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# Landscape of fear

## Crime, corruption and murder in greater Kruger

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### Summary

For more than a decade, Kruger National Park has faced a relentless onslaught of rhino poaching. But today its greatest threat is internal corruption, itself a symptom of a breakdown in trust, staff cohesion and professionalism within the park. Recent staff arrests following lengthy financial investigations and a renewed commitment to combat corruption are bearing fruit but will require political support, clear law enforcement strategies to address organized crime around the park and a long-term investment. The park is severely affected by corrosive corruption and violent organised crime, particularly in Mpumalanga, where staff living in surrounding communities are vulnerable to deeply entrenched criminal syndicates.

### Key points

- Between 2011 and 2020, Kruger's white rhino population fell 75%, from approximately 10 621 animals to 2 607.
- Internal corruption is the greatest threat facing the park, itself a symptom of a breakdown in trust, staff cohesion and professionalism within the park.
- Toxic politics, deep-seated inequality, corruption and embedded organised criminality have profoundly affected the park and surrounding communities.
- Crime and corruption in the Kruger National Park should not be viewed in isolation without taking the impact of organized crime in Mpumalanga, including kidnappings, cash-in-transit heists, ATM bombings, illegal mining, extortion and corruption, into account.
- Renewed efforts to combat corruption in the park, coupled with a refreshing openness about the extent of the problem and a desire to address it, require holistic efforts.

## Methodology

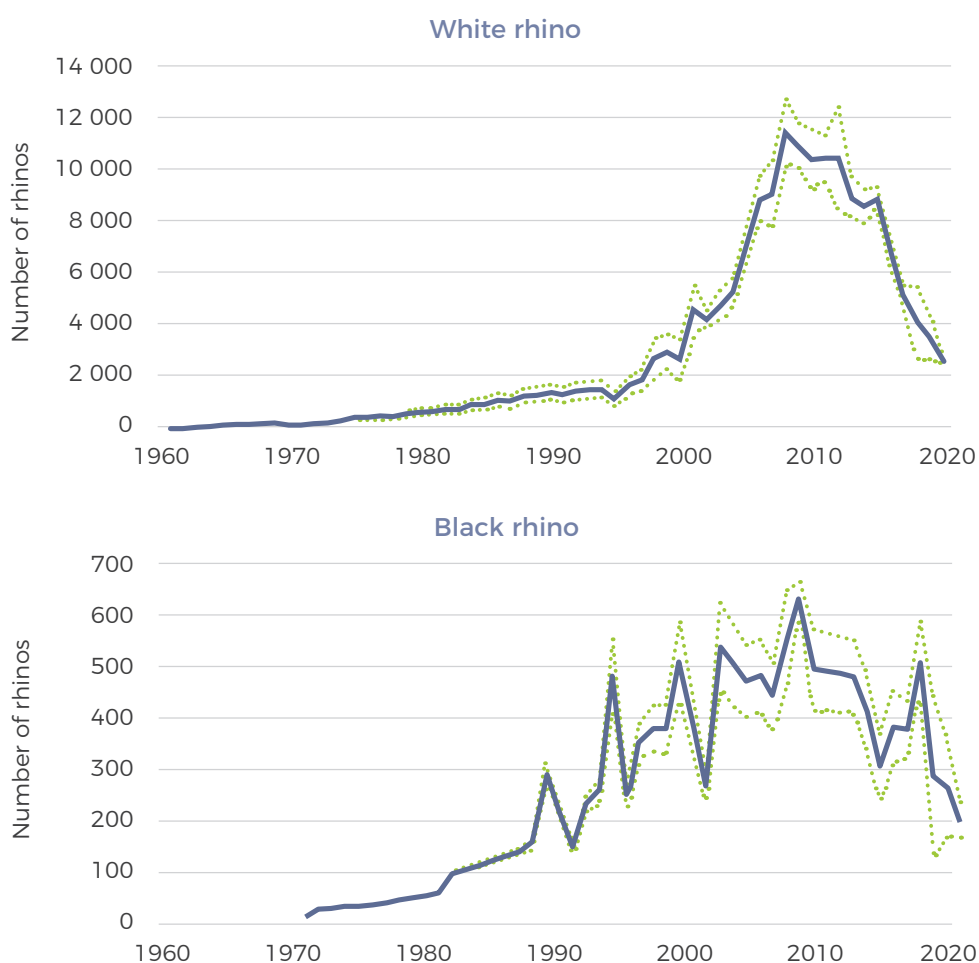
This report is based on fieldwork conducted in Mpumalanga and Kruger National Park between October 2022 and January 2023, with additional interviews in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 subjects from a cross-sector of the wildlife, enforcement and security sectors. These included senior law enforcement officials, security consultants, SANParks officials, conservation managers and others with experience working in the province and on organised crime and corruption.

Most interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity, with some interviewees expressing fears of reprisals. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and interviews lasted an hour on average. Snowball sampling or chain referral was used in some cases to identify additional interview subjects. The research also entailed a comprehensive literature review of academic research on organised crime, corruption and green violence; civil society and media reports, court documents, company and deed records, and video footage.

## A landscape of fear

The Kruger National Park is arguably one of South Africa's most iconic symbols and one of the world's greatest wildlife conservation areas. The size of Wales or Israel, it covers 19 200km<sup>2</sup> of woodland, mopane forest, savannah, granite hills, grassland plains and mountains, stitched together by the Sabie, Olifants, Letaba, Shingwedzi and Luvuvhu rivers. It is home to more than 500 bird, 145 mammal and 336 tree species.<sup>1,2</sup>

**Chart 1: Population trends of white and black rhinos in Kruger since the first introduction of white rhino in 1961 and black rhino in 1971. The broken lines reflect 95% confidence intervals of estimates**



Source: Ferreira et al, 2021, African Journal of Wildlife Research 51 (1) <https://doi.org/10.3957/056.051.0100>.

For more than a decade, Kruger and those who work there have faced an almost unrelenting onslaught of rhino poaching. This was broken only by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a 79.4% reduction in rhino poaching in the park in 2020).<sup>3, 4</sup>

Between 2011 and 2020, the park's white rhino population fell 75%, from approximately 10 621 animals to just 2 607. Kruger's small but vitally important population of critically endangered black rhinos dropped by more than half, from around 415 animals in 2013 to about 202 in 2020.<sup>5, 6, 7</sup>

Facilitated by transnational criminal networks, the global illegal trade in African rhino horn is driven by consumer demand in Asia, primarily in China and Vietnam. Ancient beliefs and modern urban myths have fused to fuel the use of rhino horn for its perceived benefits as a fever-reducer, cancer treatment, health tonic, even a hangover cure.

Disposable income in countries such as Vietnam and China has risen rapidly. Rhino horn has 'become a luxury item and an investment for the rich, coveted for its rarity, held up as an embodiment of status and a means of buying favour'.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11</sup>

Consumers there are prepared to pay between US\$17 545/kg to US\$20 881/kg according to recent data from the Wildlife Justice Commission.<sup>12</sup>

The poachers who supply this market often do not conform to the stereotype of greedy criminals who care little for the animals they kill, argues Professor Rosaleen Duffy in a new book on security and conservation. Rather, she writes, the drivers of poaching are multilayered and complex, relating to a lack of opportunity, money, status and wealth, as well as conspicuous consumption and a desire to gain respect.<sup>13</sup>

From 2018 to 2021, 2 707 rhino poaching incidents were recorded in Africa: 90% in South Africa, with the Kruger and, more recently, KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-iMfolozi National Park, bearing the brunt.<sup>14</sup> Between January and June 2022, Kruger lost 82 animals. KwaZulu-Natal was hardest hit with 133 losses, more than triple the 33 rhinos killed in the first six months of 2021 when COVID restrictions were eased.<sup>15</sup>

Today, however, Kruger's gravest threat is not poaching but the internal corruption that has metastasised as poaching syndicates have entrenched themselves around the park and organised crime has spread. As many as 40% of the park's law enforcement staff – some South African National Parks (SANParks) officials speculate it may even be as high as 70% in some areas – are believed to be aiding poaching networks or involved in corrupt or criminal activities in some way including high levels of fuel theft.

Relations between staff and management have become strained and increasingly toxic, poisoned by mutual mistrust and suspicion. Morale is low. Accusations of racism and unfair treatment – some real and some in a cynical effort to stymie disciplinary proceedings and investigations – have fuelled tensions.<sup>16, 17</sup>

This has been aggravated by a 'war on poaching', which, as with the 'war on drugs' or any other equally nebulous 'war', has no clear end in sight. The militarised response to poaching has already reaped a terrible human cost in the lives of rangers, police, soldiers and poachers. Kruger's field rangers, particularly the first responders dropped by helicopter into armed 'contacts' with poaching gangs, face enormous psychological and physical pressures that inevitably sap morale. This has led many of them to question the militarised tactics being used and whether they are fair or moral. The enormous costs of the militarised response – in flying hours, technology, manpower and weapons are also questioned, when many field rangers live in substandard housing.<sup>18, 19, 20</sup>

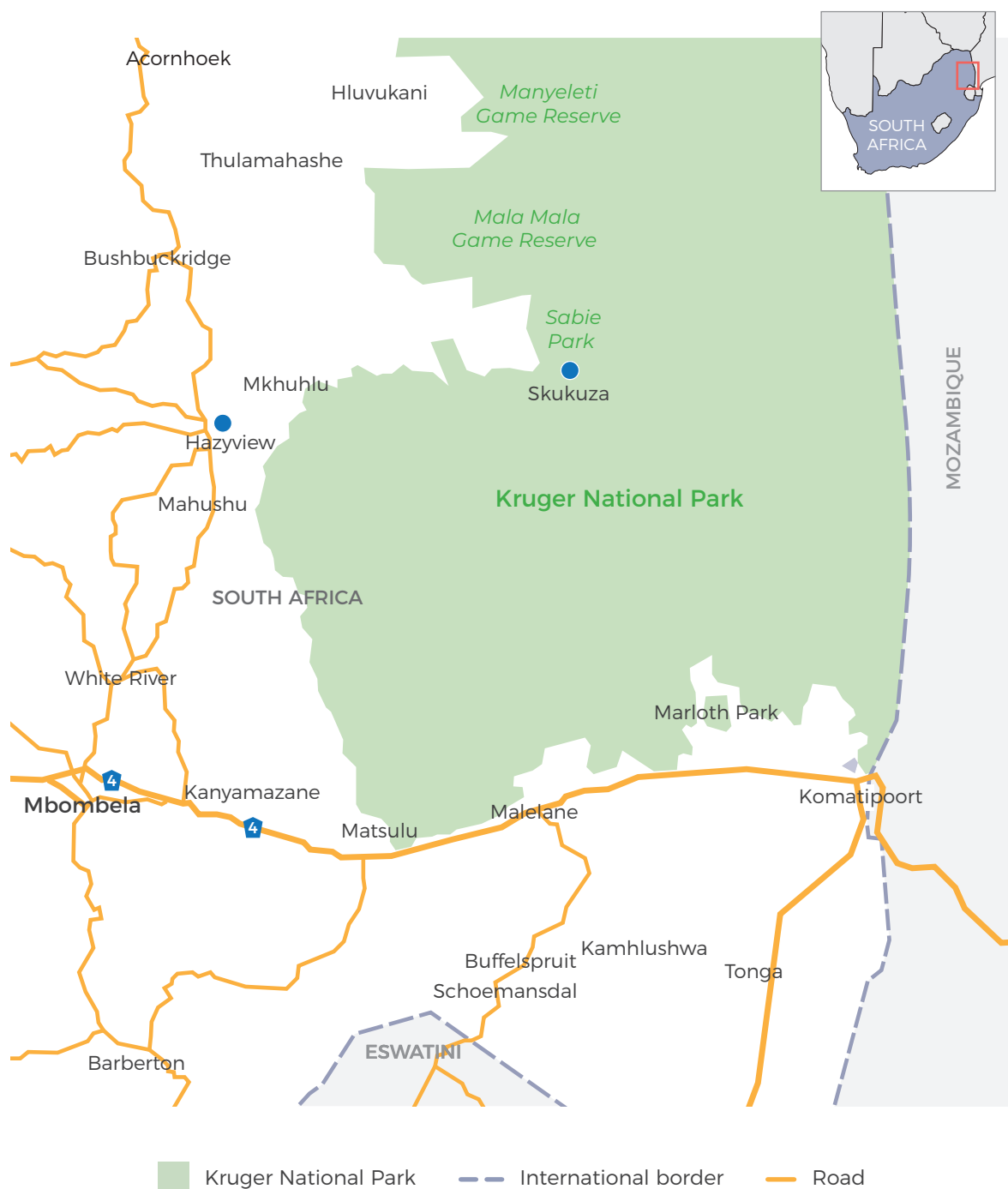
Most of Kruger's staff live in villages and towns around the park. They are particularly vulnerable to the poaching syndicates and criminal gangs that live alongside them. There are no safe spaces.<sup>21</sup> Police criminality and a lack of skills and resources, particularly at local stations, have created a law enforcement and governance void that has helped criminal networks thrive. Pervasive poverty, deep-seated inequality, political instability, violent community protests as a result of inadequate services, state inertia and widespread corruption exacerbate this vacuum.<sup>22</sup>

## Today, the Kruger's gravest threat is not poaching but internal corruption

Mpumalanga surrounds the southern half of the park, where the last rhinos are clustered in the so-called intensive protection zone (IPZ). The western boundary from Hoedspruit to Acornhoek, Bushbuckridge, Hazyview, White River and Mbombela, heading 100km east past Barberton, through Kanyamazane and Matsulu to Komatipoort is a landscape of fear. Illicit markets abound and violence and murder are all-too common. Violent organised crime came to a head with the assassinations of Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (better known as the Hawks) investigator Lieutenant-Colonel Leroy Bruwer in 2020<sup>23</sup> and Timbavati head ranger Anton Mzimba in 2022.<sup>24, 25</sup>

While some insiders wryly refer to it as the 'Republic of Kruger', the park does not exist in isolation. Around it are communities struggling to survive, marginalised by political processes and often left unprotected by the state. Organised crime groups involved in criminal activities such as poaching, stock theft, cash-in-transit

**Chart 2: Focus area**



heists, hijackings, armed robberies, ATM bombings, kidnapping, extortion and illegal gold mining have all taken root. And corruption is ubiquitous.

Far from being an insulated wildlife idyll, Kruger and its future are inextricably bound to the future of the communities that surround it and the peril that those communities face daily from violent organised crime, political inertia and absent law enforcement.

Today there appears to be renewed will among park management to confront corruption, coupled with a refreshing openness about the enormity of the problem. Still, it will be a long, gruelling task, one that will require significant resources, determination, a long-term commitment and transparent political support. Early successes, including the arrest of two rangers and 11 alleged accomplices implicated in poaching networks, corruption and money laundering, bode well. Long-running financial investigations have identified payments to dozens of Kruger staff and helped pinpoint key actors, giving further cause for hope.<sup>26</sup>

This report examines Kruger, its surrounding communities and Mpumalanga on the south-western boundary in the context of its complex criminal ecosystems and the politics and corruption that has shaped the province post-democracy. It includes case studies of key criminal actors that demonstrate the pivotal role of corruption, the adaptability of rhino-poaching networks and their links to other forms of organised crime.

## The 'Republic of Kruger'

For years, the prevailing mantra at SANParks was that to stop poaching, it was necessary to 'clear the park from the outside'; a glib phrase describing a strategy that was ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>27</sup>

More than 2.9-million people live within 50km of Kruger's western boundary fence. According to an expanded definition of unemployment,<sup>28</sup> which includes discouraged job seekers, and is a far more accurate reflection of the country's economic state, average unemployment in the area was 46.5% at the end of 2022's third quarter (nationally, the figure was 43.1%). Amid rising discontent over poverty and inequality, Kruger's significance as a tourist destination has made it a strategic pawn in protests against poor service delivery and inadequate housing, electricity, water and roads. Some of this is fuelled by internecine feuds between rival African National Congress (ANC) factions.<sup>29, 30</sup>

In recent years, for example, residents of Shabalala near Hazyview have regularly blocked roads around Kruger with rocks, tree stumps and soil mounds. This is to protest the absence of running water, electricity and tarred roads not addressed since 1994.<sup>31</sup> Most recently, in September and October 2022, protestors barricaded roads leading to Kruger Gate, the main entrance to the south of the park, for a week and prevented guests from leaving.<sup>32</sup> 'The communities know they will be heard locally and internationally if they block access to Kruger,' a local resident explains. 'It is the only way they can draw attention to grievances.'<sup>33</sup>

For many living in poverty in the area, the Kruger's beauty has 'little relevance'

The dire economy and lack of employment were recurring themes in interviews for a 2021 study of the perspectives and perceptions of protected areas, conservation and safety in Mpumalanga communities along Kruger's western boundary. Participants said they saw no benefits in conservation and viewed poverty, inequality and unemployment as drivers of crime. Aggravating tensions between communities and protected areas were heavy-handed police and anti-poaching operations 'levelled not only at rhino-poaching suspects but at random community members'.<sup>34</sup>

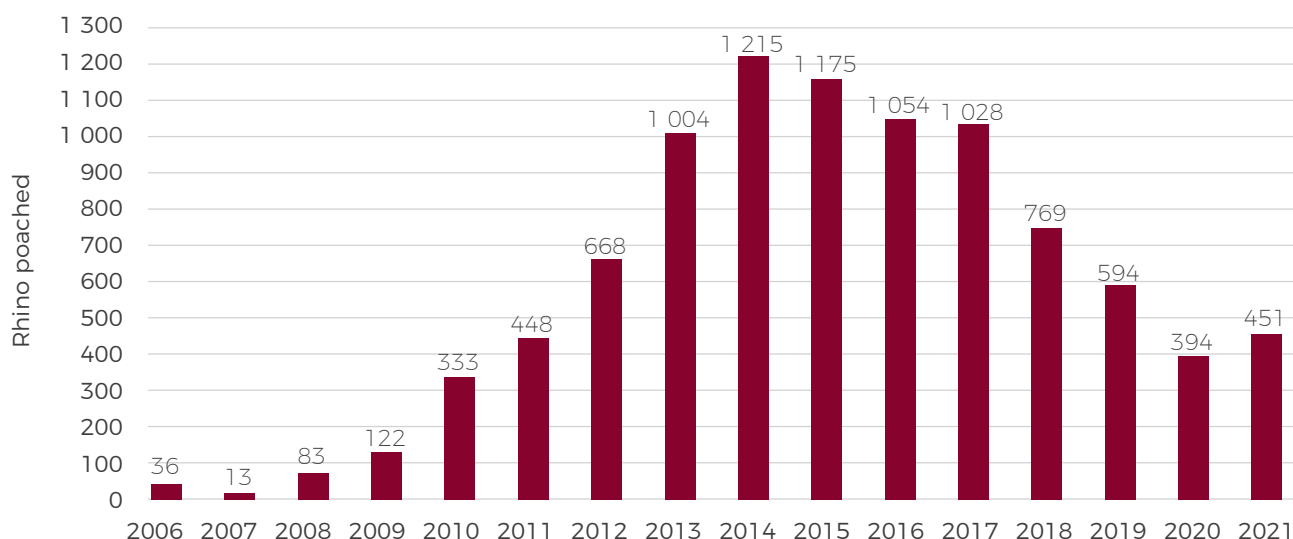
Nearly 30 years after the first post-apartheid election, Kruger and SANParks continue to grapple with an uncomfortable historic legacy moulded by Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid and exploitation and forced removals of black Africans from protected areas. As Professor Jane Carruthers wrote in her seminal examination of Kruger's social and political history, for many black South Africans living in extreme poverty in areas adjoining the park, Kruger's aesthetic beauty has 'little relevance'. 'For them, the park's name and ethos have come to symbolise strands in the web of racial discrimination and white political and economic domination.'<sup>35</sup>

In 2021/22, more than 500 000 black South Africans visited national parks overseen by SANParks, making up 28.1% of all its South African guests. But black South Africans accounted for just 12.7% of South African overnight guests. The others were all day visitors.<sup>36</sup>

Kruger employs around 2 500 staff and supports an additional 4 500 jobs mostly in surrounding communities with concessionaires and through infrastructure and extended public works programmes. About 400 staff are field rangers. Most of the park’s rangers (96.9%) are from Mpumalanga and Limpopo, with 86.8% and their families living in villages and small towns surrounding the park. The number of rangers from each area ranges from one to 47.<sup>37</sup>

A decade of ongoing conflict has taken a toll, not only on the lives of rangers, police, soldiers and poachers killed and wounded in ‘contacts’ and ‘friendly fire’ but on physical and mental health. ‘The pressure is relentless, there is no respite,’ says Elise Serfontein, founding director of Stop Rhino Poaching. ‘The physical and mental fatigue is taking its toll.’<sup>38</sup> The risks extend beyond firefights in the bush. In May 2022, for example, a Kruger field ranger and dog handler, Shando Mathebula, was killed by a buffalo while on patrol in the Shangoni ranger section.<sup>39</sup>

**Chart 3: Rhino poaching in South Africa (2006 – 2021)**



Source: Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment

During the worst years of the poaching crisis from 2014 to 2017, there were thousands of incursions by poachers every year. A dozen poaching gangs could operate in the park on any day. In 2015, for example, SANParks officials recorded a 43% increase in poacher activity compared to the previous year. That year, there were about 2 500 incursions and 137 armed ‘contacts’ with poaching gangs.

Between 150 and 200 suspected poachers were shot and killed in Kruger between 2010 and 2015. Seven South African National Defence Force soldiers have lost their lives, five in a helicopter crash and two in accidental shootings. At least two field rangers and a policeman have been killed. Others have been grievously wounded.<sup>40</sup>

Today, the greatest threat facing Kruger National Park and its staff, however, is not poaching. It is internal corruption, coupled with worsening organised crime in Mpumalanga. Over the past decade, corruption has become endemic. There are well-founded fears that as many as 40% of the park’s law enforcement staff could be aiding poaching gangs or be involved in corruption in some way. Some put the figure of staff involvement ‘conservatively at 70%’, including staff who may not be involved directly in poaching but help facilitate it by providing information or concealing weapons.

## Profile – The case of Clyde Mnisi

In late-October 2022, Clyde Mnisi was inaugurated *hosi* or traditional leader of the Mnisi clan. He wore a leopard-skin robe and took his place on a wrought-iron throne painted gold as a crowd cheered. Controversial Mpumalanga Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs MEC Mandla Msibi, who had recently been reinstated to the provincial Cabinet after prosecutors provisionally withdrew a double-murder charge against him, presented Mnisi with a gilt-framed certificate recognising him as a senior traditional leader and the 'rightful heir to the throne'.<sup>42, 43</sup>

But police and prosecutors allege that Mnisi is one of the 'kingpins' in a 'massive trafficking network of poached rhino horn'. Together with six other suspects, including now-deceased Hazyview crime boss Petros Sydney Mabuza, commonly referred to by his clan name, Mshengu, and notorious ex-cop 'Big Joe' Nyalunga, Mnisi was arrested in September 2018.<sup>44</sup>

The police operation, codenamed Project Broadbill, involved members of the Hawks, the police special task forces, SANParks, the NPA, SARS and the Department of Environmental Affairs. It seized assets worth millions, including properties, cars, trucks, stolen trailers, generators and electronic equipment, and animal skins.<sup>45</sup>

Five of the suspects were serving or ex-police. They included Phineas Lubisi (40), a police captain at Calcutta police station and formerly station commander of Skukuza police station in Kruger National Park, and Aretha Mhlanga, a constable at Skukuza. Others were Claude Lubisi (33), a former Calcutta constable, Rachel Qwebana (33), a constable with the Acornhoek stock theft unit, and Nyalunga, a former police warrant officer based at White River police station.<sup>46, 47, 48</sup>

The syndicate is alleged to have exerted influence over a swathe of territory along the Kruger western boundary. It stretched from Belfast and Cork to the east of Sabi Sands Game Reserve, down to Calcutta, Mkhuhlu, the Shabalala tribal trust area and Hazyview, where Nyalunga and Mabuza had homes a few kilometres apart.

Company records indicate a close affiliation between the Mnisi and Nyalunga families, with shared directorships in several shelf companies dating as far back as 2004.<sup>49</sup> Mnisi is also the owner of Phendhulani Lodge in Mkhuhlu, which opened in April 2019, regularly hosting DJs and pool parties, and attracting some of South Africa's top talent. Artists have included Afropop stars Blaq Diamond,

### Alleged poaching 'kingpin' Clyde Mnisi (right) with controversial Mpumalanga MEC Mandla Msibi



Photo: COGTA Mpumalanga handout

house duo Black Motion, Master KG and amapiano dancer and musician Kamo Mphela.<sup>50</sup>

At the time of the arrests, a police spokesman said the syndicate's criminal operations, aided by corrupt police and staff in state and private reserves, were 'executed with paramilitary discipline and included counter-intelligence operations to prevent detection'.<sup>51</sup> Its reach extended from Kruger to Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Many poaching incidents allegedly linked to it took place between January and May 2017 in the Stolsnek section of Kruger. 'These are the guys who organised the snipers (sic),' claimed Hawks spokesman Brigadier Hangwani Mulaudzi. 'These are the guys who were making millions.'<sup>52</sup>

During the subsequent bail hearing, the courtroom was packed with supporters of the accused. Some demonstrated outside the building wearing white t-shirts proclaiming 'No food at home without Baas Joe, Baas Mshengu, Baas Clyde'. Placards accused a SANParks ranger and 'his friends' of bringing 'prisoners to poison Big Joe, Mr Big (Mabuza) and Clyde Mnisi and those prisoners refused'.<sup>53, 54</sup> Nyalunga was granted bail of R120 000, Mabuza R90 000 and Mnisi R50 000, with the remaining accused released on bail of R10 000 each.<sup>55</sup>

In July 2020, Nyalunga was arrested for the 2010 murder of his neighbour (see separate profile).<sup>56</sup> In June 2021, Mabuza died in a hail of bullets at Lowveld Mall in Hazyview. CCTV footage caught the three killers fleeing the scene. No suspects have been arrested (see separate profile).<sup>57, 58</sup> Charges against Mabuza were formally withdrawn in November 2021 after the case was transferred to Mpumalanga High Court. The prosecution of the remaining accused continues.<sup>59</sup>

In just one section in the south of the park, 14 of its 20 rangers have been linked to poaching networks. Investigations by private auditing firm KPMG and the Hawks focusing on the IPZ, home to most of Kruger's rhinos, have uncovered evidence of payments from syndicates to at least 50 staff 'from all walks of life'. And these numbers are likely to increase.<sup>41</sup>

A report tabled at the recent Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Conference of Parties in Panama warned of 'targeted efforts by organised syndicates to infiltrate Kruger National Park employees to solicit information that assists them in poaching, such as rhino locations and ranger deployments'.<sup>60</sup>

That targeting has increased as anti-poaching efforts and a programme to dehorn most of the park's rhinos have taken effect, coupled with the decline in rhino numbers, which makes them harder to find. 'It is impossible for someone to come into Kruger now without some sort of inside link or inside information,' says head ranger Cathy Dreyer.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of each 26-day rotation, when the rangers head home to their families, they face new risks. Many live in the same communities as the poaching gangs they are meant to stop.<sup>62</sup> They walk the same streets as corrupt colleagues.

### **The aftermath of a cash-in-transit heist on 2 September 2022 in which 10 armed suspects attacked a cash van on the R40 near Bushbuckridge**



*Photo: SAPS*

Local police stations are riddled with corruption. They are deeply in the pockets of organised-crime groups involved in poaching, cash-in-transit heists, car and truck hijackings, armed robberies, ATM bombings and illegal gold mining. Thus, they offer little meaningful protection. Sometimes they even serve as escorts for contraband. The more honest police and those who feel a sense of dedication to their communities have little option but to turn a blind eye to the activities of their colleagues for fear of being killed.

The overtures can, at first, be subtle. 'A ranger goes to a shebeen and is overheard saying he needs new tyres for his vehicle but can't afford to buy them,' an investigator explains. 'A few drinks later, someone comes over and says, "Look, I can help you out. No problem, here are four new tyres". A few months later, the guy says, "I've got four shiny new mags to go with the tyres. They'll look great on your GTI". And then, the day comes when he explains who he is and what he wants the ranger to do.'

But often, the syndicates forgo any pretence of subtlety. 'You work in the park, your wife is alone at home with the kids and this is where the kids go to school. You make the choice,' they say. The ranger begins to provide information to the syndicate. He receives his first payment of R25 000 in cash or into a bank. Nothing happens to him. And then he helps, again and again, pocketing the money and protecting his family.<sup>63</sup>



The July 2022 murder of Anton Mzimba, head ranger at Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, which forms part of the greater Kruger National Park, brought into sharp relief the pressure rangers face. Mzimba, who had a reputation for resolute incorruptibility, was shot dead outside his home in Edinburgh Trust near Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga after receiving several death threats.<sup>64, 65, 66</sup> His wife was severely wounded in the attack but survived. Despite clear leads on suspects, an international outcry and calls from the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge for his killers to be brought to book, police appear to have made little, if any, progress.<sup>67</sup>

'Anton was such an incredible presence, such a strong person,' says a conservation manager who knew him. 'His murder was a huge blow and demoralised rangers. He gets murdered and nobody cares. A German tourist is murdered and police pull out all the stops. And the rangers ask, "Why is a tourist more important than our own people?"'<sup>68</sup>

Dreyer sees the impact on an already demotivated ranger corps. 'What do you do when you live in communities where the syndicates are so entrenched? You're on your own. And then rangers ask us what SANParks is doing (to protect them).

There is only so much we can do. We can't give every person who works for us and his or her family accommodation in the park. More broadly, something has to be done about the crime in the areas around the park. We need communities that are safe places for people to live in again. Because there aren't safe places for rangers to go in their off-time.

'I'm not making excuses for them, but many of the rangers who get involved in poaching or corruption have had their families threatened, their livelihoods threatened. And they have nowhere to turn. There is crime all around them.'<sup>69</sup>

Some protected areas staff say that even if they are not involved, they feel stigmatised as poachers. 'We live in shame,' one was quoted saying in a 2021 survey. 'Even for us, we are working in these reserves. When we are outside, we are enemies. They look at you and they say this man is taking news in, news out. These are people who are really trying to protect these animals.'<sup>70</sup>

Financial difficulties, particularly among staff supporting large extended families in often-marginalised communities where few have steady work, make staff especially vulnerable to recruitment by crime networks. SANParks is currently implementing a benchmarking programme to determine how salaries can be improved. 'We are trying to benchmark what, for example, a sergeant, a corporal, a lance corporal and so on should be paid, to develop an incentive and a reward model,' says Dreyer.

In a society that prizes visible displays of wealth, other park staff, particularly younger ones, 'see how successful the gang bosses are, the cars they drive, the lifestyles, the conspicuous excess, and they want it,' a law enforcement officer says. 'Often, they are not people who have worked in Kruger long enough to have developed a passion for what they do, as have some older rangers.'<sup>71</sup>

There is also little consensus among Kruger staff as to what exactly constitutes 'poaching'. 'To many staff, it is actually pulling the trigger, killing the rhino and cutting off the horn,' Dreyer says. 'But giving information about ranger deployments and rhino localities, taking horns out of the park, and bringing in and harbouring poachers, are not seen by many as actively poaching.' One case involved the 'laundry lady' who received thousands of rand to bring a rifle into the park and conceal it in linen. To her, that wasn't poaching. She did not kill a rhino, therefore she wasn't poaching.'<sup>72</sup>

On 23 April 2022, in a potentially groundbreaking investigation, the Mpumalanga Hawks' serious corruption investigation team arrested two veteran Kruger field rangers. based in the park's Stolsnek ranger section.

## Murdered Timbavati head ranger Anton Mzimba

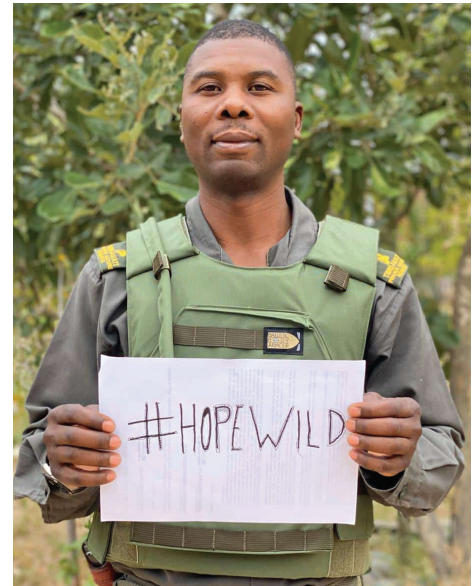


Photo: Timbavati Game Reserve

## Profile – ‘Mr Big’

Petros Sydney Mabuza (57), a notorious cash-in-transit heist- and rhino-poaching syndicate ringleader, was killed in June 2021 when three men opened fire on him as he sat in his orange double-cab bakkie (pick-up) in the parking lot of Lowveld Mall in Hazyview, Mpumalanga.<sup>73, 74</sup>

Security camera footage shared on social media showed a vehicle pull up parallel to his and people scattering as shots rang out. Two of the killers exited the getaway vehicle, fired more shots at close range and then searched Mabuza’s pick-up. No suspects have been arrested.

Mabuza, dubbed ‘Mr Big’ by the press and known more respectfully by his clan name, Mshengu, was said to be involved in a range of criminal activities, including cash-in-transit heists, loansharking and extortion. He owned several properties and was heavily involved in the taxi industry.<sup>75</sup>

His funeral was a lavish affair with a sound stage, a grand marquee, a cavalcade of cars and a string of mourners singing his praises and condemning those who said he was a criminal. His casket arrived by helicopter and was buried draped in leopard skin.<sup>76, 77, 78</sup>

Mabuza’s alleged involvement in rhino poaching dates to the early-2000s, but it was only in 2018 that he was arrested and charged. Legal proceedings continue against Mabuza’s co-accused, former police officer ‘Big Joe’ Nyalunga.<sup>79</sup> In 2020,

## Notorious cash-in-transit heist- and rhino-poaching syndicate ringleader Petros Sydney Mabuza was killed in a hit in June 2021



Photos: YouTube and SAPS

the lead investigator in the case, Lieutenant-Colonel Leroy Bruwer, was ambushed and killed by hitmen. Some of Bruwer’s colleagues believe Mabuza was behind the murder.<sup>80, 81</sup>

## Mabuza was buried draped in leopard skin at a lavish funeral



Photos: YouTube



The men, Daniel Chikwa Maluleke (60) and Solly Ubisi (56), had spent most of their working lives in Kruger. They were charged with corruption, money laundering and fraud linked to poaching and wildlife trafficking, the first case of its kind in the park. A Hawks spokesman said they allegedly 'provided tactical information to rhino-poaching syndicates in exchange for large sums of money'.<sup>82</sup>

An investigation by auditing firm KPMG and the Hawks has uncovered dozens of transactions over five years amounting to hundreds of thousands of rand, possibly millions. The money had allegedly flowed into bank accounts linked to relatives, wives and children of the accused. Outgoing payments to other rangers and staff in Kruger were also detected. Sometimes, bank accounts were opened in the names of two-month-old toddlers.<sup>83</sup>

The impact of the arrests was felt almost immediately. Poacher activity, particularly around Stolsnek, fell sharply. For 65 days, not a single poaching attempt nor incident was recorded there.<sup>84</sup> The evidence against the pair was compelling enough for internal disciplinary proceedings brought by SANParks against Maluleke and Ubisi to be concluded within months of their arrest. Both were unceremoniously sacked and now face a criminal trial.

In early-December 2022, nine of their relatives were arrested on charges of money laundering.<sup>85, 86</sup> Weeks later, two more suspects who had been on the run since the arrests, Martin Prince Lekhuleni (37) and his sister Eunice Lekhuleni (24) were apprehended by the Hawks. Police said Martin Lekhuleni allegedly 'paid money into the accounts of the field rangers and their families as gratification for tactical information in Kruger to assist poaching syndicates'.<sup>87, 88</sup>

In recent years, internal corruption has also seen a sharp increase in so-called 'drop-off' poaching incidents. The IUCN/TRAFFIC report to CITES describes it as a 'major problem'. Poachers posing as tourists drive into the park, collect a rifle that has been hidden for them, kill a rhino and remove the horns. After leaving the horns in the care of a Kruger staff member in the syndicate's pay, they leave the park. The horns are later delivered to them.

In some instances 'rangers located carcasses 200m to 700m from tourist roads indicating that ... poachers knew the rhino's location'. Rangers also report hearing shots 'without an associated detected incursion' across the park's fence line, suggesting the shooter had driven in or been driven in.<sup>89</sup>

In the past, poachers moving through the park would conceal weapons for future use or use corrupt staff to hide them. 'We pulled so many weapons out that had been hidden in the park,' a SANParks official says. 'Sometimes a hyena or elephant would discover the rifle and play with it, and then it ended up on the road. The poachers learnt their lesson.'<sup>90</sup>

Instead of trying to hide weapons in the bush, they would be carried over the Kruger boundary fence, picked up inside the park by staff and moved to where they could be stored securely.

'The easiest way for syndicates to poach is to ensure they have done their homework internally,' the official continues. 'They don't usually drive into the park with a concealed rifle. They need people to help.'

'They have to recruit someone at the gate – a corrupt security guy – then a field ranger who knows where anti-poaching deployments are, where the rhinos are. Then they need people who can drive around the park and secure a weapon for them.'<sup>91</sup> The arrests of Maluleke, Ubisi and their alleged cohorts, couple with mounting pressure on 'internal suspects' who are aware they are being watched, reduced sharply the number of drop-off poaching incidents in the latter half of 2022.<sup>92</sup>

In December 2022, two former Kruger rangers, Hendrick Experience Silinda (31) and Musa Mlambo (38), were each sentenced to seven years in prison by the Skukuza Regional Court. They were arrested in February 2019 while on duty. Regional rangers received a tip-off that poachers were going to enter the park and that they had insider help. Silinda and Mlambo were apprehended with a hunting rifle, seven rounds, a sound suppressor and three hunting knives.<sup>93</sup>

'The easiest way for syndicates to poach is to ensure they have done their homework'

Corruption, mistrust and suspicion have poisoned relations in the park. Discipline has crumbled and staff are demoralised, disaffected and feel unappreciated. A recent survey of Kruger staff and management conducted by the WWF/USAID Khetha programme was 'depressing and eye-opening', says Dreyer. The internal study, which examined the drivers and impact of corruption and solutions to mitigate it, interviewed more than 30 rangers and about 30 people in management in greater Kruger.

'It is certainly not a healthy work environment,' a SANParks official explained. 'It is toxic. Imagine what it does to relations being in a position where 40% or more of your workforce is working against you. Game guards, rangers, trail guides, protection services and housekeeping staff have been arrested. Section rangers are forced to plan deployments on whom they can trust and can't.'<sup>94</sup>

'For example, there are 52 vacancies in ranger services alone and no money to fill them. But even if we had the money tomorrow, we are certainly not going to recruit 52 people and put them into what is not a nice work environment at the moment. It's not right for them and it is not right for us. If you bring anyone in now, you're just going to break him or her.'<sup>95</sup>

The focus now, Dreyer says, must be to improve work conditions and relationships, and reinstate training programmes put on hold for the past six years due to the focus on anti-poaching efforts. Crucial is fair, objective implementation of a new integrity management policy. This would help build resilience, strengthen leadership, ensure accountability and combat a sense of impunity around corruption that has taken root in the park.<sup>96</sup>

Previous efforts to implement 'integrity testing' and polygraphing were met with stiff resistance from unions and ultimately abandoned.<sup>97</sup> The technology used at the time, layered voice analysis (LVA), was also highly controversial, and its accuracy has been called into question in several published studies.<sup>98, 99, 100</sup> Dreyer says the new integrity management policy would not be limited to polygraphing but would include lifestyle audits and background checks that go beyond the 'basic screening' currently being done. It is part of a more holistic strategy that would also "reinvigorate the core values of what makes a ranger a ranger and made them choose this path". The new policy was approved on 23 November 2022 and the standard operating procedure is currently in development.<sup>101</sup>

Getting a policy and an operating procedure in place is one thing. Implementing them is another. While integrity tests, including polygraphing, are used widely in private game reserves and stipulated in performance contracts, those lodges don't face the uphill battle of SANParks as a government department having to negotiate with national unions. Nor do they employ nearly as many staff.

Where a private reserve may need to conduct lifestyle audits and polygraph 20 or 30 staff, SANParks has 400 rangers and a total staff complement of 2 500. If polygraphs were limited to those in enforcement, such as section rangers, field rangers and protection services, that would still necessitate around 600 tests. The resources required would be enormous and swamp SANParks investigators. And the cost would be immense. Each polygraph test costs around R1 000. SANParks would likely need to source external help and funding.<sup>102</sup>

## 'Rangers need somewhere to turn. They need somewhere where they will be heard'

While integrity testing has worked well in the private sector, SANParks faces distinct challenges. Staff are unionised and efforts to implement testing could spark strike action. To ensure equitable implementation, all staff must be polygraphed, which could prove prohibitively expensive without donor funding. The SANParks operational budget was cut by 70% during the COVID pandemic and it could take the organisation at least five years to recover.<sup>103</sup>

But donors have been leery of SANParks since 2016 when the Howard G Buffett Foundation suspended US\$14.6-million in funding – of a total grant of US\$23.7-million – to combat rhino poaching. It cited SANParks' 'inability to execute at even the most basic level' or 'overcome its own bureaucracy and turf battles to do simple things such as meet our expenditure and reporting requirements'.<sup>104</sup>

Some private reserves have opted to pay severance packages to staff who fail polygraphs and background tests to cut ties cleanly and avoid legal challenges. SANParks does not have that luxury.

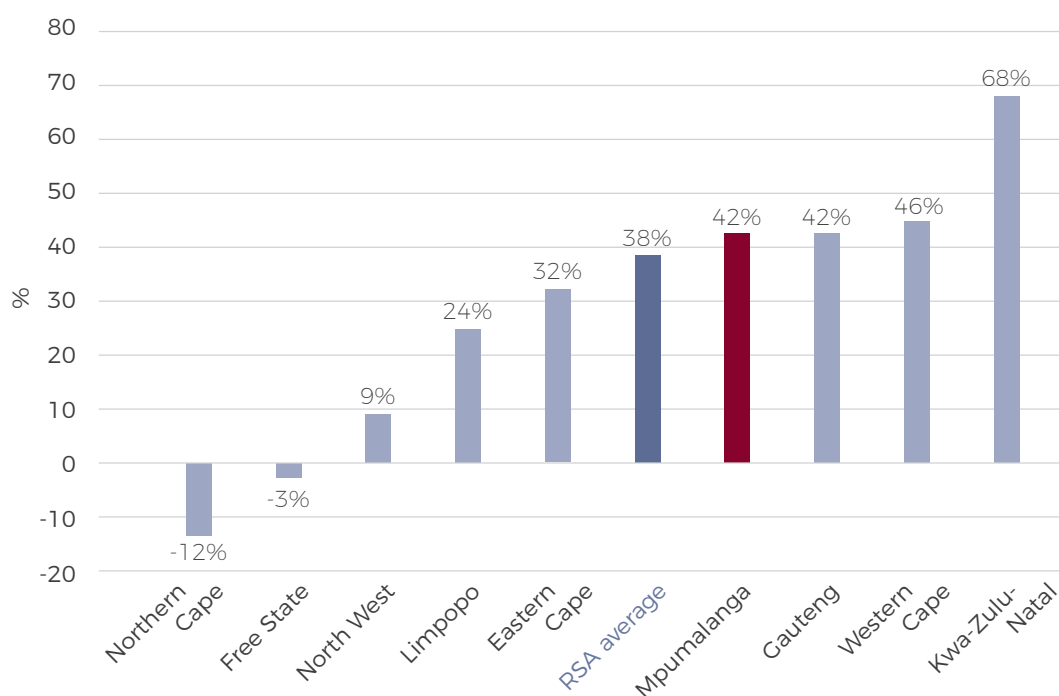
Dreyer is keenly aware of the challenges she faces. ‘How do you get the whole workforce to work together and trust each other again? It is going to take years to rebuild in Kruger, but it is something we have to do.’ That must involve creating the right forum or ‘safe place’ where rangers can speak openly about corruption without fear of reprisals and where their broader concerns can be addressed.

‘How do you create a safe space in this world of no loyalty, no trust anymore? There’s no benefit to being a whistleblower in South Africa, we all know that. But rangers need somewhere to turn. They need somewhere where they will be heard. We must address that.’<sup>105</sup>

## The ‘Wild East’

Mpumalanga’s violence sets it starkly apart from neighbouring rural provinces such as Limpopo and North West. Over the past decade, Mpumalanga’s murder rate has increased by 42%, putting it on par with Gauteng (with a 42% increase over the same period) and Western Cape (46%). Only KwaZulu-Natal, with high levels of violent organised crime, taxi industry conflict and political murders, outstrips them all with a 68% increase.<sup>106</sup>

**Chart 4: The murder rate increase, per province, 2012 – 2022**



Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

The province faces a complex, corrosive threat from organised crime, which has grown virtually unimpeded for decades. This was worsened by the hollowing-out of state and law enforcement agencies during the presidency of Jacob Zuma and the disbandment of the Directorate for Special Operations, better known as the Scorpions. Added to this were the gutting of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), police crime intelligence units, the South African Revenue Service (SARS), the State Security Agency and a host of other law enforcement agencies.<sup>107</sup>

The Mpumalanga Hawks organised crime unit, which has had significant successes investigating rhino poaching, ATM bombing and cash-in-transit syndicates, is too small and under-resourced to confront the enormity of the province’s organised crime problem. In 2020 and 2021, the unit lost two of its investigators.

## The car in which Hawks organised crime investigator, Lieutenant-Colonel Leroy Bruwer, was assassinated outside Mbombela



Photo: SAPS

Lieutenant-Colonel Leroy Bruwer, who was leading investigations into alleged rhino-poaching syndicate bosses Petros Mabuza, 'Big Joe' Nyalunga and Clyde Mnisi, was killed in an ambush on his way to work in March 2020.<sup>108, 109</sup> To date, only one suspect has been arrested for his murder. In September 2021, Warrant-Officer Gerrie le Grange was killed in a vehicle accident as he rushed to a crime scene.<sup>110</sup>

The South African Police Service (SAPS) in the province, meanwhile, is mired in an ugly internal struggle for control. This has pitted Mpumalanga provincial police commissioner Lieutenant-General Semakaleng Manamela against senior officers under her command, one of her predecessors who now runs a private forensics investigations firm and a journalist.<sup>111</sup> Manamela, who was appointed to the post in July 2021 – the first woman to lead Mpumalanga's police – positioned herself as being tough on internal corruption and determined to clean out the rot in the police service.<sup>112</sup>

### Mpumalanga faces a complex, corrosive threat from organised crime

But a forensic report compiled by former Mpumalanga police commissioner Thulani Ntobela was leaked to the journalist – Riot Hlatshwayo of Rio-Jab Media, Limpopo – who published the details on Facebook. It accuses Manamela of 'a misuse of tea-club funds, nepotism and possible corruption'. The report was based solely on information and documentation provided to Ntobela by a whistleblower. The most severe claim involves the possible misuse of more than R1.7 million in donations from police station tea-club funds intended for functions and gifts for speakers.

Manamela has applied for a protection order against Hlatshwayo and Ntobela. Her supporters say she is being targeted by senior police implicated in criminal activities tied to illegal mining. Six police officers and a state prosecutor have been arrested and charged with theft of coal, corruption and money laundering.<sup>113, 114</sup>

'You can't go to the police in the communities around the park because you don't know who to trust,' says a senior manager in a private reserve in greater Kruger. 'Police are either on the take or just too scared to do anything.'<sup>115</sup>

In October 2022, a German tourist, Jörg Schnarr (67), was shot dead near Kruger's Numbi gate a kilometre from his destination.<sup>116, 117</sup> South Africa's police minister Bheki Cele was quick to visit the scene of yet another criminal atrocity. Tourism minister Lindiwe Sisulu consoled Schnarr's family while falsely claiming: 'In the 27 years of government, there have been only three (tourist) deaths – that is a record of safety and one we would like to keep.'<sup>118, 119</sup> Three suspects were quickly apprehended and charged.

## Profile – ‘Big Joe’ Nyalunga

In December 2011, police pulled over a Range Rover Sport on the N4 highway near Middelburg. There were two occupants: Joseph Nyalunga, a former warrant officer at White River police station, and Conrad Nkuna, a Hazyview police constable.<sup>120, 121</sup> A search of the boot revealed R3.2 million in cash (around US\$470 000 at the time) and a bag containing traces of animal material. This was later linked through DNA analysis to the killing of two white rhinos in Kruger’s Stolsnek area. Two months later, two Kruger field guides, a ranger and a traffic officer were arrested in connection with the incident.<sup>122, 123</sup>

Nyalunga and Nkuna were granted bail, but the police were not yet done. On 27 February 2012 and again on 2 March 2012, members of the SAPS Organised Crime Unit in Mbombela conducted two operations targeting Nyalunga. An undercover operative first sold two rhino horns to Nyalunga for R346 000. Then, during a second ‘buy-bust’ operation, he received four more horns for R370 000. Once the deal was done, he was arrested.<sup>124</sup>

Nyalunga had allegedly sold the first set of horns to a Vietnamese buyer in Bedfordview, east of Johannesburg. Ngoc Cuong Pham and his wife Lan Anh Nguyen were arrested in May 2012 and 10 rhino horns were recovered at a property they rented, together with R4 million in cash and an elephant tusk. Pham was tried separately and sentenced to a fine of R1 million and five years’ imprisonment for possessing and dealing in rhino horn. He received another five years for racketeering, three of which were suspended.<sup>125</sup>

A search of one of Nyalunga’s residences in Mkhuhlu led to the discovery of metal coffers containing just over R5 million (around US\$735 000 at the time).<sup>126</sup> Nyalunga was unemployed and ‘had no legitimate income that could explain the huge amount of cash’, police said.<sup>127</sup> Further searches of properties owned and rented by Nyalunga in Mkhuhlu and elsewhere led police to more than 60 hunting knives and pangas, some still stained with blood. There were also night-sight equipment, sound suppressors for .375 and .458 hunting rifles, stolen laptops and television sets, and an electronic money counter.

A camera belonging to Nyalunga was also seized. Among its images were those of a terrified young man, handcuffed in a foetal position around a pole. In the background were a car battery, jumper cables and cans of beer. He has never been identified and police fear he may be dead.<sup>128, 129</sup>

### ‘Big Joe’ Nyalunga during a police raid on his house



The NPA obtained a preservation order for the money found in Nyalunga’s properties. The basis was its link to unlawful activities and/or use for the unlawful hunting of rhinos and illicit dealing in and smuggling of their horns and/or money laundering. They also seized the Range Rover and a Toyota Fortuner.<sup>130</sup>

In the wake of the raids, a dozen additional suspects were charged. Among them were six Mozambicans, Timothy Mcube (44 at the time), David Sigangwe (29),

Calisto Massada (26), Zeka Santos (31), Checo Cossa (37) and Sam Mashaba (23). Four South Africans, including Nkuna, were also charged in the case: Happy Zitha (37) from Calcutta, Tabang Shakwane (37) from Kaapmuiden and Elijah Ngubeni (39) from Kabokweni.<sup>131, 132</sup>

By 2021, as the case continued to grind its way slowly through court postponement after postponement, one of the Mozambican suspects had reportedly been deported and three had vanished, according to the NPA. The case has yet to be concluded.<sup>133</sup>

In 2018, Nyalunga was arrested yet again in a significant crackdown led by the Hawks wildlife crime unit, members of the SWAT-team-style police special task force, SANParks, the NPA, SARS and the Department of Environmental Affairs. Project Broadbill saw heavily armed police smash their way through Nyalunga’s driveway gate in an armoured police Nyala. He was taken into custody with crime boss Petros Mabuza, commonly known as ‘Mr Big’ or by his clan name Mshengu, four other ex-cops and Clyde Mnisi, who would later become a senior traditional leader (see separate boxes on Mabuza and Mnisi).<sup>134, 135</sup>

Nicknamed ‘Big Joe’ due to his enormous size, Nyalunga had been a serving police officer until he resigned abruptly under a cloud in 2009. He had become the subject of an investigation into a cross-

Heavily armed police raid 'Big Joe' Nyalunga's Hazyview home in this screengrab from video shot from a police helicopter



Photo: SAPS

border syndicate smuggling contraband cigarettes and stolen cars into Mozambique.<sup>136</sup>

In 2010, he was implicated in the kidnapping and murder of a neighbour, an Eskom employee named Willy Shipalane (36). There were whispers that the murder was related to a 'business deal that went south'. Police divers recovered Shipalane's body from Inyaka Dam on Ngwaritsane River, near Bushbuckridge, after Nyalunga was questioned and made several admissions. Shipalane had been beaten to death, his feet bound together with wire and weighted down with concrete blocks, before being dumped in the dam.<sup>137, 138, 139</sup>

Nyalunga and one of his alleged henchmen, Elvis Mulimi, were arrested at the time and charged.

The case was postponed numerous times until it eventually 'disappeared' from the court roll with all traces that it had ever been enrolled.<sup>140</sup>

A decade after the murder, in a dawn raid in July 2020, a police task team adopting a 'severe tactical response' unceremoniously smashed their way through Nyalunga's driveway gate in Hazyview for the second time in two years.<sup>141</sup> Nyalunga and Mulimi were arrested and charged with Shipalane's kidnapping and murder. Seven months later, another suspect, identified as Selby Nyalunga, accompanied by a lawyer, handed himself over to police.<sup>142</sup> Today Nyalunga is viewed by investigators as a spent force, out of money and, allegedly, with limited access to any weapons.

One of the properties belonging to Big Joe Nyalunga that was raided by police in Hazyview



Photo: Julian Rademeyer



But the area around Numbi gate has not been safe for decades and illustrates the broader problem of organised crime in Mpumalanga and the failure of reactive policing. The murder of a tourist or a visitor to the park was almost inevitable.

In July 2000, for example, 10 foreign tourists were hijacked in just three weeks.<sup>143</sup> The Mpumalanga head of safety and security then, Stanley Soko, expressed concern about a lack of arrests, saying that communities were afraid to cooperate with police because of rogue, corrupt cops in their ranks. 'We are trying hard to change officers' attitudes so people can give information to police freely without fear of being attacked or killed by criminals,' he said.<sup>144</sup>

In the 22 years since, little has changed. Eleven cases of vehicle hijacking and robbery targeting tourists were recorded in the Numbi area between January and September 2022, including an incident where a teenage girl was shot in the leg when two men opened fire on the car in which she was travelling with her family.<sup>145, 146</sup>

In December 2022, two months after Schnarr's murder, two private security guards patrolling the road near Numbi gate were shot and robbed of their firearms. Badly wounded, they narrowly escaped with their lives. This time, no government ministers descended on the scene.<sup>147</sup>

These are not isolated incidents of violent and organised crime. Across Mpumalanga, heists and ATM bombings, illegal mining, the pillaging of state infrastructure, car and truck hijackings, kidnappings, extortion and wildlife crime are embedded and enmeshed.

Cash-in-transit heists peaked in Mpumalanga between 2016 and 2018, then dropped from 23 incidents in 2017/18 to 16 in 2018/19, 15 in 2019/20, the year that COVID struck, and then went up to 17 in 2020/21.<sup>148</sup> It has witnessed some of the most violent cash-in-transit heists, with gangs routinely using explosives. It is a quick and an easy way to access the heavily armoured vaults that most cash vans now use, retired police general Bushie Engelbrecht says.

'It is also not coincidental that most of these explosives attacks are happening in Mpumalanga, Limpopo and Gauteng. These are mining areas. Mines use explosives and they have demolition men who know how to use them. This is where the gangs go for help with explosives.'<sup>149</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom or extortion has risen dramatically across the country since 2016 due to foreign syndicates shifting operations to South Africa and local copycat groups mimicking their modus operandi but targeting South Africans. However, these cases account for only around 5% of all kidnappings. The police define kidnapping as the 'unlawful and intentional deprivation of a person's freedom of movement or if such person is a child, the unlawful, intentional deprivation of a parent of control over the child'.<sup>150</sup>

In Mpumalanga, 234 kidnappings – including those involving ransom or extortion – were reported between April and June 2022, compared to 186 in the corresponding period in 2021. Between July and September 2022, 243 kidnappings were recorded, compared to 171 in 2021.<sup>151</sup> Victims include vulnerable members of townships and informal settlements, migrants, prominent businesspeople and their families – with ransoms calibrated accordingly.

In October 2022, Nkangala District municipal manager Margaret Skosana and her driver Gugu Mtsweni were kidnapped outside the entrance to the municipal offices. The abductors posed as police officers and said they were arresting them. Skosana's car and her wheelchair were found by police outside Middelburg. The pair was held for a week before being dumped next to the N14 highway in Diepsloot, Gauteng.

The reason for the kidnapping remains a mystery. In an interview, Skosana said it made little sense.

### **Kidnapped Nkangala District municipal manager Margaret Skosana**



*Photo: Nkangala District Municipality*

One of the kidnappers hinted that she had 'enemies', she said. 'I said, "I don't know of any enemies". He then said: "That's why you're here. You do have enemies".'<sup>152, 153, 154</sup>

Elsewhere in the province, illegal mining syndicates operate openly, often with the assistance of corrupt police officers. Data compiled by Pan African Resources at its Barberton Mines Complex, which includes Fairview, Sheba, New Consort and Agnes mines, show that 3 541 suspected zama zamas have been arrested at its operations since January 2020. Nearly 70% of those arrested by mine security are foreign nationals, predominantly from nearby Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Between August 2019 and October 2021, 514 illegal mining cases were opened at the Barberton police station. In September 2021, following the influx of zama zamas at Sheba, there were 115 arrests. Usually, foreign nationals granted bail disappear or are rearrested, often using newly acquired fraudulent identities.

Pan African Resources says there has been a 'significant' increase in 'violent and organised crime numbers' in and around Barberton in recent years linked to illegal mining syndicates, including murder, rape, robberies and ATM bombings. There are some indications, too, that gangs of illegal miners have links to rhino-poaching networks that provide them with protection and weapons for a fee.

In September 2022, security officers at a mine in the Barberton area came under rifle fire from suspected zama zamas. While not confirmed, there is speculation that the stolen rifles may have originated from poaching networks.<sup>155</sup> 'With poaching down in Kruger, rhinos being dehorned and the population growing smaller, it makes sense that poachers would need to explore other ways of earning an income,' a former policeman, now involved in the private security industry in Mpumalanga, told ENACT.

"Some of the main players in the poaching space are involved in illegal mining and other organised crime," another investigator said in an interview. "The funding generated by one crime is used to fund other crime."<sup>156</sup>

Illegal mining cases, however, result in high levels of repeat offenders as prosecution rates are very low and sentencing lenient. The criminal justice system is unable to cope with the volume of cases, prompting mining companies to implement their own security strategies, investigations and case management systems to track dockets through the criminal justice system.

Between June 2021 and June 2022, 445 cases were opened, 376 of which went to court. Of these, just 69 resulted in guilty convictions, while 76 were struck off the roll. In 83 cases, warrants of arrest were issued for suspects who failed to appear in court.

### **Police seize makeshift phendukas used by illegal miners to refine gold near Barberton along with detonation cords and explosives**



Photos: Supplied

## The lawless Lowveld

To understand how organised crime has flourished in Mpumalanga and around Kruger National Park, you need look only at its politics. Bordered by Mozambique and Eswatini, Mpumalanga in South Africa's northeast is one of the country's smallest provinces. Its name means 'the place where the sun rises'.

Nearly 70% of its land area is used for agriculture and it accounts for more than 80% of the country's coal production, most of it destined for use in power parastatal Eskom's dozen ageing coal-fired power plants dotting the province. It is rich in mineral wealth, with mines still producing ore 140 years after gold was first discovered there. And it has abundant and diverse fauna and flora, making it a primary tourist destination and a key gateway to Kruger National Park.<sup>157, 158</sup>

But it is also widely regarded as one of South Africa's most corrosively corrupt provinces. It is besieged by a seemingly unending litany of scandals, assassinations of high-level political figures and whistleblowers and rising numbers of kidnappings – most recently of the Nkangala District municipal manager. Illicit economies are diverse and evolving. In mineral and natural wealth, criminal networks have entrenched themselves, exploiting the void left by absent, ineffective and corrupt local and provincial governments and police.<sup>159, 160</sup>

Veteran Mpumalanga journalist Sizwe sama Yende describes a province crippled by a succession of corrupt actors and administrations. It is, he contends, 'blinded by the glitter of public resources it holds in its hands' and 'unable to resist the urge to become rapacious as if government was closing shop in one hour'.

'It is quite common to find an official who was fired or demoted for corruption a few years back now occupying a position at the apex of a department without any rehabilitation or punitive process having taken place,' he writes. In this newspaper columns, he dubs the bent bureaucrats and corrupt politicians the 'bulletproof crew'.<sup>161</sup>

Mpumalanga was established in 1994, cobbled together from the Eastern Transvaal, the apartheid-era black 'homeland' of KaNgwane and parts of the homelands of Lebowa and Gazankulu. These 'Bantustans', as they were otherwise known, were the creatures of apartheid policies aimed at fostering 'separate development' along racial and ethnic lines. They were the product of violent forced removals, cynically exploited once established as 'labour reservoirs and dumping grounds for the unemployed, the elderly and the unwanted'. As with six other newly created regional governments in South Africa in 1994, Mpumalanga absorbed homeland administrations into the new provincial bureaucracy.<sup>162</sup>

The absorption of apartheid-era administrations and bureaucracies, with ANC structures in the newly democratic

Mpumalanga is besieged by a seemingly unending litany of scandals, assassinations and kidnappings

country, extended to the police. Several political agreements prevented the radical transformation of the police force. The 'sunset clause' guaranteed apartheid public servants their jobs for five years following the 1994 elections. This included elements of apartheid's security branch enforcers, who would find themselves working together with former foes in the ANC's department of intelligence and security in new police intelligence structures.

Another agreement saw the absorption of subsidiary and informal policing structures such as the 'kitskonstabels' and the railway and municipal police. The 10 homeland police forces, comprising nearly 29 000 police, were also amalgamated. Many of the new police were poorly educated and had received little or no professional police training.<sup>163, 164, 165</sup>

'Certainly, the new national police service was far from homogenous,' write the Institute for Security Studies' Gareth Newham and Andrew Faull. 'Its members spoke different languages, wore different uniforms, carried different types of firearms, used different ranking systems and had received different levels of training. An estimated third of the 120 000 members were functionally illiterate, 30 000 did not have driver's licences and 20 000 had criminal records.

'The scale of the problem following the transition was evidenced by the fact that by 2000, as many as 14 600 members of the police service faced criminal charges ranging from murder, rape, armed robbery, assault, theft and bribery to reckless driving.'<sup>166</sup>

Apartheid's 'homelands' were notoriously corrupt. Lebowa's chief minister Nelson Ramodike, a former traffic policeman, ran a string of state-funded businesses through various brothers and cousins, lived lavishly and flaunted a personal fleet of three top-of-the-range Mercedes Benzes. A year before South Africa's first democratic elections, 200 justice department officials in Lebowa received 100% pay raises. Separately, in an evidently corrupt deal, Lebowa Tender Board, despite objections from three of its members, approved a tender for R15 million worth of cleaning chemicals, enough to supply the government for seven years.<sup>167</sup>

In KaNgwane, civil servants and politicians took advantage of two dubious official schemes that cost taxpayers R4.6-million to buy their official cars at bargain-basement prices. A Ford Laser, valued at around R18 000 at the time, was sold for a token 65 cents.<sup>168</sup>

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## From ill-fated beginnings, Mpumalanga would be 'characterised by graft among political notables'

From those ill-fated beginnings, Mpumalanga's administration would be 'characterised by extreme forms of graft among political notables', historian Tom Lodge wrote in the mid-1990s. He argued that 'it would be reasonable to expect the continuation of a certain amount of corruption' with the absorption of former homeland administrators into new provincial governments.<sup>169</sup>

One example is David Mkhwanazi, who had been a minister in the KaNgwane homeland. As the 'godfather-like' environmental affairs member of the executive committee (MEC) in the new Mpumalanga provincial administration, he

was dogged by scandal from the day he took office. He allowed an extraordinary R20-billion deal secretly ceding all commercial development rights to the province's flagship public reserves and tourist sites to a Dubai-based group. Millions of rand were diverted from Mpumalanga Parks Board through a network of front companies into the ANC's elections war chest, leading to the near destruction of the province's conservation and tourism infrastructure.<sup>170</sup>

In an interview in 1998, Mpumalanga's first premier, Mathews Phosa, rationalised the corruption during his tenure, saying it had been inherited from the apartheid government. 'We found the culture of corruption in this system, we found it there. When you talk about transforming the civil service, it is introducing new ethics in the environment. But it is not only government that has to be transformed; it's the whole society, the moral values of our society. Our society has been so brutalised and degraded, black and white ... we are all traumatised in our own different ways.

'I am not making excuses for the new corruption by the new people. There is a culture of corruption in the system, in society. It is there in the police force, in the civil service, in justice, it's there. It comes out of every pore of our society and we need to deal with that. The whole society must look at itself and say we need a new course.'<sup>171</sup>

The scandals that roiled the Mpumalanga government and its administration in the first years of democracy ensured that it could not chart a 'new course'. Coupled with the fractious politics of ANC branches, political patronage networks, a string of assassinations and mysterious disappearances and the 'glitter of public resources' to which politics gave access, it created a perfect storm in which organised crime could thrive.

Enter David 'DD' Mabuza, a charismatic and enormously influential figure in Mpumalanga who rose to South Africa's deputy presidentship. He has been described variously as a 'ruthless chameleon'<sup>172</sup> and 'a master political entrepreneur' who wrote the 'playbook of political chicanery'.<sup>173</sup> He calls himself 'The Cat'.<sup>174</sup>

In 2009, Mabuza became the premier of Mpumalanga. This was the pivotal year Jacob Zuma became South Africa's president, heralding a 'lost decade' of state capture by corrupt actors and the hollowing out and neutering of enforcement agencies and the prosecuting authority. It was a reward for his support of Zuma at the ANC's 2007 elective conference in Polokwane.<sup>175</sup>

Mabuza held on to the premiership for nearly a decade, consolidating power, growing the provincial ANC branches into a hugely significant power base and finally becoming 'kingmaker' at the ANC's 2017 elective conference. There he sided with Cyril Ramaphosa, ensuring his election as ANC president and, consequently, president of South Africa.<sup>176</sup>

Mabuza, a former school teacher and principal in KaNgwane, was Mpumalanga's first provincial MEC for education, recruited by Phosa. In 1998, Phosa sacked him after he cooked the books on Mpumalanga's matric pass rate, falsely claiming it had soared from 51% to an astonishing 71%. Ndaweni Mahlangu, who replaced Phosa as premier, brought Mabuza back into the provincial cabinet as housing MEC, memorably saying: 'It is acceptable for politicians to lie. It is nothing new.'<sup>177, 178</sup>

Controversy followed Mabuza as he rose to provincial premiership. There were tales of reporters in the province being paid off to write savage takedowns of his opponents. There were whispers about the sources of his money and widespread allegations of him handing out wads of cash to supporters and acolytes during audiences at his farm near Barberton.<sup>179</sup>

Mabuza promoted the construction of large boarding schools in rural areas, with costs rapidly ballooning from around US\$11-million to US\$30-million. Funds were allegedly diverted to bolster Mabuza's ANC recruitment drive in the province, providing jobs, cash, even lunch to entice people to sign up.

'There is a culture of corruption in the system, in society ... It comes out of every pore of our society and we need to deal with that'

This 'illegally inflated the party's membership rolls by paying people's annual dues with government money'. ANC membership rocketed 190%, outstripping the national increase of less than 60% and ensuring the province became a political powerhouse.<sup>180</sup>

Another scandal swirling around Mabuza – dating back to 2002 – involves a scheme to defraud land reform programmes. Mabuza, who had served as MEC of land affairs, environment and agriculture, is accused, with a dozen others, of obtaining beneficial control of vast tracts of land under land claim, sometimes fraudulently. He allegedly then sold it to the Land Claims Commission at massively inflated prices.<sup>181</sup> He is also implicated in a scheme that 'exploited the province's biodiversity by monetising the killing of so-called problem animals'. In December 2022, the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA) lodged a criminal complaint with the NPA's new Investigating Directorate.<sup>182</sup>

Mabuza has rebutted allegations of corruption levelled against him, arguing that he is the subject of 'baseless exaggerations and claims that have been peddled by those who have sought to tarnish my name'. In a letter to The New York Times in 2018, he wrote: 'I abhor corruption. Any fiction to the contrary or "fake news" is laughable.'<sup>183</sup>

For more than a decade, Mabuza has been dogged by allegations linking him to several high-profile political killings in the province, claims he has vigorously denied.<sup>184</sup> In July 2022, he pushed ahead with a defamation suit against a former ANC member, Pompie Letwaba, who stated publicly that during Mabuza's tenure 'people began perishing one by one'. According to Mabuza's lawyers, Letwaba claimed that Mabuza was responsible for killing whistleblowers, knew the 'masterminds' of murders and that, during his time as premier, 27 people were assassinated and 'evaporated into thin air'.

In 2010, the Sunday Times published an investigation into Mpumalanga's 'hit squad' and the murders of a dozen senior politicians and bureaucrats since 1998. They included Jimmy Mohlala, the Mbombela municipal speaker murdered in January 2009 after questioning contracts related to the Mbombela FIFA World Cup soccer stadium. There was also Sammy Mpatlanyane, the communications director in the provincial department of arts, culture and sport, who was gunned down at his home in Mbombela. This was ostensibly because a senior 'ANC boss' and his political allies saw him as an obstacle to lucrative World Cup tenders.<sup>185</sup>

## The Kruger's struggle mirrors South Africa's struggle against organised crime

In October 2010, James Nkambule, the whistleblower who had revealed information about the links between senior political figures and assassinations in the province, died in mysterious circumstances. A post-mortem report found a 'white foamy material' in Nkambule's throat and windpipe and brownish fluid in his stomach 'suggestive of poison ingestion'. 'There is no smoke without fire,' Mpumalanga's chief medical officer Dr Gantcho Gantchev told the paper.<sup>186</sup> Poisoning is a relatively common method of murder in Mpumalanga. Mabuza himself has claimed to have been poisoned, prompting long sojourns to medical facilities in Russia.<sup>187, 188</sup>

Political murders, rarely solved, continue to this day. On 4 November 2022, Gert Sibande ANC branch deputy chairman Muzi Manyathi was shot several times after stopping at a petrol station in Mkhondo, formerly Piet Retief.<sup>189, 190</sup> The murder came just days after Manyathi spoke publicly about an incident in which he was threatened by a gunman. '...[W]e don't know if we will come back alive because there are always gunshots fired ... [T]here is no peace in our communities,' Manyathi said.<sup>191</sup>

## Conclusion and recommendations

Kruger National Park's struggle mirrors South Africa's struggle against organised crime over the past decade. Criminal networks today pose an existential threat to the country's citizenry, democracy, political integrity and economic growth. The Kruger exists in a landscape where organised crime has metastasised and become deeply embedded. The criminal networks, particularly those operating in Mpumalanga, which encompasses the park's southern half, are diverse, highly connected and violent. Decades of corruption,

## A truck burns after violent protests, allegedly fomented by community leaders with known links to illegal mining syndicates, erupted outside Barberton mines



Photo: Supplied

political instability and political murders have shaped the province, creating a fertile environment for organised crime, illicit economies and criminal governance in towns and villages.

Kruger's challenge is immense. Turning it around will require addressing corruption in the park and mending deeply fractured relations between staff and management. With operational budgets slashed by 70% during the COVID pandemic and recovery likely to take as long as five years, the resources needed are severely limited.

Any efforts to counter corruption within Kruger need to be coupled with carefully targeted efforts address broader criminal ecosystems in Mpumalanga. That will require far greater resources and external support than the Hawks in the province currently have, coupled with a clear assessment of the province's criminal ecosystem and actors, the interactions between disparate criminal markets and an evaluation of the harms associated with them that could guide the prioritisation of interventions.

- To be effective, short-term, reactive policing tactics must be replaced with a long-term strategy to counter and disrupt key criminal networks.
- Targeted assessments, intelligence-gathering and investigations can identify high-level criminal actors and networks in markets causing the greatest harm. Coupled with a prosecutor-driven organised crime combatting strategy and judicious prosecutions of principal actors, this could gradually widen investigations, arrests and prosecutions.
- Critical financial investigation and intelligence gathering skills need to be bolstered significantly. This is particularly so in SAPS, where they are noticeably absent, but also more strategically in the local Hawks unit, which has shown an ability to make inroads into organised crime.
- Far greater steps must be taken to ensure the safety of Hawks investigators and prosecutors involved in high-risk organised crime cases in the province.

Within the Kruger, steps are already being taken to root out corrupt elements and the recent board approval for an integrity management policy is a major step forward. The task is enormous and will require:

- A clear long-term commitment from political leadership and from SANParks and its board to address park corruption transparently and ensure that it is done fairly and with consequences that are enacted swiftly and consistently.
- Effective implementation of a transparent and fair integrity management policy, with background and criminal record checks, polygraphing and, where necessary, lifestyle audits and investigations for all staff, resulting in swift and consistent consequences when necessary.
- Re-establishing professionalism, motivation and trust by embedding shared core values, like discipline and integrity, at both leadership level and among staff, and building these into all selection, assessment, management, skills development and leadership systems.
- Ensuring that staff have greater support, starting with understanding how rangers are being approached and protecting them from approaches, as well as focusing on overall mental, physical and social wellness, including improving general employee, for example, training in financial management.
- Improving transparency and internal communications at all levels within Kruger National including the creation of safe spaces and guided dialogues in which concerns and grievances can be raised and addressed
- Public-private partnerships with banks, auditing firms and the Hawks that will expand limited resources to investigate financial flows between poaching networks and park staff.
- Strategic and targeted investigations with support of outside agencies or the private sector, given the scale of corruption in the park and the limited resources of SANParks' internal investigations unit.
- Prosecutions of high-level actors and possible amnesties for low-level offenders who cooperate with investigators.
- The creation of an independent whistleblowing mechanism, with all necessary protections and rewards, through which corruption can be reported, evaluated and investigated.



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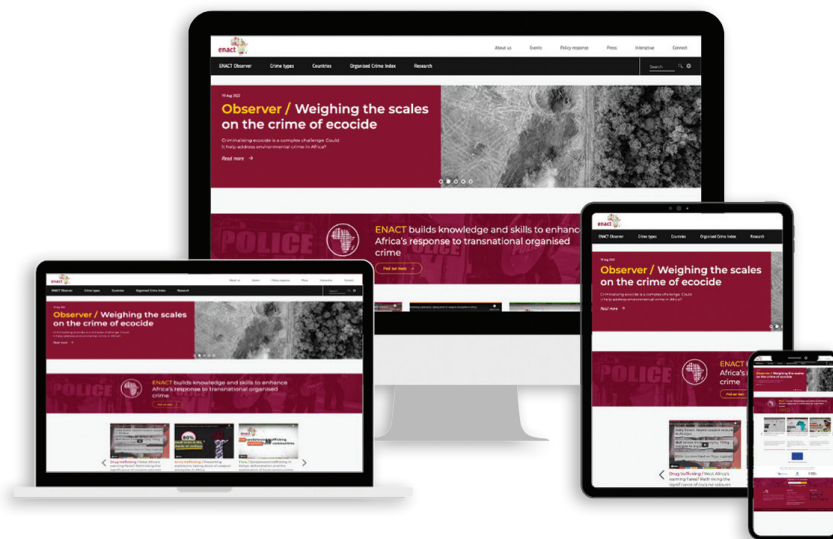
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