

Hunters and Conservation Association donates R100k to Onderstepoort

The Veterinary Genetics Laboratory (VGL) of the University of Pretoria at Onderstepoort, received a R100 000 boost from the SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association (SAHGCA) to help fund the upkeep of its Rhino DNA Index System (RhODIS).

The VGL collects and stores DNA from South Africa's white and black rhino populations. This database not only plays a key role in providing irrefutable evidence to trace poached products and convict rhino poachers, but also serves as a valuable source of information for rhino breeding programmes.

SAHGCA's donation stems from its Rhinos Alive! awareness and fundraising campaign launched in April 2011, when the VGL was identified as its beneficiary. The campaign will continue to raise more money for rhino conservation and anti-poaching measures from its own members and the public.

Database can expand by 200 additional profiles

"SAHGCA's commitment to and support of the VGL's rhinoceros DNA project through this significant donation will help us expand the database by more than 200 additional DNA profiles of individual live and poached rhinoceros. This ongoing expansion of the database with individually identified animals and horns provides a traceability system to monitor live animals and to investigate and successfully prosecute poaching cases," says Dr Cindy Harper, VGL director.

SAHGCA's donation equals the R100 000 from SA Breweries to the VGL to help fund RhODIS a year ago. Dr Herman Els, manager of hunting and conservation at SAHGCA, challenges other associations and conservation bodies, animal rights groups, and the corporate sector to assist in funding rhino conservation initiatives. "Entities claiming to raise funds for rhino conservation are mushrooming. We really appreciate all these efforts to create awareness and to raise money for rhinos, and we hope the money is used where it can make a real difference," Els said.

Since the dramatic rise in rhino poaching in 2010, SAHGCA and well-known conservationists such as Dr Ian Player and David Cook, a former Natal Parks Board senior officer, have called for the legal trade in rhino horn as the only viable solution to keep the country's rhinos alive.

Ban on trade must be lifted

It is estimated that SANParks have stockpiles of rhino horn worth R3,7bn, which could meet the demand for rhino horn from Eastern countries for many years to come. This excludes the approximately 400 rhinos that die of natural causes each year. "The horns from these animals alone can supply the bulk of the annual international demand. Rhino poaching proves there is a market for rhino horn. We do not have to research it. Currently, only poachers and crime syndicates benefit from rhino horn, while conservation and rhinos suffer," said Els.

SAHGCA says it is the responsibility of the Department of Environmental Affairs to convince the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to lift the ban on the international rhino horn trade in South Africa. This will allow SANParks to legally sell its stockpiles of rhino horn, and generate sufficient income to maintain the parks, without having to resort to other avenues of income such as building hotels.