

**MIKE BOON.** Ex-airborne soldier, pioneer adventurer, author, leader, transformational facilitator. Rhino owner.



Mike Boon has a much loved game farm – a private modest refuge from his busy corporate life - nestled in a valley just outside Naboomspruit in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Here, with years of focus and dedication, Mike has been nursing the farm from hard-worked agricultural land back to its former natural bushveld, a long term project of invasive plant clearing and grass seeding that has re-created numerous new eco-systems on the farm. Home to eland, wildebeest, impala, giraffe, bush buck, hippo and a resident pair of blue cranes, Mike has also, up until recently, been the proud owner of 6 rhino.

Relying on “being low-key” and the idea that “no one knew he had rhino”, Mike was quite confident that his animals were safe. His choice to stay under the radar was easily made due to the ever increasing news of respected vets, game farmers and game dealers being behind the poaching syndicates. Who do you trust under such circumstances?? The rhino, comprising of 3 groups of 2 (cow plus 4 month old calf, cow plus bull calf and 2 heifers) were monitored on a daily basis.

**STRIKE 1** During the third week of October, tragedy struck. Staff noticed the 4 month-old calf walking with one of the other groups of rhino. The cow was nowhere to be found.



Eventually, after an extensive search, the decaying carcass of the cow was found in the area preferred by the rhino, horns removed. Surrounding her body were numerous R5 casings. Tracing back her last steps revealed that she had been lying under a tree when the poachers first opened fire. A shot in the foot proved attempted anchoring shots and a fatal shot was taken in the head. A wildlife vet was called out to capture the calf for hand-raising late afternoon, and in the setting

sun it became evident while flying the farm that two of the other rhino had also sustained injuries. The date – Friday 22 October. Mike, a seasoned soldier, was back at war.

Early Saturday morning a team comprising of the SAPS, neighbours, Mike and his staff waited patiently for the pilot and vet to locate the rhino. Obviously traumatised, they had been impossible to find from the ground. The first 2 were darted, the cow and her bull calf, and Mike was soon the find out that both animals had sustained gunshots wounds.



Obvious shots were located from weeping holes to the head, body and legs. The cow was bleeding continuously from her left nostril. Small sinister scabs were located with difficulty revealing additional shots that were in need of treatment. By carefully inserting a pipette into each hole, the trajectory of the bullet could be ascertained, and it was soon obvious that the rhino had been fired upon from a number of different angles – or that they had spun around while being shot at by one weapon.



The rhino cow having being treated – the dark coloration of her skin is a clear indication that she is not well.

While pilot and vet headed off to locate the two heifers, the recovery team waited patiently, scared for what was coming. All hopes at finding the two animals untouched were soon lost – these rhino too had sustained gunshot wounds. One of the heifers sustained an in /out wound to the chest, while the other rhino's most obvious wounds included a nasty shot to the leg, and a shot to the head through the sinus very narrowly missing her brain.





Wounds are disinfected and treated with Acriflavine Glycerine, and each rhino injected with long acting antibiotics and pain killers to last 10 days. Everything that could be done had now been done for them.

Mike embarked on exhausting all night vigils to guard his rhino, drawing on years of experience from the bush war. All staff were on alert. Limping badly from their respective foot and leg wounds, the cow and heifer made slow recovery. Three weeks after the first attack, Mike headed for Cape Town on business.

**STRIKE 2** On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> of November, Mike receives a call from workers on the farm. It is 5.20 am and they have heard multiple gunshots fired in the area where the rhino are. While Mike alerts the Conserv network to start mobilizing support, workers on the farm discover the still warm body of one of the young heifers, her horns removed.

Only weeks before had Mike held her gently and wished her well after her wounds were treated.



While Mike liaises with workers on the farm he makes plans to fly back immediately from Cape Town. Annie, Mike's wife and a seasoned pilot herself, is arranging a helicopter as aerial support. By now the Conserv Team has mobilized backing, the sms's have gone out, the community has been alerted and within no time the police Squirrel is patrolling while The Trackers follow the spoor. SAPS officials secure the crime scene and ascertain the sequence of events leading up to the heifer's death.

As the day progresses more and more people join in the search. Road blocks are established, the community has joined forces and a tracking team including their dog have arrived from Mabula. More helicopters arrive to help search. It has been established that the group of 4 men are surrounded on the mountain opposite Mike Boon's farm. Towards sunset and now having split up into two groups, one of the poachers – though presumably the second as well – is wounded and shot in the hip. Bleeding badly he is brought down off the mountain, his obvious agony generating no sympathy from onlookers. He is taken to the lodge to wait for an ambulance, and it is established that he is carrying a Mozambican passport. By now a late afternoon storm has passed over, night time has come and both the SAPS and The Trackers head out again. Unfortunately, after an extensive search following spoor on Saturday night and Sunday, no one else is arrested.



Mike Boon is a humble and extraordinary man. His loss serves as an excellent model on which to base a case study that could be applied to all private rhino owners. Rather than have the deaths of his rhino go unnoticed amongst so many, the intention of this article is to highlight lessons learnt and to motivate rhino owners to become proactive rather than reactive.

## LESSONS LEARNT

- 1) Considering the involvement of members within the wildlife industry, assume that syndicates know where you are and plan accordingly.
- 2) Enquire about any rhino security networks in your area. For more information, contact the Conserv Network at 083 655 1315 or Faan Coetzee of the EWT on 082 563 0402.
- 3) Register on the Rhino Owners Login page of [www.stoprhinopoaching.com](http://www.stoprhinopoaching.com) for useful procedures and documentation including a concise Rhino Security and Management Contingency Plan for Private Landowners compiled by EKZN Wildlife.