

Rhino Orphanage in South Africa gives animals a safe haven from poachers

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.16.15

Word Count **754**



In this photo taken June 28, 2014, and supplied by a board director of The Rhino Orphanage, a baby rhino runs in the bush at the facility, which is near a lodge at the Entabeni Safari Conservancy in the northern part of South Africa. Photo: Dex Kotze/The Rhino Orphanage via AP

ENTABENI SAFARI CONSERVANCY, South Africa — They are the most fragile victims of South Africa's rhino hunting problem. They are the baby rhinos that survive the shooting deaths of their mothers.

Many probably die of dehydration or other perils in the wild. Still, some lucky ones end up at The Rhino Orphanage. Workers there become mothers to the scared young ones, feeding, walking and comforting them until they are ready

to return to the wild. The rhinos learn to recognize voices, sleep in a stable, eat a milk substitute, roll in the mud and play with each other and their human minders, who try not to get knocked over by these big, active babies.

Extreme Measures To Protect

The orphanage takes extreme measures to protect its rhinos from poachers, who hunt rhinos illegally. It keeps out all but selected visitors. It also does not advertise its exact location. Managers say only that it is near a golf and safari resort at the Entabeni wildlife park, about a three-hour drive north of Johannesburg.

"These rhinos would be dead if there weren't a place to send them," Gabriela Benavides said. She is a Mexican veterinarian at the orphanage.

Benavides spoke while three rhinos named Faith, Lunga and Matthew trotted and slurped water from containers. The rhinos were all younger than 1 year old. They approached visitors behind a low wooden barrier. The rhinos let people stroke and touch the rough skin of their heads.

Legendary Horn A Death Sentence

South Africa is home to most of the world's rhinos. However, the country has a big problem with poachers. The hunters killed more than 1,200 of the country's rhinos in 2014 and are killing them at a high rate this year to meet rising demand for their horns in parts of Asia. The buyers believe rhino horn, which is ground into powder, works as medicine. There is no scientific evidence to back up that idea. The horn is made of keratin, a protein also found in human fingernails.

South Africa's national parks service rescued 16 rhino orphans in 2014. A dozen were put in expert care. Four others were placed with female rhinos in government-run enclosures who act as mothers, said Edna Molewa, minister of environmental affairs.

The goal is to have the orphans return back to the rhino population in the wild, she said.

Keeping Secrets For Safety

The mothers of most rhinos at the orphanage were shot. Poachers with machetes hacked another baby rhino more than two dozen times as it stayed near the body of its mother. The baby recovered at the orphanage.

The Rhino Orphanage was started in 2012. It says it has successfully raised and released nine rhinos back into the wild. Because of security concerns, workers do not say how many rhinos are at the facility. There are no signs that identify The Rhino Orphanage at the entrance.

Poachers will "go for any little bit" of horn, said Dex Kotze. They will even go after a baby rhino whose horns are emerging, he said. Kotze helps to oversee the orphanage. Kotze said that several similar centers have started operating elsewhere in South Africa.

Stopping Poachers, Saving Rhinos

On one occasion, poachers were on their way to the orphanage, but a secret government agent had become part of their organization. The suspects were arrested, according to Benavides.

People who have assisted with the rhinos turned off phone and camera location settings while at the orphanage. They did not post photographs or video onto social media websites. The people did not want to give away the location of the orphanage, said Fortunate Phaka of the group called Youth 4 African Wildlife.

"We try to keep it as secret as possible while at the same time raising awareness," Phaka said. The orphanage is a non-profit organization, and does not make money for the people who run it. The orphanage costs roughly \$32,000 a month to maintain, so it must raise money through donations. "It's kind of hard trying to raise money for something people are not allowed to see."

Limiting Human Contact

Putting limits on human contact with the rhinos while they are at the orphanage also assists in their return to the wild, which happens when they are 2 or 3 years old. This is the age at which they would usually become independent.

Benavides said it was rewarding to help rhino orphans, but also stressful because, "you don't know what's going to happen to them when you finally let them go," she said.