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THE FUTURE OF THE BIG FIVE



green life
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In the wake of the Cites wildlife-trade gathering in Bangkok, the question to ask is whether Africa's iconic animals will still be with us in 20 years

WHITE RHINO, BLACK RHINO

Wild animals left: SA houses the majority of the continent's 20 000 white rhino and 4 900 black rhino. "Throughout most of the 20th century, the black rhino was the most numerous of the world's rhino species, which at one stage could have numbered around 850 000," notes the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List. About 150 rhino have been poached in SA this year, or one every 11 hours.

Conservation status: Black: critically endangered; white: near-threatened.

The future: Some 745 rhino were poached in Africa last year. Having lost 425 of SA's 668 poached rhinos in 2013, the Kruger National Park has been under the greatest siege — especially with Mozambique, the major transit corridor for horn from SA, on its borders. "Sanparks has recommended to the minister of environmental affairs that the boundary fence between SA and Mozambique be reconstructed," says Sanparks CEO David Mabunda. Around 40km of the fence was dropped in 2002 to create a transfrontier park. At Cites, delegates instructed Mozambique to put greater restrictions on trophy imports and intensify penalties for rhino crime, or face sanctions. Vietnam, the major consumer destination of Africa's rhino horn, also faces trade restrictions unless it gets tougher on wildlife traffickers. According to the IUCN's experts, Africa's rhinos "won't hold out much longer. Nearly 2 400 rhinos have been poached across Africa since 2006, slowing the growth of both African rhino species to some of the lowest levels since 1995."

LEOPARD

Wild animals left: The most commonly cited figures of 700 000 leopards in Africa and 9 844 in Asia are considered flawed. Reliable estimates don't exist, the IUCN Red List tells us.

Conservation status: Near-threatened.

The future: Even though Cites allows SA to hunt 150 trophy leopards a year, the actual number "rarely" reaches this level, says David Newton of wildlife-trade monitoring network Traffic. But ask any leopard expert how many of these spotted

big cats are left in Africa, and they're likely to tell you they're not sure. "Leopards are singular, elusive creatures whose home ranges overlap," explains Adam Pires, an Endangered Wildlife Trust conservationist. So, why are we hunting 150 leopards a year when we don't even know how many there are? Tristan Dickerson of Panthera, a nongovernmental organisation dealing with wild cats, says a recent assessment by the SA hunting and big-cat fraternity has found the country's population to be stable. He adds that trophy hunting provides an important revenue stream, plus an incentive to conserve leopards — but claims SA is the only African country that still endorses the hunting of female leopards. Dickerson is the brain behind the filming project *To Skin a Cat*, which first exposed the Shembe church's illegal use of leopard skins as ceremonial dress. He notes he has observed "easily a thousand leopard skins at one gathering alone".



AFRICAN ELEPHANT

Wild animals left: Less than 500 000.

Conservation status: Vulnerable.

The future: About 8%, or 40 000, are killed annually, which means the world's largest land mammal could be extinct in less than a decade. What's driving the crisis? In 2008, Cites authorised the once-off sale of a 150-ton ivory stockpile by Botswana, Namibia, SA and Zimbabwe to China and Japan. Activist Braam Malherbe says this move could be to blame: "The demand seems to have spiked again in recent years. The so-called once-off sale merely served to fuel an insatiable demand for ivory as religious carvings." Did the sale create the impression on the streets of China and Japan that it was okay to buy ivory again? Instead of flooding China with low-priced, legal ivory, the most recent sale simply inspired the Chinese government to raise ivory prices by 650%, according to a National Geographic investigation

published in October. In the meantime, SA's growing elephant population of 20 000 could be our Achilles' heel. Warns Malherbe: "Elephants in the north of Africa are being decimated. We're next."

LION

Wild animals left: 16 500 to 47 000.

Conservation status: Vulnerable.

The future: Now that tigers are critically endangered, Southeast Asia's medicine markets have begun targeting lion bones as substitutes for tiger bones, placing the so-called king of the jungle under increasing pressure. Will ours be the final generation to witness lion in the savannah?

CAPE BUFFALO

Wild animals left: 900 000.

Conservation status: Least concern.

The future: Named a Time magazine "hero of the environment" in 2007, documentary maker Karl Ammann says horn from water buffalo, an Asian species, is a popular fake substitute for rhino horn on the Vietnamese black market. Although wild water buffalo are endangered, there are millions of the domesticated kind, which means African buffalo are probably safe. For now.



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