

RHINO CONSERVATION AWARDS HONOURING RANGERS ON THE FRONTLINES

According to a recent article written by photojournalist, Scott Ramsay, rhino poaching in South Africa is at record levels, with more than 1 215 having been killed in 2014. The game rangers are the soldiers on the frontlines in this war against the desecration of a species, putting their lives and that of their families on the line for nature conservation.

Lawrence Munro, winner of the Best Conservation Practitioner Rhino Conservation Award in 2014, previously the head ranger of the iMfolozi wilderness area in the southern section of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, now heads up the Rhino Operations Unit, the anti-poaching task force for the whole of KwaZulu-Natal. Munro's unit has been relatively successful and he attributes much of the success to targeting poachers and their syndicates outside of protected areas, rather than waiting for poachers to come into the reserves.

A great advance in the war against poaching is the listing of rhino poaching as a priority national crime, indicating that government's intelligence and security agencies now support conservation agencies such as Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

This essential yet dangerous line of work is unforgiving, unrelenting and dangerous. Thirty-nine year-old Munro, who has a young family, is constantly armed and on guard. "I am thinking combatively all the time," he explains. "My family and I have had very directed, pointed death threats. Letters addressed to me that say: *we don't want you around anymore.*"

The implications of his line of work mean that his family cannot travel after dark without Munro acting as escort; he works strenuously long hours – preparing in the day and hunting poachers at night. This places stress on his family and affects every facet of his life. Munro is often forced to keep a lot of his work secret, unwilling to reveal anything to his family that will endanger their lives. Despite the danger, Munro loves his work. "It's such a great feeling to catch a rhino poacher or middleman. But the job does take its toll."

"We deal with paradoxes all the time," says Munro. "We flit between what is beautiful and peaceful one day, to what is very ugly and confrontational the next." On Christmas Day, Munro and his team were on patrol in the iMfolozi wilderness area. At dusk they were treated to a spectacular sunset, but the beauty was shattered by countless gun shots; the only thought being hope that the rhinos and Munro's team were safe.

“We sprinted to the contact point. There were bodies lying around, and I prayed it wasn’t one of our team. Fortunately the poachers had been killed, and none of our team was hurt.” Despite these battles, which Munro describes as “a typical day’s work”, he has lost only one man so far. “People do die. Luckily, so far, the majority are poachers, but we’re under no illusions.”

Nominations are open for the Rhino Conservation Awards 2015 and are invited from all African rhino range states, in categories including; Best Field Ranger, Best Conservation Practitioner, Best Political and Judicial Support, Best Science Research and Technology, and Best Awareness, Education or Funding. The additional Special Youths category honours youngsters that have taken action against poaching.

Nominations can be made by and/or on behalf of any person or organisation that has played a part in rhino conservation, on any scale. Nomination forms can be requested from Janyce Dalziel at janyce@currinthevents.co.za, or downloaded from the Rhino Awards website, rhinoconservationawards.org, which is now live. Once nominations are closed on the 1st of June 2015, an executive committee will review all nominations and draw up a short-list for the winners to be chosen from. A panel of adjudicators will then identify the winners and runners up in each category.

For more information visit rhinoconservationawards.org, follow Rhino Conservation Awards on Twitter twitter.com/RhinoAwards or like the Rhino Conservation Awards Facebook page facebook.com/rhinoconservationawards.

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Adapted from an article written by photojournalist, Scott Ramsay, with his permission - <http://m.news24.com/Traveller/Explore/Bush/Zululand-Ranger-on-the-poaching-frontlines-20150209>

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