



Do National Parks and Private Nature Reserves create a cause for wildlife poaching in South Africa?

Daniel J. Bardey

University of Brighton Alumni, 10 Mickle Street, Tooradin, Victoria, 3980, Australia

email: dbardey92@gmail.com

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Abstract

The history within South Africa of white colonial land dispossession can be traced back to the expansion of the Dutch colonial settlements within the Cape. Land and livestock dispossession resulted in many frequent wars against the native peoples and the colonial settlers. With indigenous peoples limited to regions of the country, and the establishment of national parks and large game reserves, many people were restricted to their ability to successfully access natural land resources, and this today creates a conflict between different levels within the community forcing those in impoverished regions to seek resources from South Africa's national parks creating a cause for illegal wildlife poaching.

Keywords: Illegal trade, national parks, poaching, resources, South Africa, wildlife.

Introduction

Despite being one of the most naturally stunning and biologically diverse countries on the planet, South Africa is riddled with a multitude of different social and economic problems. Recovering from the Apartheid (Desai 2002), outbreak of HIV (Walker *et al.* 2004) and disputes over land right claims (Miller and Pope 2002, James 2007) are just a

few of the recent issues South Africa are still covering from. But how have some of these issues impacted, encouraged and increased levels of illegal wildlife poaching. The illegal wildlife trade is the world's fourth biggest illegal trade, only surpassed by drugs, counterfeit goods and human trafficking (Warchol 2004). Many examples of illegal wildlife trade are well known, such as the poaching of elephants for ivory (Lemieux and Clarks 2009), pangolins for their scales (Nijman 2010) or rhinos for their horn (Biggs *et al.* 2013). These are just a few examples of the countless number of species overexploited illegally. For example, one species within the past decade that has seen a drastic increase in its poaching, rhinos within South Africa, with annual poaching numbers rising from 13 individuals in 2007, to a peak of 1215 in 2014 (Fig. 1).

Between 1948–1994 South African politics were dominated by Afrikaner nationalist, where racial segregation and white minority rule came common place within the country (Lipton 2016, Marks and Trapido 2014). Later this became officially known as the apartheid in 1960, becoming an official law of segregation and the country establishing itself as a republic. The Afrikaans word 'apartheid', means quite simply "separateness" (Clarks and Worger 2016). The history within South Africa of white colonial land dispossession did not begin in 1913 with the passing of the Native Land Act, but can be traced back to the expansion of the Dutch colonial settlements within the Cape.

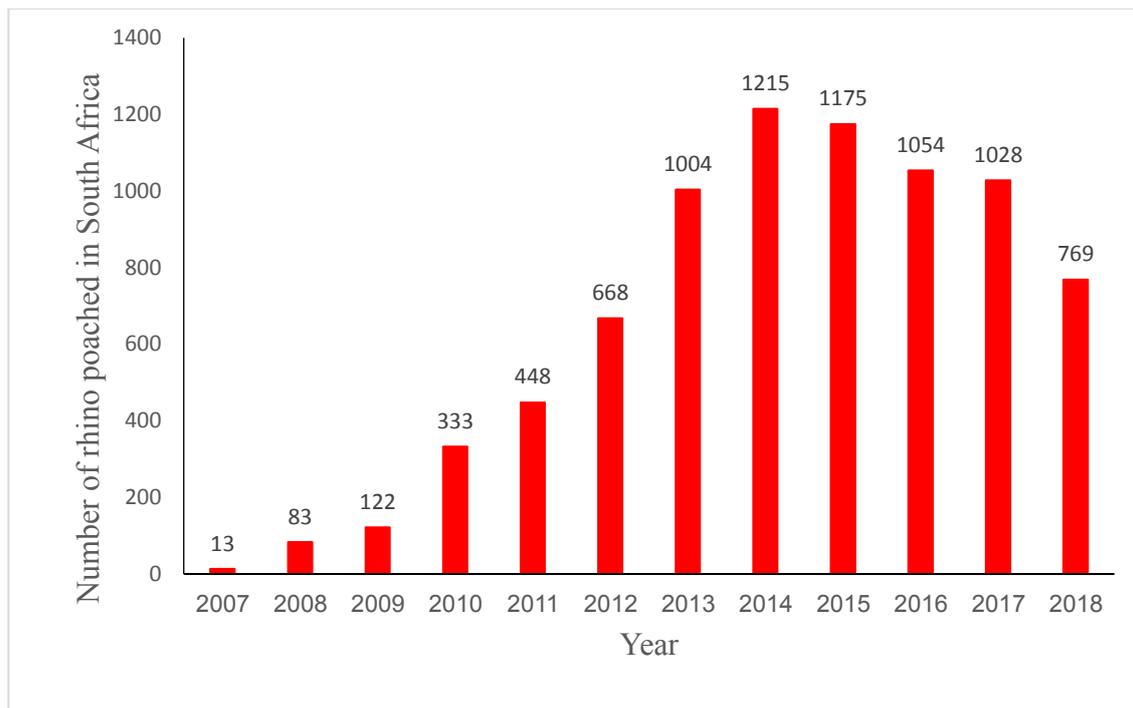


Figure 1. Rhino poaching statistics from 2007–2018 in South Africa (Department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa 2019).

Land and livestock dispossession resulted in many frequent wars against the native peoples and the colonial settlers. It was from these conflicts that the ruling government termed the phase ‘the native question’ (Marks and Trapido 2014). This is loosely defined as “embracing the present and future status of all aboriginal natives of South Africa, and the relation in which they stand towards the European population”. The initial part of land dispossession began with annexation and division of territory, and over time proclamations were made and laws enacted by both the Afrikaners and British to dislodge and displace African people from their land, whilst consolidating areas of white settlement (Clarks and Worger 2016, Marks and Trapido 2014). Though within South Africa this reterritorialization through state power is mostly associated with the first 1913 ‘The Native Lands Act’, which prohibited the establishment of new farming operations, sharecropping or cash rentals by blacks outside of the new created national parks and private white owned reserves (Letsoalo 1987). By the

end of apartheid, many black natives had been pushed to small established homelands within the country, whilst a large majority of land remained under white ownership and control (Fig. 2). During the early 20th century, white landowners claimed high productive land areas for themselves, including the Western Cape, famed for its ability to produce wine, and a large majority of ancestral land was converted into large game farms or national parks for nature to thrive (Ives 2014). The states reterritorialization of the majority of South Africa, has created a number of issues for its indigenous people, with the white settlers favouring conservation, value of nature and preservation of environmental systems above more land rights for those displaced (Neumann 2003). With indigenous peoples limited to regions of the country, and the establishment of national parks and large game reserves, many people were restricted to their ability to successfully access resources, and to this day still creates a conflict between different levels within the community (Igoe 2004).

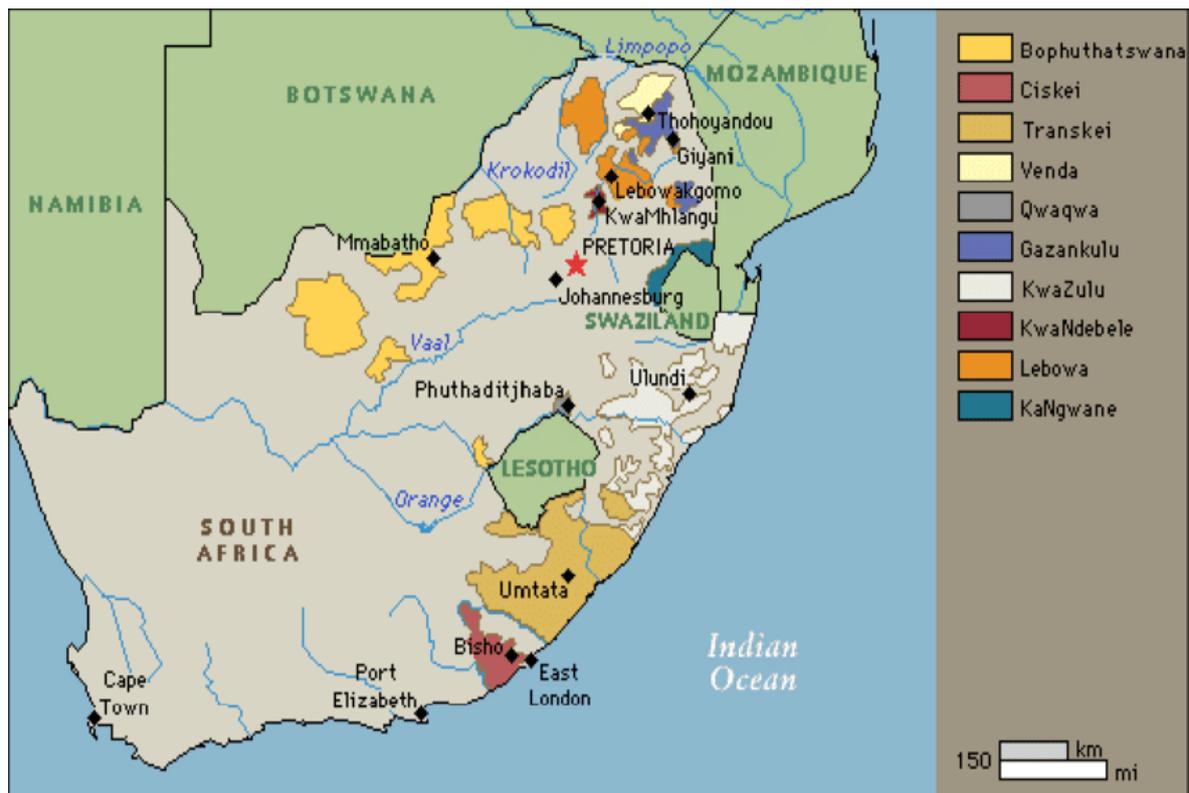


Figure 2. Map of former black homelands in South Africa at the end of apartheid in 1994 (Hirway *et al.* 2008).

The South African government during the times of apartheid also used these game reserves and national parks as a form of control for peoples through conservation, but this preservation of environmental eco-systems, landscapes and natural resources has led to instability among the indigenous communality (Ramutsindela 2003). These managed areas of conservation are often fraught with conflict and trespassing by poachers. These managed areas are essentially protected in a heavily militarised fashion therefore preventing indigenous people from being able to utilise the ancestral resources for livelihoods and food, it is now seen as a crime to access what was once theirs. This ignores how local residents historically managed the ‘wilderness’, and in a way, views these people who were once part of nature, outsiders seeking to decimate it (Schmidt-Soltau 2003). The postcolonial conservation view, that game reserves and nature is an entity without people is one so engrained, people wishing to now access these resources are now deemed as illegal poachers. This control of

resources and landscape has been stripped from the local producers through these modern efforts to preserve ‘sustainability’ of nature, but in the process officials and global interest seeking to protect wildlife and the eco-system they thrive in have disabled local systems of livelihood, production and caused rifts in the socio-political dynamics (Robbins 2011).

Results and Discussion

But how does all the above link to wildlife trafficking and the increase of wildlife poaching within South Africa? The issues concerning land use and the ability to access resources in South Africa has caused a great deal of inequality post-apartheid. The apartheid was a rigid and intricate system whose goal was to isolate and better the lives of whites from non-whites (Hunt 2003). It rested on violence and the power of apartheid made an effect on social control through terror and creating violent environments (Hunt 2003). Many inequalities created and maintained by the apartheid still remain, with income

inequality worsening since the end of apartheid.

Around 80% of the South African population are classified as black (South African Census 2011). Despite this, 70% of all land is still owned by the 9% of white landowners (Klein 2007), regardless of recent promises from the African National Congress to redistribute this land from the whites to the blacks (Atuahene 2011). South Africa also has high levels of poverty, 47% of South Africans are impoverished (Bhorat 2013), with spatial segregation of black Africans to poor rural areas, much of the poverty is still largely experienced by the black population (Gradín 2013), 63% of black children's households have an income less than 800 rands a month, compared to only 4% of white children's households (Durrheim 2011). Additionally, since apartheid, the income inequality among each racial group has only increased, with the wealthiest 10% earning 58% of the country's total income, and the wealthiest 5% taking home 43% of the country's total income (Leibbrandt 2012). Additionally, South Africa has extremely high unemployment rates of 26%, with the majority of this being comprised of rural black populations. 90% of this unemployment is concentrated among unskilled indigenous blacks (Akora and Ricci 2013). For many rural communities, this lack of employment opportunities and low income requires them to find other means for survival, which often leads to wildlife poaching. Wildlife poaching varies from bush meat poachers, wanting to snag an impala or warthog to either sustain their family, or sell in the local township, to wildlife trafficking syndicates paying thousands of dollars to help facilitate rhino poaching (Duffy and John 2013, Knapp 2012).

With much of Africa's wildlife now being protected in fenced game reserves, this is the only viable place for poachers to obtain what is needed for survival (Nuno *et al.* 2013). But as mentioned, for many conservationists, nature is for recreational consumption, and the

landscapes are seen without people. These reserves are protected by the aid of anti-poaching units. Private, trained and armed professional who are willing to put their life on the front line to protect what was once a natural resource. This militarisation of natural reserves and national parks to combat poachers creates violent conflicts between the two parties, frequently leading to loss of human life (Warchol and Johnson 2009). In 2013 there were 343 poachers arrested or killed throughout the South Africa. Of which 133 of those poachers were neutralised in Kruger National Park, South Africa's largest national park, and a further 47 of these individuals killed during shoot-outs with anti-poaching rangers (Pasmans and Hebinck 2017).

Poaching for black market commodity goods such as rhino horn, is in such high demand due to its high value on the black market. Fetching up to \$60,000 a kilo and worth more than gold, platinum and cocaine, rhino horn is currently one of the most valuable, precious and illegal substances on the planet (Biggs *et al.* 2013, Hübschle 2015). The high demand for rhino horn stems from the belief in South East Asia that it has the power to cure terminal illnesses, work as an aphrodisiac or treat hangovers (Ayling 2013, Abraham 2014, Truong *et al.* 2016) despite being made from keratin, the same substance as our fingernails (Hieronymus *et al.* 2016). With such lucrative payoffs, it is certainly understandable why peoples from rural communities take risks in facilitating this black-market trade. Another major factor influencing the poaching problems within South Africa is the lack of conviction for arrested poachers due to a flawed and biased judicial system against white landowners and in favour of indigenous blacks. When it comes to statistics, the devil is within the detail, or in the spin when it comes to politics. In 2016 the South African minister for environmental affairs and tourism, claim a 78% successful conviction rate for all poaching related cases. This high rate of successful convictions for combating poachers, may seem high, and be a

deterrent for potential poachers. But the National Parks Authority of South Africa defines their rate of successful prosecutions as the percentage of cases finalized with a guilty verdict, divided by the number of cases finalised with a verdict.

Often, cases are dismissed within the South African court systems for a variety of causes, and comparing conviction rates verses arrests, poachers are only prosecuted 15% of the time. This means, that 85% of those arrested were not prosecuted, and are free to repeat their activities. It must be noted that whilst, not all 85% would have been guilty of poaching related crimes, those who were, will most likely try again. These false statistics can lead to false impressions to the severity and extent of wildlife poaching within South Africa (Verwoerd 2016). Potential ways to mitigate and reduce these poaching incidents and human conflicts occurring at private game reserves and national parks, would be for both parties to develop working relationships within the local communities to help support the previously disenfranchised peoples to thrive. This could be achieved by re-allowing lost access to natural resources, facilitating local communities to collect firewood, graze cattle, access water or manage monitored hunts for bush meat. This could provide employment opportunities for local peoples, or follow suit after the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve, that donated a proportion of the fees from trophy hunting back to the local community (King 2007). Pasmans and Hebinck (2017) looked at the relationship between nature reserves and the rural communities within the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

They perceive game farming on nature reserves as an assemblage that brings together new factors, new forms of land use and also new discourses. Arguing that although game farms have generated new opportunities and forms of added value to the available resources, such as eco-tourism, trophy hunting and game-meat production, situated in the history and contemporary context of the Eastern Cape, it is

a contested, and from a development point of view, problematic land-use practice. They state that game farming constrains land and agrarian reforms, with the distribution of land and income still remaining skewed; with 'poaching' occurring and game farms do not, or only minimally, generate new and badly needed employment opportunities. Overall game farms have emerged as an exclusive, globally well-connected space. The nature of the relationships this space maintains with the surrounding communities are, however, such that the overall contribution to rural development in South Africa is questionable. There are many social and economic factors that may be one of the major causes of wildlife poaching, but the underlying causes appears that during the states reterritorialization and land reform during the apartheid, many indigenous peoples who had survived for centuries were displaced from local resources and livelihood, and are still trying to re-cover from this displacement; whilst battling poverty, unemployment and the inequality and injustice of land ownership. Whilst there are causes both, for and against how national parks and game reserves can benefit and negatively impact rural communities, figures from poaching statistics severity underestimate the true extent of the world's fourth largest crime.

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