

What is one datum worth?

Forgive me if my words become emotional, absolve me of the sin of sentimentality, for I come from sitting by a rhino with her face cut off.

I visited the Limpopo Province of South Africa in October 2013 as a volunteer with Siyafunda Wildlife and Conservation (a nonprofit, conservation volunteering organization) monitoring animal populations on the Makalali Game Reserve. I delighted in the opportunity to gather a few bits of data that might help preserve Africa's wildlife, or that as entries in some database might one day help answer questions no one had yet thought to ask. Spotting two leopards in a tree soon after I arrived helped dispel the fear that had haunted me during my flight: that my children's children might never see what I knew awaited me. That fear, however, would return, and I would experience the bitter contrast between some of the happiest and one of the most despondent days of my life.

Contrast, I soon learned, is always present in South Africa. On some days I shivered in my polar fleece, while on others I baked at 40°C. I witnessed innumerable small acts of everyday kindness, yet heard firsthand accounts of the most appalling violence. I was ashamed for my gender on hearing of the epidemic of sex crime affecting young African women, yet wanted to shout my admiration for the myriad orphaned teenage boys who sacrifice their schooling to feed their younger sisters and brothers. Not least, as Nelson Mandela lay sick, I heard a nation pray for his deliverance, while questioning whether corruption was not squandering his legacy.

Makalali, too, breathed contrast. Once cattle range, its present owners had returned it to the wild. Lions again hunt eland in the bush where, for a while, cows ruminated; zebra run across earth where tomatoes once grew. The rangers who guided us contrasted too: Andrews "Toko" Mtshali, a Zulu who I almost believed could track a bird through the air; Andrew Forsyth, of Scottish descent, who laughed off being charged by elephants and lions; and Jamie Paterson, a young woman with a ballet dancer's build, yet as resilient as spider silk, from which, I thought, she must be made. The contrasts, however, stopped there: they all detested poachers.

By the time of my visit, South Africa had lost well over 2000 rhinos in the poaching plague that has afflicted the country since 2008. Nearly 800 had been slaughtered in the first 10 months of 2013 alone, a rate of over

two animals per day, growing toward 25 per week. Kruger National Park had lost almost 500. Armed poachers, I learned, commonly cross the border from neighboring Mozambique, slipping back to ship their keratin booty to Southeast Asia, where it is used to spike the cocktails of Vietnam's nouveau riche and touted as a cure for everything from fever to cancer. Having recognized the risk to its tourism industry and perceiving the situation as a national security issue, South Africa is fighting back: the South African Defence Force now patrols Kruger's borders, drones are beginning to cruise its airspace, and real bullets are being fired. But the task is huge, and with rhino horn fetching more than its weight in gold, the rewards for poachers still far outweigh the risks.

When the news came of Makalali's first-ever rhino killing, the mood was somber. Despite being dehorned for her protection, they still took her life, murdering her for a meager stump. I watched her lifeless, faceless body become food for lions and for a white butterfly that sipped at the liquids draining from her into the sand. No field data were ever so difficult to record.

Rain fell hard the next day, and I uncharacteristically sank into a dark place, persuaded that the ongoing mass extinction driven by our avarice and stupidity was unstoppable. Then we would vanish too, in dishonor; perhaps for the best. Contrast, however, decided to rerun my analysis. In this successfully recovered wilderness, where leopards *are* walking, baboons *are* barking, and cheetahs, hyenas, and jackals *are* raising their young, I watched Jamie put her entire 99 pounds time and again into stripping a tire from a wheel rim, preparing our vehicle for a night-time anti-poaching patrol. The future, read the result, correlates with our commitment to protect it; $r = 1$.

Boarding my plane home I realized my impressions of South Africa had probably been based upon too small a sample to be valid, but I took my seat knowing that the figures I had collected on kudus, lions, and nyalas would have value as part of someone else's means and standard deviations. I also understood just how important one datum could be. I am not going to forget they killed *that* rhino. This war just got personal.



Killed for a tiny stump of horn.

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