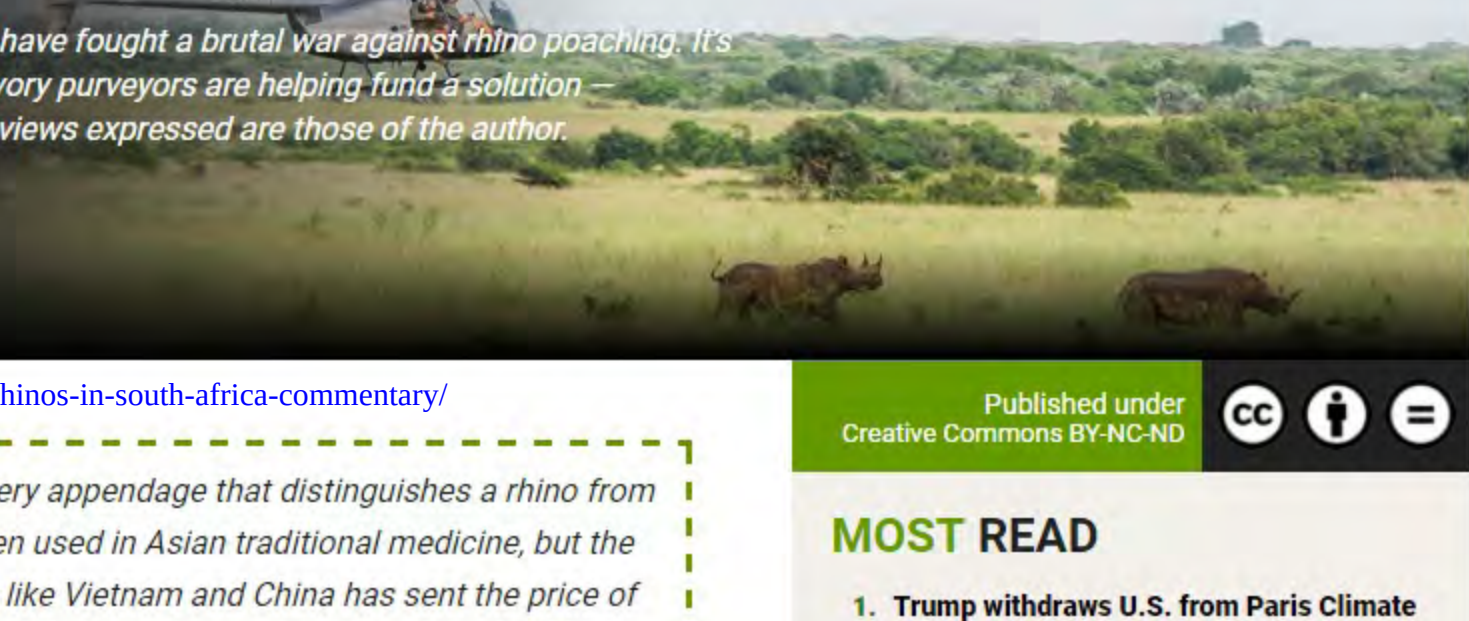


New York detective work saves rhinos in South Africa (commentary)

2 June 2017 / Commentary by **Axel Hunicutt**

For the last decade, South Africa's wildlife parks and reserves have fought a brutal war against rhino poaching. It's a war we aren't winning. But busts in New York City of illegal ivory purveyors are helping fund a solution – removing rhinos' horns before poachers can get to them. The views expressed are those of the author.



<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/06/new-york-detective-work-saves-rhinos-in-south-africa-commentary/>

- The slaughter of rhinos is due to demand for the very appendage that distinguishes a rhino from other creatures – its horn. Rhino horn has long been used in Asian traditional medicine, but the recent surge in the illegal horn market in countries like Vietnam and China has sent the price of horn skyrocketing to upwards of \$65,000 (USD) per kilogram – more than the price of gold.
- Southeast Asia isn't the only market for smuggled rhino horns. In New York City, wildlife law enforcement officers and port authority agents are finding rhino horn in shipping containers and commercial luggage destined for markets in the United States and beyond.
- One of the major anti-poaching operations funded by the Wild Tomorrow Fund with money from court-ordered donations by sellers of illegal ivory busted in New York City is the dehorning of a black rhino population at Phinda Private Game Reserve.
- This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.

Insects is rising, the curious or curious is revving up, and the traffic is thickening – as the wildlife gets moving.

However, today the African sun is welcomed not by a symphony of nature, but by the buzz of helicopters and the growl of a chainsaw. This song of man and machine doesn't announce the destruction of nature, but instead man's attempt to preserve it. Today we begin dehorning an important black rhino population to quell the wave of poaching in the area.

For the last decade, South Africa's wildlife parks and reserves have fought a brutal war against rhino poaching. It's a war we aren't winning. Most conservationists in the country are at their wit's end, working tirelessly to combat what seems like an unstoppable flood of poaching that is pushing rhinos to the brink of extinction.

South Africa is home to over 80 percent of all of Africa's rhinos, with less than 19,000 white rhino and 2,000 black rhino left within its borders. As such, it remains the last stronghold for these animals on the African continent. But, since 2007, the poaching of South Africa's rhinoceros for their horns has increased from 13 rhinos in 2007 to a peak of 1,215 in 2014, according to South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs. This surge of rhino poaching has claimed the lives of well over 7,000 rhinos in the last decade alone.

This slaughter is driven by the demand for the very appendage that distinguishes a rhino from other creatures – its horn. Rhino horn has long been used in Asian traditional medicine, but growing demand in countries like Vietnam and China has sent the price of horn skyrocketing to upwards of \$65,000 (USD) per kilogram – more than the price of gold. With growing wealth in the region, rhino horn has become a status symbol worthy of high-end nightclubs and million-dollar business deals.



Helicopter in flight to find rhinos. Photo by Peter Chadwick.

Southeast Asia isn't the only market for smuggled rhino horns. In New York City, wildlife law enforcement officers and port authority agents are finding rhino horn in shipping containers and commercial luggage destined for markets in the United States and beyond. A raw rhino horn seems like an usual item to find in New York City, and, indeed, rhino horn pales in comparison to the amount of elephant ivory being trafficked into the city.

Yes, in addition to elephants and rhinos sharing the wilds of Africa, their body parts are finding each other again in cities around the world.

Outside of Asia, New York City is one of the largest international markets for illegal ivory. Peering into shop windows in central Manhattan, you might just see beautifully carved tusks that once belonged on the face of an African elephant. That's just what Wendy Haggood, director and co-founder of Wild Tomorrow Fund, did a year ago.

Until recently, it was legal to sell mammoth ivory, or the tusks from long extinct proboscideans (elephant-like species). Many shopkeepers, like the one Wendy stumbled upon, had been passing off ivory recently poached from elephants as mammoth ivory in order to circumnavigate the law. Between 2007 and 2014, the Savannah elephant population declined by 30 percent, or 144,000 elephants (there are actually two species of African elephant, the Savannah elephant and the Forest elephant, a third species is found in Asia). This decline is primarily due to poaching for their tusks, so it's perhaps no surprise that ivory is making its way to major cities across the world.

Wendy's discovery of "questionable mammoth ivory" led her to contact wildlife crime detectives with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). It just so happened that the NYDEC detectives had already been investigating that very shop, and it was later revealed that the shop's proprietors were in fact selling real ivory under false claims of it being mammoth ivory. Undercover work by the detectives resulted in a record bust with the seizure of more than \$4.5 million in ivory items – the largest bust in New York State history. This case remains under investigation by the Manhattan district attorney's office.



Seized ivory in New York. Photo by Wendy Haggood.



Seized ivory in New York. Photo by Wendy Haggood.

Since the laws governing ivory and rhino horn were strengthened, New York's environmental conservation detectives have been working hard to shut down New York's domestic ivory trade. Another store, Landmark Gallery, within footsteps of Central Park, was also found to be selling ivory illegally. In March 2017, the store owners were ordered to pay a penalty donation of \$50,000 towards wildlife conservation work on top of additional legal penalties. Wild Tomorrow Fund was selected as the non-profit organization to receive the \$50,000 donation to put towards our conservation work in Zululand. This donation is being used to fund a wide range of conservation operations, educational programs, and to purchase desperately needed equipment for wildlife managers and anti-poaching units across the region.

One of the major anti-poaching operations we were able to fund with this money is the dehorning of a black rhino population at Phinda Private Game Reserve. The black or hook-billed rhino is a critically endangered species with only around 5,000 left in the world. At the turn of the 20th century, there were as many as 850,000 black rhinos in Africa. By 1960, that number was 100,000. In the early 1990s, the species hit an all-time low of just over 2,000 black rhino left in the world. Most of the black rhino in Zululand are part of the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, which moved portions of the remaining population to smaller protected areas to be managed as one. Phinda was the first reserve to receive black rhino with this program and has remained a critically important population for the species and its future.

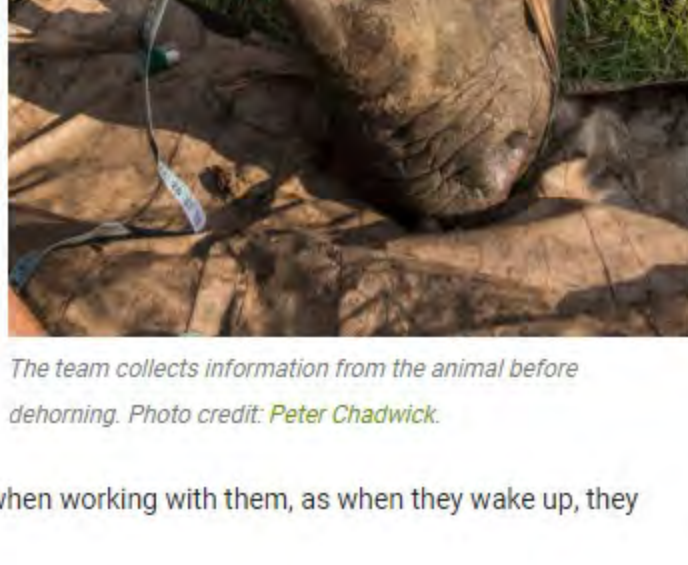
Several years ago, if you had asked conservationists and wildlife managers in Zululand if dehorning their rhinos was an option to stop poaching, most of them would have told you it hadn't come to that yet. That changed in 2016, as poaching pressure in the area continued to climb and the number of rhinos killed continued to increase. Last year, Phinda started dehorning white rhino in response to the majority of the rhinos outside its borders being poached, leaving its population a vulnerable target. It was not a verdict that was made lightly; the war on rhinos is only getting worse in this area and the decision to remove the very thing that makes a rhino a rhino is a sign of the times.

How to dehorn a rhino

A rhino's horn is just like our own fingernails: It is compressed hair made out of the protein keratin that grows throughout the life of the animal. Just like trimming a fingernail, we can cut the horn off a rhino without causing the animal any pain, and by cutting it just above the growth plate, it is allowed to slowly grow back. Dehorning does not stop poaching, but it does decrease the incentive for poachers while we increase security and thus the risk to the animals. This begins to shift the scales back to our side, where wildlife managers regain control of the situation.

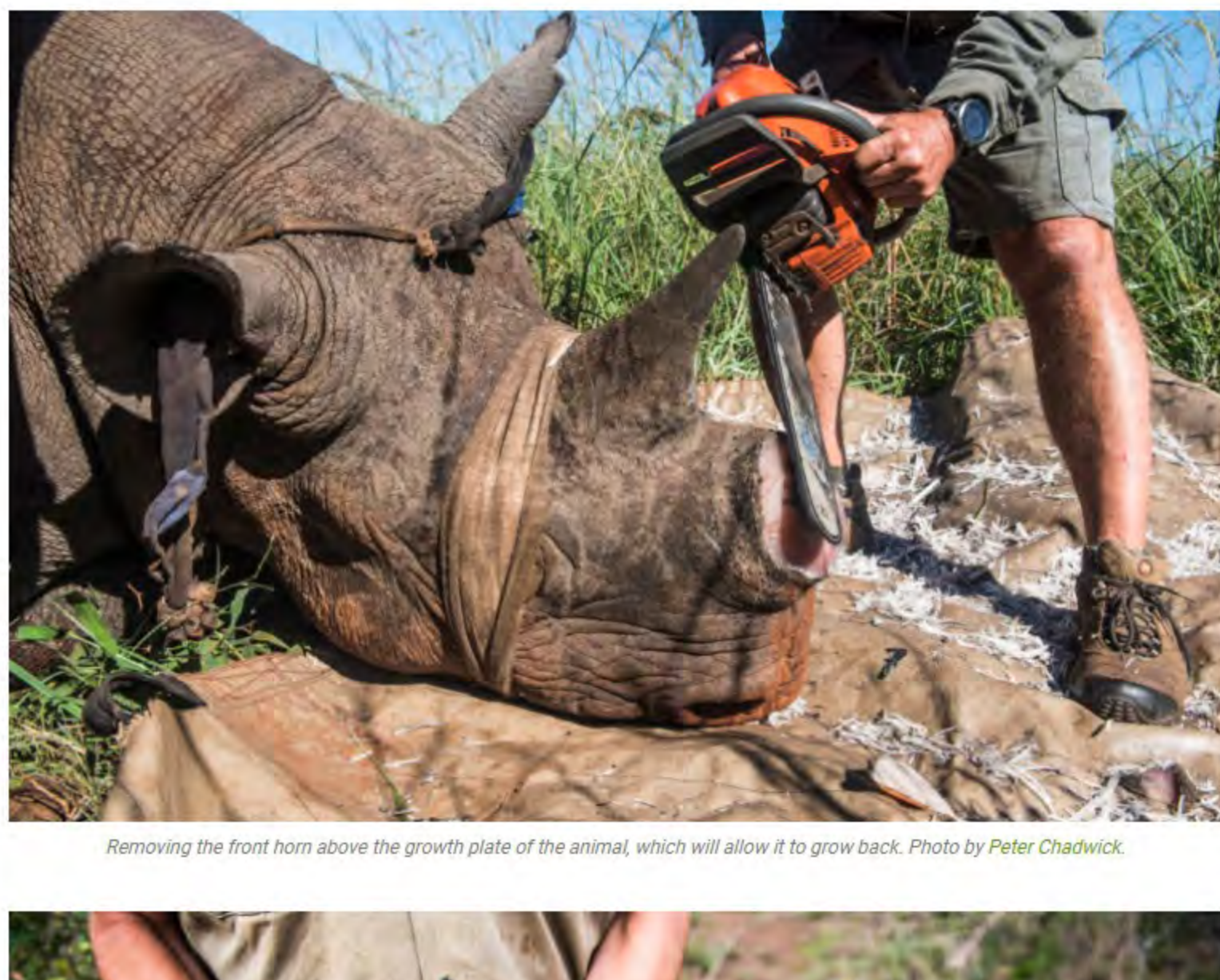
Since last year, Phinda has wanted to dehorn its black rhino population but has lacked the funding to do so. With its white rhino population dehorned and the majority of the surrounding reserves in the area having gone ahead with dehorning their black rhino, Phinda's black rhinos had become a vulnerable poaching target. Through Wild Tomorrow Fund's involvement at Phinda, however, a portion of the ivory bust penalty money was used to fund a black rhino dehorning operation.

Last month, the Wild Tomorrow Fund Team joined Phinda's habitat team in the extensive operation to save the black rhinos. This was no small task. Although there are far fewer black rhinos than white rhinos in the area, the black rhinos are much more difficult to find and work on. Unlike the docile white rhino, the black rhino is known for being extremely cantankerous and aggressive. Extra precautions need to be taken when working with them, as when they wake up, they wake up livid and with a bang!



The team collects information from the animal before dehorning. Photo credit: Peter Chadwick.

Led by local wildlife veterinarian Dr. Mike Toft and Phinda conservation manager Simon Naylor, the small team worked from a helicopter to locate and then dart individual rhinos while a ground crew followed through the bush. Once darted, most animals can be steered by the noise of the helicopter to a safe area for the ground team to approach. This is less true for black rhino, who instead will often try to attack the helicopter and sometimes even stand their ground as the chopper hovers just over them.



Removing the front horn above the growth plate of the animal, which will allow it to grow back. Photo by Peter Chadwick.



The author holds a rhino's horn after dehorning. Photo by Peter Chadwick.

As the drugs take effect, a running rhino crashes through everything it can find. Eventually the rhino comes to a halt as the drugs take full effect and cause the animal to stand still and eventually lie down. It's then that the ground team can rush in to secure the animal, usually having to cut a path through brush to the animal using chainsaws and machetes. Once at the rhino, they immediately cool it off with water and leaf-blowers to stabilize its body temperature.

The team works quickly to collect important DNA samples and body measurements before the rhino awakes. At the same time, the veterinarian, Dr. Toft, measures and marks the base of the horn where he will cut with his chainsaw to ensure the animal's safety. We continue to collect information on the downed animal as the shavings of horn flies around us.

Once we have all of our samples and the horns have been removed, Dr. Toft uses a grinder to smooth out the small amount of remaining horn. Next it is coated in an oily substance that smells like barbecue sauce to prevent cracking of the freshly trimmed horn. As quickly as possible, the equipment is loaded into vehicles and we drive far away from what will soon be a very angry rhino. Dr. Toft then administers the antidote for the drugs as the helicopter prepares to take off.



Dr. Toft monitors the status of an anaesthetized black rhino. Photo by Peter Chadwick.

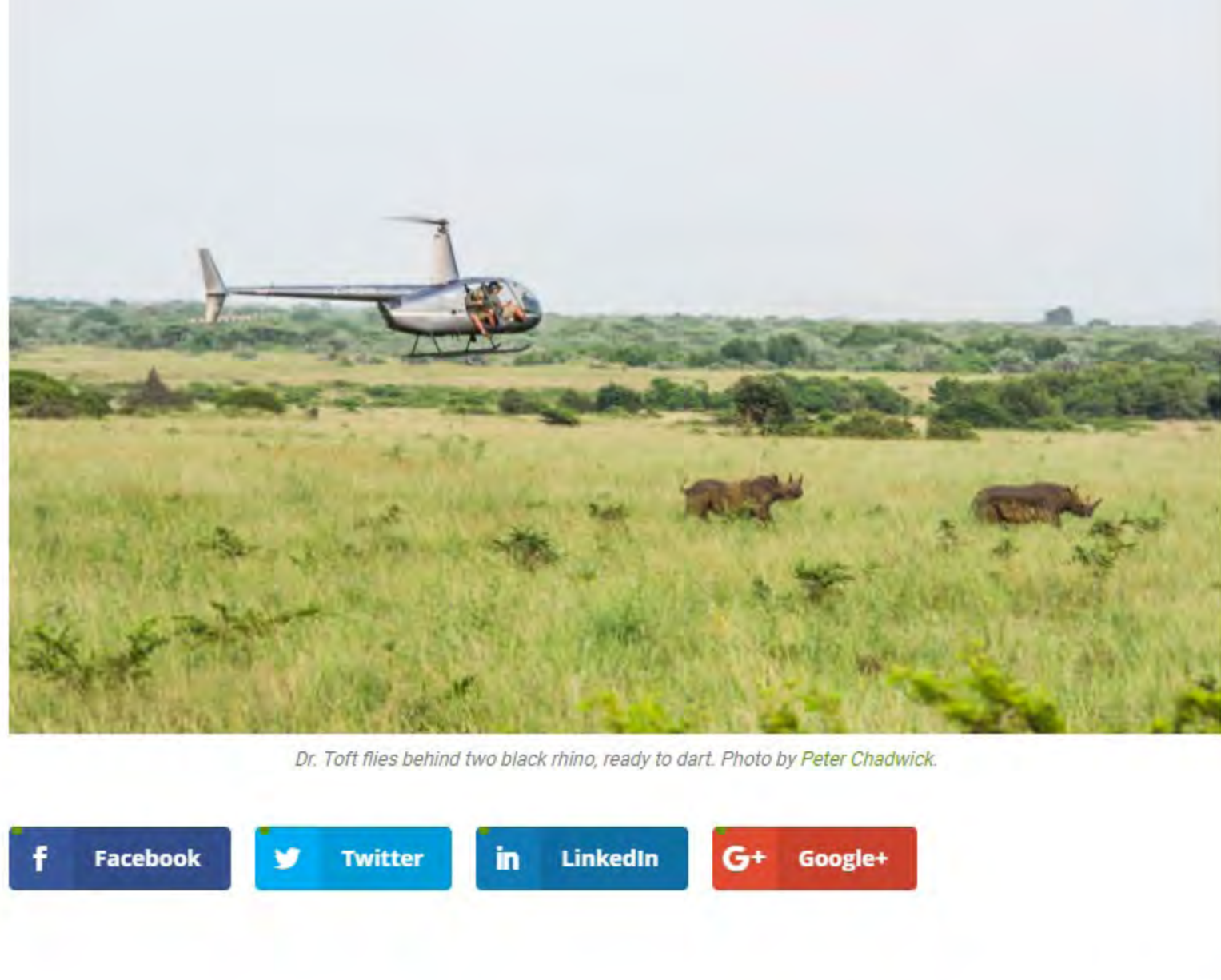
As the helicopter hovers overhead, the rhino wakes up as if startled and immediately begins aggressively snorting and running around the area where the team has just been working. While the rhino feels no pain from the operation, it can be slightly drowsy from the drugs. Most often the rhinos bash a few trees angrily and run off in a huff, not because of what we have done, but because that is the nature of black rhino.

This operation continued for days until all of the black rhino on the reserve had been successfully dehorned.

Watching the rhinos wake up from the dehorning, it is difficult to see what we have taken from them. The black rhino embodies the rawness of Africa, with their aggressive temper and unruly nature; they represent the wild spirit of this continent. Dehorning them feels as though we have taken part of that away from them, however we all know that if these animals are to live, they must sacrifice their horns for now.

Back in New York, the detectives at the NYSEC continue their never-ending work to stop wildlife traffickers who are selling rhino horn and elephant ivory. Everyday these men and women work without the reward of witnessing the beauty of the living endangered protect. Yet today their work on the other side of the planet has funded the protection of these critically endangered rhinos.

Together, we can help to swing this war to the side of wildlife.



Dr. Toft flies behind two black rhino, ready to dart. Photo by Peter Chadwick.

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Article published by Mike Gaworecki on 2017-06-02.



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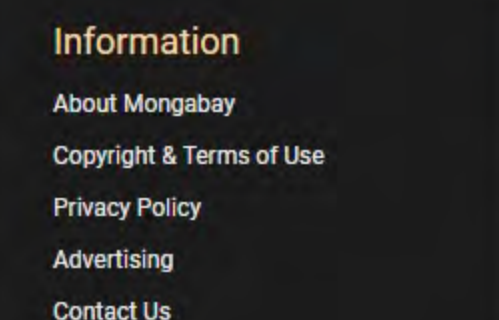
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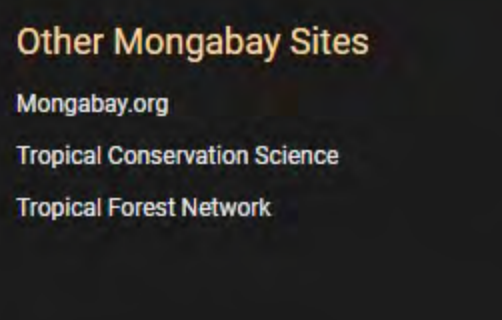
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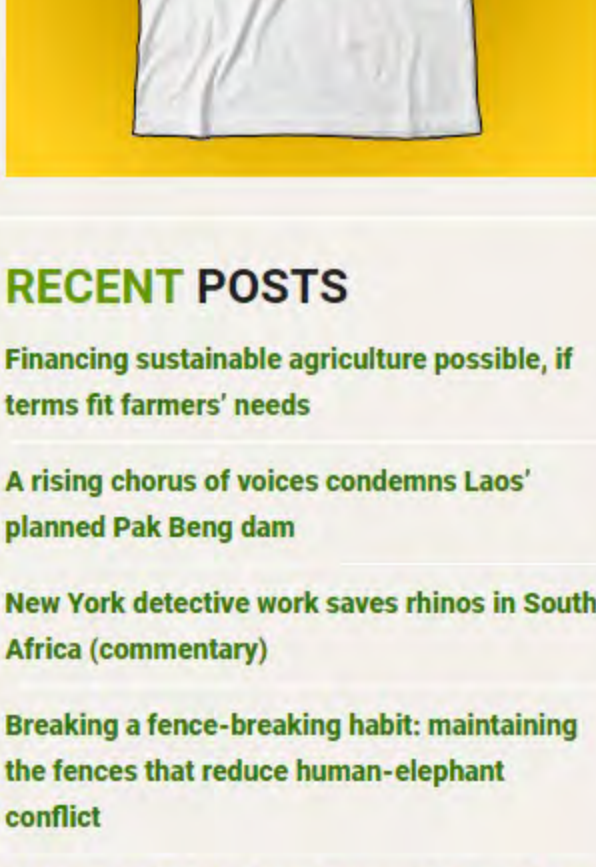
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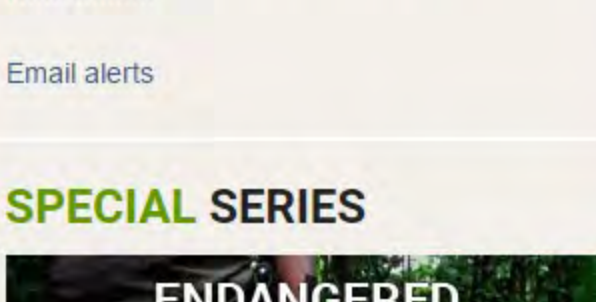


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