three were dehorned.

"The vet rushed to aid the (youngest) and injected an antidote," Grose said. "(She) is about 80 percent stable now and thankfully should pull through."

Added Grose: "Everyone is very emotional at the moment and mourning the loss of the two. The rhinos are like our children and some rangers grow a close bond with them. I suspect the incident happened between 9 and 11am because they're monitored frequently during the day."

Rhino security co-ordinator for KZN Ezemvelo Wildlife, Cedric Coetzee said syndicates operated differently, and used different methods to put down the animals.

Darting the animals did not necessarily mean that the poachers were more humane.

"The effects of these drugs sometimes take time to manifest themselves, so the animals take some time to go down. Of course, the poachers don't want to waste too much time by following the animals until they drop... and they get caught."

It was possible, he said, that they were overdosed to speed up the effects of the drugs.

Grose commended the Hawks, guests and the parks board staff for their help in searching for the poachers.

"The Hawks acted swiftly and there are even private people who have offered the use of their helicopters to help apprehend the murderers," he said.

"These are professional syndicates who have conducted a well-orchestrated attack on our rhinos.

"This is now a national crisis and everyone needs to unite to stop these senseless, brutal killings."

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs and Rural Development said yesterday they would not be taking the incident lying down.

"We are now going to fight fire with fire. There is going to be a no-nonsense approach to these criminals," said its spokesman, Jeffrey Zikhali.

"The department has already intensified its plan to stop these international syndicates using our locals to get their hands on our precious rhinos. Our guards patrolling the game reserves are armed as they need to firstly save the lives of the rhinos and secondly protect themselves. Let this be a warning to all poachers that our security will not waste time with these criminals."

The numbers of rhinos poached has increased dramatically over the years. In 2010, the country lost 333 of the animals; in 2011, it lost 448 and in 2012, it lost 668.

The figures jumped to 1 004 last year.

As of last Wednesday, the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs said the number of rhino deaths from poaching already stood at 376 – 40 more than the total number lost in 2010.

The latest killings bring the total killed this year to 378.

Statistics show that KZN has so far lost 37 rhinos, only one less than the total number lost in 2010.

The Kruger National Park has been hit the hardest this year with 245 rhinos poached, while Limpopo lost 39.

In the Free State four were killed and in Gauteng, three.

Across the country, 106 people have been arrested for rhino poaching-related offences since January 1, including 28 in KZN – the second highest after the 45 arrested at Kruger National Park.

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