

## RHINO CONSERVATION PROJECT

Schools participating in Whale Coast Conservation's Eco-Schools programme have taken up the challenge of making a difference in rhino conservation. Sheraine van Wyk, Environmental Learning Manager at Whale Coast Conservation, is engaging with learners about the threat to South Africa's rhinos. She explains:



The greatest demand for rhino horn comes from China and Vietnam. Some believe that powdered horn has healing powers. Others acquire & display the horn as a status symbol in their homes. CITES (the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*) banned the trade of rhino horn in an attempt to save the rhino from extinction a number of years ago, but recently the resultant decrease in horn supply has pushed up the black market price of the horn. This is very unfortunate as sophisticated criminal syndicates have become involved in 'stealing' rhino horn by poaching the animal in other countries. The cruel result is that often a drugged animal's face is hacked away to extract the horn. The surviving rhinos are mostly euthanized as their injuries are so severe. Many rhino calves are

orphaned and traumatised by the poaching experience and if not handled very carefully, will die too.

Rangers and anti-poaching units are at war against very well equipped and ruthless poaching networks. These rangers put their lives at risk and make many sacrifices to protect the rhino on behalf of the South African nation. They need our encouragement and must be applauded for the heroes that they are. Through the Eco-Schools programme we can send messages of support (and small gifts) to the men. Through school fundraising efforts a pair of night vision goggles or a cell phone can be purchased to make a difference in the effectiveness of the anti-poaching units.

Our schools & learners can create awareness of the issues that threaten the survival of the rhino and they can raise funds to aid the national efforts to fight the rhino. There are many organisations involved in initiatives to protect the rhino. The Endangered Wildlife Trust explains that there is a need to do training of anti-poaching units, law enforcement agencies, sniffer dog training & deployment to use by customs at all border posts, harbours and airports. Offering workshops on environmental laws with prosecutors, magisterial and judicial bodies will also make a difference.



Furthermore there needs to be care centres and response units with a standardised procedure for the care of rhino orphans. DNA profiling is currently being done in order to trace the origins of all confiscated rhino horn with a view to gaining successful convictions of poachers, carriers and smugglers. Donated funds can also be used to sponsor a DNA test.

The most important step is to engage with the end users of the rhino horn and persuade them to work with the South African nation to save the rhino. If we can communicate positively with learners in Asia and seek a solution where we can safeguard our rhinos and give the Asians the knowledge to be informed non-consumers of the rhino horn, we stand a chance of winning this battle. Whale Coast schools are intent on showing support to the people

involved in the national rhino conservation initiatives. Learners/schools are encouraged to raise funds to help organisations such as the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa & the Endangered Wildlife Trust to roll out the interventions that are needed to combat rhino poaching. Every contribution will make a difference.