

Book review

Rhino War: A general's bold strategy in the Kruger National Park

Johan Jooste and Tony Park

Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan
2022, 284 pages
ISBN 978-1-77010-790-8 (Softcover)

As global trade in wildlife products increases, the dark illicit markets follow suit, supplying the ever-increasing appetite of end-users worldwide, especially in South-East Asia. As a result, illegal wildlife trade now ranks fourth in transnational organised crime. Moreover, it has been linked to the crime–terror nexus that plagues West and Central Africa and other regions internationally.

South Africa has been at the forefront of the battle against rhinoceros poaching for over a decade, with the initial growth of poaching in 2008. The rapid increase in the poaching of rhino in the Kruger National Park caught the South African National Parks (SANParks) off guard and ill-equipped in terms of rangers, resources and a strategy to counter the daily incursions of poaching gangs. By 2012, the then-CEO of SANParks, Dr David Mabunda, appointed Maj Gen (retd) Johan Jooste with a mandate to paramilitarise (p. 26) the Kruger National Park – firstly, to stem the tide of rhino poaching, and secondly, to reduce rhino losses to an acceptable level that would ensure the continuation of both the black and white rhino populations in the park.

The recent release of the book *Rhino war* by Johan Jooste, with supporting author Tony Park, maps out the journey Jooste undertook to build the capability of the Kruger National Park in order to counter the threat of rhino poaching. In the early chapters of the book, Jooste introduces us to his personal history and passion for conservation, much from his early days at 7 South African Infantry Battalion in Phalaborwa bordering the Kruger National Park with its abundant wildlife. Little did he know that he would return much later in his life to the park in a completely different capacity. Later, his posting as a lieutenant colonel at Jozini in North-Eastern KwaZulu-Natal, where he became an honorary ranger immersed in the heyday of conservation in remote regions, left an indelible mark on him and his wife, Arina, for things wild and untamed. Here, encounters with nesting leatherback turtles and his later command of a battalion group at Eenhana in the then South West Africa territory (now Namibia) further exposed the future general to wildlife conservation. The fact that one could find solace and joy in nature during times of war comes across strongly in Jooste's book.

His family supported him in his military career as he grew and took on greater command responsibility. The then General Jooste was offered the command of the well-known San Battalion. They were widely acknowledged as master trackers and feared for their obvious counter-insurgency talent in combatting Angolan forces in the brutal conditions of the African bush where close-contact warfare was the norm and not the exception. Here General Jooste also had command of national servicemen from South Africa who were qualified in nature conservation. Being a commander responsible for kinetic military forces and conservation staff may feel like a paradox, but it provided the context and golden thread for Jooste's biography. It is also clear that Jooste learned much from his San soldiers and conservation staff, reinforcing the adage that lifelong learning is crucial for military commanders.

Readers will enjoy the ease and honesty of the book as Jooste navigates the organisational and political culture of the Kruger National Park, where there was some apparent resistance to his appointment as an outsider being given such tremendous responsibility to turn around the response by the Kruger National Park to poaching.

From Chapter 4 onward, Jooste explains the various levels of activities and plans he had developed, from integrity management (polygraphs of park staff and management) to his assessment of the inherent weaknesses of the park in terms of human resources, infrastructure, logistics, ranger equipment and domain awareness. Finally, Jooste sought advice and insight across the spectrum to build a concept of operations (CONOPS), which provided a cohesive framework for establishing a shared vision for park law enforcement leadership and operations management. For readers, the book holds vital lessons about leadership in law enforcement and paramilitary operating contexts. Jooste builds on this theme throughout the book, which gives insight into the man behind the story.

Jooste outlines the seductive lure of technology and the world of technology suppliers, being an old hand at the game of defence and security contracting. However, his lessons have particular value for the conservation sector, which is receiving unsolicited and seemingly attractive bids to supply surveillance, antipoaching and human resource services to protected areas in the public and private domain – all of this in the name of stopping poaching. The reader will note some of the cautionary tales about purchasing military-grade equipment and services.

The highly politicised environment of state-owned enterprises and agencies needs no introduction in South Africa, often constraining innovation and change initiatives. In later chapters, Jooste highlights how he navigated institutional bureaucracy, personality politics (including the vociferous NGOs), along with relationships with the South African Police Service and the private sector to secure funding to support his vision and its practical resource needs. Jooste highlights the power of partnerships and securing goodwill from donors such as Howard Buffett and the Peace Parks Foundation. From supporting the design and later the implementation of specialist radar equipment, known as the Meerkat, to training rangers in holistic leadership, these partnerships began to pay dividends for the park. In the book, Jooste bravely tackles the spectre of corruption within the park and the ranger corps and its insidious grip on the staff. He also addresses the formal policy on

the much-touted shoot-to-kill (p 24) thinking that many conservation NGOs and activist groups promote to deter poaching. Human rights and the support of rangers and their families feature strongly in Jooste's thinking. This is a refreshing view in the conservation world, where most field rangers have traditionally been recruited from poverty-stricken communities adjoining protected areas, such as the Kruger National Park.

As many famous anecdotes point out, a general is only as good as the battles he wins and the loyalty of his subordinates. History, as expected, will judge the success of Jooste and the work of his team by the rhino poaching statistics. Objectively, the statistics began to come down significantly in 2016, and later, the success of Jooste's strategy drew attention from the Minister of Environmental Affairs at the time, Edna Molewa, who recognised that the work that was done by Jooste and his team could be adapted for use elsewhere.

As far as the reviewer knows, no other books have been published on this subject. However, there has been significant academic contestation from various quarters by political ecologists, human geographers and other academic domains. This biography will no doubt stimulate further debate and engagement on the concept of paramilitary strategies employed in protected species and protected area conservation.

In conclusion, the book provides a unique set of insights highlighting the man behind the story and the challenges that conservation faces in terms of the onslaught on wildlife worldwide. Nevertheless, Jooste discusses how poaching can be countered by utilising a hybrid of paramilitary concepts, training and law-enforcement theories, which has been through the crucible of harsh application.

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