

# 'Rhino poaching is out of control!' Violence, race and the politics of hysteria in online conservation

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**Bram Büscher**

Wageningen University, The Netherlands; University of Johannesburg, South Africa; Stellenbosch University, South Africa

**Abstract**

The rhino-poaching crisis in South Africa, according to many concerned citizens, conservation organisations and governments, is 'out of control'. With over 1000 rhinos poached in each of 2013, 2014 and 2015, the crisis has triggered a massive response, much of which heavily depends on online tools to raise funds and awareness. The paper analyses emotive discourses and imaginaries as part of dominant online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis and found that these are predominantly espoused by whites and show a worrying penchant towards (extreme) violence. Building on a theorisation of the links between race, nature, affect and control, the paper hypothesises that these responses reflect a 'politics of hysteria'. This politics captures the employment of affective and emotive expressions as a way to demand control over a situation 'out of control' in the context of historical and contemporary South African political economies of racial inequality. And as these expressions often tend towards exaggerated or extreme violence, they become potent forms of political mobilisation and intervention. New media are a crucial ingredient of this potency, and the paper concludes that this opens up important new questions about the relations between race, nature and violence.

**Keywords**

Rhino poaching, conservation, hysteria, South Africa, violence, politics

**Introduction**

*Rhino poaching is beyond a crisis now; it is simply out of control*

– Dr William Fowlds, wildlife veterinarian<sup>1</sup>

*Rhino Death Toll Continues To Spiral Out Of Control*

– [www.environment.co.za](http://www.environment.co.za)<sup>2</sup>

Rhino poaching has been steadily on the rise in South Africa since 2007 due to the massive increase in the value and illegal trade of rhino horn. The result is a major 'poaching war'

**Corresponding author:**

Bram Büscher, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

Email: [bram.buscher@wur.nl](mailto:bram.buscher@wur.nl)

between poachers and conservation agencies around various parks and reserves (Duffy, 2014), as well as a rapidly changing politics of conservation based on highly emotive discourses and imageries. Yet when in January 2014 it was officially confirmed by the South African Department of Environmental Affairs that 1004 rhinos had been killed the year before<sup>3</sup> a certain threshold seemed to have been surpassed. The outcry on social media and the amount of voices, like the quotes above, saying that rhino poaching was ‘out of control’, reached epic proportions. As a consequence, rhino poaching has become the preeminent conservation issue in South Africa and one of the main conservation issues worldwide.

Since the beginning of the poaching crisis in 2008, a massive response by governments, (private) rhino owners, the conservation sector and the general public has erupted, in South Africa and globally. This response has been exceptionally diverse and creative – accompanied by heated discussions about the best solutions for the crisis<sup>4</sup> – though often ultimately focused on fundraising for (military) counter-poaching initiatives or information and awareness campaigns. The far majority of these heavily depend on online communication, social media and web 2.0 tools; indeed, one could say that the rhino is increasingly ‘saved’ online as much as offline.

Based on a three-year research project investigating the effects of new media on conservation,<sup>5</sup> this paper analyses dominant online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis and hypothesises that these might reflect a ‘politics of hysteria’. This politics, to be sure, has nothing to do with historical, gender-biased ideas about hysteria (Scull, 2009). It is here defined as a situation in which emotions run so high that it leads to exaggerated, extreme or uncontrolled behaviour.<sup>6</sup> What exactly constitutes exaggerated, extreme or ‘uncontrolled’ is a difficult question and I will not venture to conceptualise these terms on the individual level. This paper focuses on how those involved in my research and online anti-rhino poaching activists more generally respond to this ‘out-of-control’ situation and how it relates to dominant online and offline actions, discourses and imageries. Given the massive volume of online commentary and activities, this is necessarily a partial exercise. Moreover, given the high emotions triggered by the poaching crisis and their intricate links to broader racial, political and social dynamics in South Africa and globally, formulating generalisations about these emotions runs the risk of making individuals feel unfairly categorised or stereotyped, which could lead to (personalised) online reprisals – something that, as we shall see, occurs regularly.

Yet, and following Kepe (2009), the topic and what it reveals about the contemporary social and political situation in South Africa and globally is too important not to try and understand its broader implications. As will be elaborated below, these implications concern the relations between race, nature and various forms of violence in defence of rhinos, including material violence such as the ‘green militarization’ of parks (Lunstrum, 2014), and myriad social and discursive forms of violence that often lead to exaggerated, extreme or uncontrolled online behaviour (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016). This, however, does not mean that violence was the only dominant emotional expression online as many others, including care, heroism or concern, often accompanied those same violent expressions. Vilification or violence and heroisation or care go together: because those slaughtering rhinos are often considered ‘evil’, those going out to protect rhinos are easily rendered ‘heroes’ who deserve care and support. I will argue that it is the combination of online expressions of (extreme) violence together with a host of other, often opposing, affective responses that together might be theorised under the label ‘politics of hysteria’.

The key to understanding this politics lies in paying attention to the employment of affective and emotive expressions as a way to demand control over a situation ‘out of control’, but doing so explicitly within historical and contemporary South African

political economies of racial inequality. As these expressions often tend towards exaggerated or extreme violence, I argue that they become potent forms of political mobilisation and intervention. New media are a crucial ingredient of this potency and in the conclusion of the paper I will outline the implications of how new media open new (political) possibilities and questions about the relations between race, nature and violence. First, however, I posit some further theoretical, conceptual and historical considerations crucial to understanding current dynamics in ‘saving the rhino online’.

### **Race, nature, affect, control**

In this section, I will argue that the dramatic online (and offline) responses to the rhino-poaching crisis should be understood within historical and current (South African) political–economic contexts that emphasise the connections between race, nature, affect and control. The central element of this context relates to the interconnectedness between histories of (white) belonging through the environment and (black) dispossession through conservation. As Brockington (2002), Brooks (2005), Carruthers (1995), Igoe (2004), Neumann (1998) and others have convincingly shown, European, white imaginaries about ‘pristine’ African wilderness were directly responsible for the forced removal of many African communities from their land, in order to create ‘fortress conservation’ spaces. Brooks (2005: 236) even refers to ‘a brutal geography of forced removal’ when describing the history of the famous Hluhluwe game reserve that played a pivotal role in the conservation of the white rhino. Conservation more generally, we can argue with Moore (2005: 13), was a central strategy for whites to ‘ground’ ‘racialized rule in spatial practices’.

But not only did white colonials dispossess Africans in order to create wilderness spaces: ‘by writing themselves so single-mindedly into the landscape, many whites wrote themselves out of the society’ (Hughes, 2010: 25). David Hughes, in his book *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, forcefully argues that white belonging in Africa through the environment was tied both to their *exclusion* from black societies and their *control* of land and people. Building on the work of Dyer, he argues more generally that many whites explicitly value “‘the control of self and the control of others’”, including territory’ (Hughes, 2010: 137).<sup>7</sup> This renders what he calls ‘post-mastery whiteness’ a difficult and complex positionality. Giving up state control, as has happened in all parts of Africa, but very late in Zimbabwe and South Africa, was (and still is) not easy, clear-cut or one-dimensional, and in many areas whites have tried to hold on to privilege and power, especially economically (Steyn, 2001) but also through (senses of) entitlements to nature, land and territory.

But these issues are not and were never just about (political–economic) control. As Lorimer and Whatmore (2009: 684) show, they also need to be understood within historical connections between humans, land and animals that were deeply affective and embodied. A focus on the latter dimensions, Lorimer and Whatmore argue, helps to foreground the connections between ‘passion, care and violence’ that co-constituted these same historical relations and continue to do so in the present (see Cousins et al., 2009). As we shall see below, the rhino-poaching crisis foregrounds these same connections but in order to understand their importance and political stakes – and more generally the relations between race, nature, affect and control – we need to attend closely to how they ‘become articulated together’ in the current political moment in South Africa (Moore et al., 2003: 3).

Important in this respect is that while whites may have lost control over the state, they have retained much de facto control over conservation spaces (Humphreys and Smith, 2014: 796). This concerns not only private ‘wilderness estates’ that have seen rapid growth in numbers over the last decade (Brooks et al., 2011) but also public protected areas now

administered by the black post-apartheid government (Butler and Richardson, 2015; Maguranyanga, 2009). Related and importantly, ‘for many whites the management and conservation of wildlife, with its closely linked tourism industry, forms an iconic article of self-definition’ (Humpreys and Smith, 2014: 796). Affective and embodied experiences in relation to conservation and wildlife form a crucial part of this self-definition (Cousins et al., 2009), something that can for instance be seen through the importance that many South African whites attach to (regular) embodied presence in the Kruger National Park.

This, to be sure, is not new. As David Bunn aptly describes in his study on waterhole photography in the Kruger National Park, affective experiences of ‘African wilderness’ were crucial for many whites to make sense of larger political–economic and social changes in the early 20th century. Bunn’s words are worth quoting in full:

Kruger is a typically modernist form of symbolically enclaved space that tries to separate the destructive force of early twentieth-century industrialisation, mechanisation, and shocking new experiences of time, from the realm of value. European and American modernists saw the need for special forms of leisure experience that would counter the experience of ‘technologically multiplied shock’ (Benjamin’s phrase) characteristic of post-First World War society. There was a broad perception amongst white opinion-formers in South Africa that senses had been maimed by the war, and that the industrial work regimes of mining and manufacture were having widespread negative effects. The effect of this new experience of time, according to philosophers like Benjamin, was to produce a ‘defensive numbing of the sensorium’ in which the subject created a protective anaesthetising screen. Wilderness experience would simply restore the deadened, instinctual power of the sense, and the beautiful, mirroring semblance of the waterhole photo was designed to achieve just that sort of sympathetic reawakening. (Bunn, 2003: 207–208)

Kruger National Park, in other words, was not only an important part of the political economy of early apartheid South Africa, but also of the affective, embodied ‘sensorium’ of many whites in this period. The fact that Kruger was a ‘fortress conservation’ area was highly convenient in this regard, as it presented a perfect separation between a controlled space where everything seemed ‘natural’ and under control and the chaotic world outside where so much seemed ‘out of control’ (Bunn, 2003). To a certain degree, this sentiment has persisted, even after the demise of Apartheid. The Kruger Park for many South African whites resembles not merely a protected area with beautiful animals, but a social space where their affective belonging to the continent can be expressed more fully. According to one informant, many whites think they still ‘own the park’, and long back to the old days when they did not have to share the park with blacks and foreigners.<sup>8</sup>

With the rhino-poaching crisis, this ‘out of control’ outside world has wrested itself onto conservation spaces, and especially the Kruger, to a degree that has thoroughly shaken up the conservation world and broader (especially white) publics. It is here, then, that the elements of nature race, affect and control need to be (more) explicitly connected to broader political economic geographies of power in South Africa. Whites still occupy a dominant position in the South African economy (Steyn and Foster, 2008; Seekings, 2008) and they, as well as foreign whites, are by far the majority of visitors to South Africa’s national parks (Kepe, 2009).<sup>9</sup> And since these parks have been thoroughly neoliberalised (Dressler and Büscher, 2008), they depend on tourist income and thus must appease, at least to some degree, their (white) clientele.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the tourism industry is overwhelmingly in white hands and hence it is white (south African) tourism capital that habitually employs the typical wilderness imageries that aim to attract white European or American tourists (Rogerson, 2004). These confluent dynamics have ensured that

conservation spaces, and especially the Kruger National Park as one of the prime symbols of ‘African wilderness’, become even more important in relation to conjoined white capitalist interests and white feelings of affect and control (even if, or especially because, the racial imbalance seems to be slowly changing).

An ‘attack’ on the Kruger such as through rhino poaching, therefore, comes close to an attack on white affect *and* white capital, which together could be a potent source to legitimate violent counter strategies (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016; Duffy, 2014; Humpreys and Smith, 2014; Lunstrum, 2016). One of these has been a wholesale ‘green militarisation’ of the Kruger that has led to hundreds of suspected poachers’ and rangers’ deaths (Lunstrum, 2014). To be sure, violence in the name of conservation is not new, and neither is the legitimisation of this violence in name of the ‘higher’ cause of conservation (Neumann, 2004: 818). Yet, the poaching crisis seems to have unleashed deeper emotions about (the fear of losing) control over crucial conservation spaces and what they represent to many whites in South Africa and beyond, and new media helps people to express these emotions.

What is new, then, amongst others, is the scale and intensity of public outpouring in relation to the rhino-poaching crisis and the way new online media facilitate this. Many people concerned with or enraged about the poaching crisis express their feelings and opinions online and so air their emotions. Yet, expressing emotions in online spaces through these new technologies influences them in peculiar ways, something that only recently started being addressed in scholarly writing (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, 2012).<sup>11</sup> Crucially, whereas Steyn and Foster (2008) found that ‘white talk’ enables whites to express deeper emotions and opinions in a subdued, implicit manner, the Internet seems to have become a space where many of these inhibitions often do not apply (Kuntsman, 2012). To the contrary, social media spaces appear to encourage more extreme or exaggerated behaviour, which seem further exacerbated with issues like the rhino-poaching crisis that many believe are ‘out of control’. In the concluding discussion, I will tease out the implications of these developments, but first we turn to the empirical dynamics.

## **Saving the rhino online**

The rhino-poaching crisis, as mentioned, has become one of the main conservation issues worldwide and hence most major conservation organisations have prominent online rhino spaces. Rhinos are one of WWFs ‘critical species’ and the ‘poaching crisis in Africa’ is a prominent feature on their rhino page.<sup>12</sup> The African Wildlife Foundation has a dedicated rhino page using various celebrities, amongst others, to inform people about the poaching crisis.<sup>13</sup> Some other organisations are dedicated wholly to the rhino, like Save the Rhino, and it is no surprise that their websites focus heavily on the poaching crisis.<sup>14</sup>

All these, and many other websites, give general information about the rhino poaching crisis, centred around the main reason for the crisis, namely ‘the increasing demand and very high prices being paid for rhino horn, which fuels escalating poaching’ (Duffy et al., 2013: 5). They show, inter alia: how this demand comes mainly from China and Vietnam’s emerging middle and upper classes, fuelled by a widespread believe that rhino horn has medicinal properties and can enhance status, luck, wealth and so forth (Milliken and Shaw, 2012); how the high price of rhino horn has led to ever more sophisticated poaching methods, including the use of helicopters, and the involvement of well-organised international crime syndicates (Rademeyer, 2012); and how the crisis is centred on South Africa as the home to over 80% of the global rhino population. Also found on many websites is the dire warning that if poaching numbers continue to increase, the rhino will soon be extinct in the wild.



These websites, however, are the ‘old-fashioned’ way in which the web is used to inform people about the poaching crisis and solutions for saving the rhino. They are the so-called web 1.0 focused on providing information and, although still important, have increasingly given way to ‘web 2.0’: interactive online technologies and platforms that depend on *co-creation* or *prosumption* (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). Online co-creation or prosumption means that information is not simply consumed, but actively (co-)created, shared, liked or otherwise modified by users, for example through social media like Facebook and Twitter. Given that the current poaching crisis started in earnest in 2008, new media became an important tool to reach audiences and for concerned citizens to ‘take action’.

As the most dominant social media, Twitter and Facebook have been especially important in communicating the rhino-poaching crisis. For example, in September 2013, a ‘rhino twitter storm’ was launched through the hashtag #iam4rhinos.<sup>15</sup> Organised by WWF South Africa, the goal was to get one million tweets using the Hashtag before World Rhino Day on 22 September 2013 and so raise awareness of the poaching crisis.<sup>16</sup> More generally, being active on Twitter or Facebook and to post or ‘#tweet4rhinos’ seems an accepted way to do something for rhinos, as suggested by South African wildlife veterinarian Will Fowlds (Figure 1).

Precisely what tweets or posts should be directed towards, and how they impact rhinos in practice often remains unclear – a problem that also concerned the ‘twitter storm’ initiators.<sup>17</sup> Yet this is not to say that they cannot or do not have (political, social, environmental) impacts. Lovink’s (2011: 2) argument that ‘online discussion tends to take place within “echo chambers” where groups of like-minded individuals, consciously or not, avoid debate with their cultural or political adversaries’, is true in some respects, but not always. A case in point is the many rhino Facebook groups that have sprung up over the



**Figure 1.** Will Fowlds’ message. Source: <https://twitter.com/ElleRhinoMarch/status/542769277578010625/photo/1>.

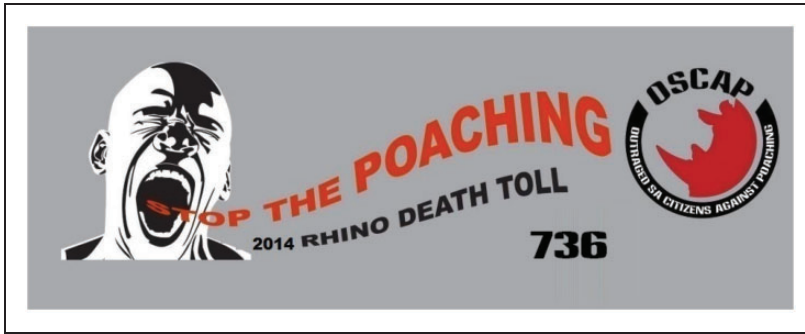
last years. During my research, I became a member of the biggest and most vocal of these and when following discussions, it is clear that many members share certain passions and beliefs or react to certain posts quite similarly. But this does not mean there are no contestations or that these groups are mere ‘echo chambers’.

One group in particular, the Outraged South African Citizens Against Poaching or ‘OSCAP’ Facebook group, has rapidly grown into an active political force in the South African and even international conservation landscape. It has over 17,500 group members, developed into a full-fledged, registered nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and has a satellite organisation in the UK.<sup>18</sup> In 2014, it organised an international conference on ‘risk assessment of rhino horn trade’ and so became the leading organisation behind the – until then rather subdued – anti-trade camp in the South African rhino horn trade debate.<sup>19</sup> Its (leading) members write letters to politicians, do street demonstrations and visit bail hearings of suspected rhino poachers to protest their (potential) release on bail. According to the organisation’s facilitator in an interview, it is important to do things ‘on the ground’, next to raising awareness on social media, otherwise you end up as a ‘yapping dog, which doesn’t really help’.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it is clear that the Facebook group page remains the core of the organisation, and also what gives it legitimacy.<sup>21</sup>

Several other Facebook groups have also been able to organise people around the rhino-poaching crisis, while there are many hundreds of individual Facebook pages dedicated to the cause. Besides Twitter and Facebook, other platforms are also being used to rally support for anti-poaching measures, such as blogs, Youtube channels, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest and many more. The blog <http://fightforrhinos.com/>, like OSCAP, turned into a registered NGO in the USA, and partnered with another volunteer organisation from the UK, Helping Rhinos, in order to ‘to save rhinos from extinction by creating awareness and providing support for rhino conservation projects’.<sup>22</sup> Yet another interactive platform employed to raise awareness and funds for rhino conservation is online gaming, such as the WWF South Africa sponsored ‘Rhino Raid’ game. Popular games, such as RuneScape, ‘have added virtual rhino sidekicks to their medieval playing field’ in order to ‘raise awareness about the threats facing these iconic animals’ and so help gamers ‘game for good’.<sup>23</sup>

One could go on like this but the point is that many online tools are being used to ‘save the rhino’. When studying the breadth of online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis, the term ‘hysteria’ quickly appears as a potential banner to describe many online discourses and imageries. This relates, initially, to the first part of the above definition as ‘a situation where emotions run high’, of which an OSCAP Facebook group banner in Figure 2 provides but one illustrative example.

More generally, rhino-poaching discussions on Facebook groups, Twitter and other online platforms are often highly emotional.<sup>24</sup> When Facebook groups such as OSCAP or Save Our Rhino update their poaching statistics, many of their members react with outrage, grief and sadness, often supported by emoticons to express their feelings. Dr William Fowlds, who I quoted earlier in this article, became famous for showing his emotions on video after two rhinos were poached on the Kariega Game Reserve in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province. One survived but the other one did not and the video that was shot of Dr Fowlds crying over the deceased rhino went viral, subsequently inspiring others to take up the cause.<sup>25</sup> Organisations responsible for protecting rhino, like South African National Parks (SANParks), have also realised how emotional the rhino issue can be on social media. In an interview, several SANParks social media staff mentioned that conservation supporters have put increasing pressure on them to communicate information on and solutions for the crisis through social media. They stated that because of the emotions involved, people get suspicious if the organisation does not respond the same day, or



**Figure 2.** Online banner of the OSCAP Facebook group. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OSCAP/>.

sometimes within two hours, leading them to start rumours that can be uncomfortable for the organisation.<sup>26</sup>

All this is not surprising: animal welfare issues have long been known to lead to situations where emotions run high. The more interesting questions in relation to hysteria is how and why these heated emotions lead to forms of ‘exaggerated, extreme or uncontrolled behaviour’ and how they relate to the above-discussed issues of race, nature, affect and control. Before I formulate answers to these questions, it is important to explain the methodological ground that underpinned my research. After all, for online research, two major methodological challenges loom large, namely how to choose which spaces to study given the (above illustrated) massive volume of potential online spaces and commentaries, and how to ascertain race in online spheres when the use of avatars and pseudonyms is widespread. Regarding the first problem, I restricted myself to key online spaces that were dominant in relation to the rhino-poaching crisis. These were the three most populous rhino Facebook groups, and several online spaces managed by SANParks, the organisation ultimately responsible for curbing rhino poaching in South Africa. I observed these spaces for nearly three years, making notes, printscreens, doing short online interviews and analysing debates. As such, my study came close to a ‘netnographic’ account, an ‘ethnography of the virtual world’ (Boelstorff et al., 2012; Kozinets, 2010) though I did not systematically ‘trace and interpret the complex currents of everyday life’ of virtual communities (Boelstorff et al., 2012: 3). Instead I focused on connecting online observations and interviews with offline observations and interviews, using the latter to confirm or challenge my findings from the former.

I did over 75 (offline) interviews with key individuals involved in social media and conservation generally and with rhino poaching and South African conservation specifically, and these helped me to overcome the second challenge. One thing I noticed immediately from observations was a highly skewed racial imbalance in the said online spaces. I tried to verify this by checking all individual profiles in the various Facebook groups and sites I was following but this did not take away the problem of avatars and pseudonyms. I therefore did (offline) interviews with key facilitators of those same online spaces and without exception they confirmed that the far majority of their members were white, with estimates ranging from 80 to 90%. One facilitator even mentioned that the latter number was a conservative estimate while another facilitator maintained that there were no non-whites present in the online space she moderated (which she regarded as highly problematic).<sup>27</sup> This is perhaps not surprising since the racial profile of visitors to the





**Figure 3.** Rocking for rhinos conservation heroes. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/RockingForRhinos/photos/pb.200734650039682.-2207520000.1419787096./539385319507945/?type=3&theater> (accessed 28 December 2014).

Kruger National Park, where most rhino poaching takes place, also remains highly skewed in favour of whites.<sup>28</sup> But it does matter, especially in relation to the finding that dominant online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis often become (extremely) violent.<sup>29</sup>

In the next two sections, I will analyse two aspects of the ‘affective universe’ of online expressions in response to rhino poaching: the dominant presence of discourses and images of violence and rage and the simultaneous presence of discourses of heroism, care and concern. This might seem to come close to classic ‘good versus evil’ stories that are often employed in the defence of rhinos.<sup>30</sup> Of course, this is a dramatic oversimplification of very complex and contradictory realities, but the point here is not just to show the dangers of this oversimplification but that the two sides are not separate in practice. To the contrary: it is the combination of the two ‘sides’ that I will argue holds the key to understanding highly emotive online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis as a ‘politics of hysteria’.

## Rhino violence

The rhino-poaching crisis is steeped in many forms of violence – so much is clear from the emerging literature on this topic. Duffy (2014: 819) argues that in the current ‘war to save biodiversity’ ‘militarized forms of anti-poaching are increasingly justified by conservation NGOs keen to protect wildlife’. Lunstrum (2014: 817) refers to the ‘striking’ and ‘lethal’ ‘green militarization’ taking place in the Kruger Park and indeed in many conservation areas around the world. Humphreys and Smith (2014: 795) write that

the intensification of the counter-poaching strategy is clearly part of a trend that has witnessed the increasing militarization of wildlife management, the physical manifestation of this approach also bears resemblance to some notable developments in late-modern warfare. These developments have seen an emphasis on the close targeting of individuals or groups, broadly identified in the current military argot as ‘man-hunting’ or ‘targeted killings’. The combative language suggests that a policy of enhanced confrontation with the poachers is being ramped up.



**Figure 4.** Violent graphic posted often in Facebook comments.

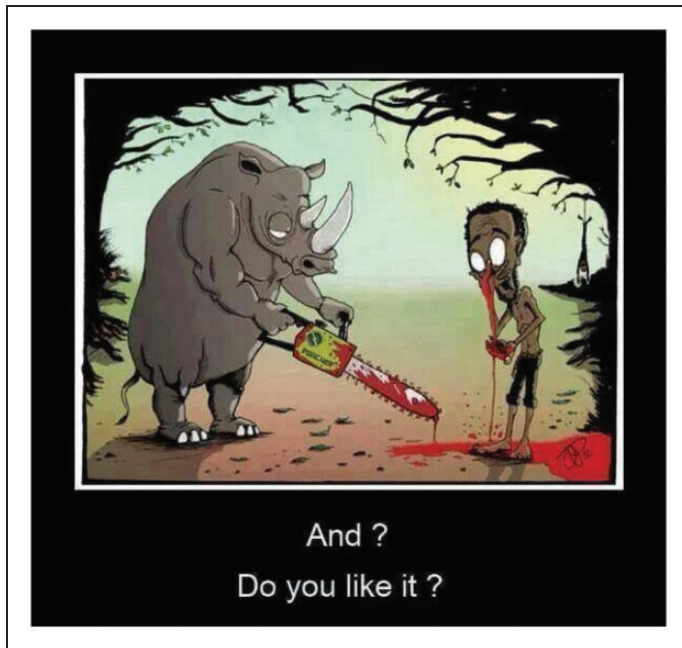
Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016), finally, argue that various forms of ‘green violence’ are taking place in the rhino-poaching crisis, including material, social and discursive forms. In all, it is clear that violence is one of the – if not *the* – prime expression(s) in both offline and online (anti-) rhino-poaching discourses and activities. What I will show in this section is that in the online spaces that I have studied, these violent expressions regularly become extreme, exaggerated, even uncontrolled or uncontrollable.

One of the most frequent forms of online violence is what I started calling ‘celebrating the death of poachers’. On Facebook groups in particular, but also on other social media, news reports about poachers being caught or killed are habitually greeted with enthusiasm and often extreme forms of discursive violence. For example, when a news item is shared on a rhino Facebook group with the title ‘two suspected poachers killed in Kruger shoot out’, a bare three hours later there are over 70 ‘likes’ and many comments, including: ‘yay – two less to worry about!!!’; ‘Good, kill more!!!’; ‘Yippie’; ‘Good riddance to bad rubbish’, ‘great work, kill them all’, and so forth. Another comment in response to a similar news story is more extensive:

Yay!!! - Best news I have heard today - well done - Photograph their dead bodies and make a few million leaflets - then drop them over every bloody village in Mozambique and around the park in SA - talk about Big rewards for tip offs and let every poacher know they WILL DIE<sup>31</sup>

Over the course of my research I collected hundreds of screenshots of these types of responses cheering the death or injury of suspected poachers. What is more, many add graphics to their comments. Two that I saw often are those in Figures 4 and 5.

Many similar examples could be given, but this would become repetitive. Yet one more example is important as it goes to show that commenters are willing to push their arguments



**Figure 5.** Violent graphic posted often in Facebook comments.

very far. The following was part of a discussion that ensued after news was shared that buffalo killed a suspected poacher:

Commenter 1: Poachers deserve to die! That's final - and besides, this was divine intervention! The Universe got rid of a cruel poacher who kills for a living, so why should poachers live? So they can kill and maim our wildlife?

Commenter 2: Not all human life is worthy of respect, in my opinion. Some humans really are just a waste of skin and oxygen thieves. Society is enriched when they are no longer dwelling amongst us.

Commenter 3: aha yes totally agree (. . .), but then if I follow that through there would be very few humans left on earth - which would be a good thing for the earth of course. but I am not the judge. rapists and killers of other humans are tried and then sentenced (and yes, I think we should have the death penalty back).

Commenter 2: Nah. I don't even respect their right to life. They do not begin to display the faintest smattering of RESPECT and therefore will not receive mine. If we are going to respect their right to life it simply means we agree that poachers should not be shot on sight. And I certainly do not agree with that!!

What is extreme or exaggerated is that poachers here are placed in a 'space of exception' where their right to life no longer applies (see Agamben, 1998).<sup>32</sup> Poachers are seen as evil monsters that rupture the perfect 'dream spaces' that conservation areas represent for many whites, and hence killing them seemingly becomes legitimate (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016). This, then, goes beyond the 'mere' cheering of the death of suspected poachers; these are extreme expressions of hate against suspected poachers though sadly fairly common in online social media.<sup>33</sup>

When studying the comments condoning and cheering violence, one also notes that there is resistance, and occasionally some commenters do make the point that online discursive violence might be extreme or unhelpful. These commenters, however, were almost always

immediately attacked by others, like in the below exchange after the sharing of the news that rangers wounded a suspected poacher:

Commenter one: 'Cruelty to animals is totally unacceptable, but cruelty to a human being is just fine? And we call ourselves civilised...'

Commenter two: 'Oh [*name of commenter one*] get over yourself - this is certainly not cruelty to a human being - he is NOT DEAD, like so many of our Rhino!!! I would prefer to actually see 1 DEAD poacher and save 10 Rhino!! Grow up and see the big picture here - people like you make me want to puke!!'

Here is another example after a similar news story was shared on Facebook:

Commenter one: 'It's easy to say, shoot them. who of us had to aim at another human to kill, it's not easy, trust me'.

Commenter two: 'Yes [*name of commenter one*] not easy but then they aim at magnificent beings that are totally innocent of any such evil deeds, so they deserve to be taken out of society as alive they are a menace and a very serious threat, not only to the animals teetering on the brink of extinction, but to the rest of humanity as we need the same animals for our own preservation. And anyhow, there are far too many humans on this planet we are heading for some disaster so low scum humans not really a loss'.

And a final example relates to the news of a shooting of a suspected rhino and elephant poacher in the buttocks:

Commenter one: 'Um... They're still people... Legal to shoot them?

People, lease STOP blind hating... At least try... You don't know their reasons'.

Commenter two: [*name of commenter one*]- whatever planet did you come from? Haven't you seen the photo of the elephant who HAS NO FACE? The poachers left her there on a road WITH A HOLE where she used to have eyes, mouth and TUSKS!... so don't post rubbish comments about poachers 'still being people'... Because THEY ARE NOT HUMAN!

Commenter three: '[*name of commenter one*], you are on a group to support rhino poaching, yet it shows you are in this group to defend the poaches... of course it's not legal to shoot people, BUT NOR IS RHINO POACHING the ONLY difference is these poor animals have NO Defense beside US!!!!'

Commenter four: '[*name of commenter one*]... try caring for the young left behind or the animals that dont die imm and have to be doctored... are you awake??? Fuck their reasons... they are and never will be good enough... this is murder... cold bloody murder, i would have shot him in the face, twice for good measure...'

Interestingly (and disturbingly), not only do commenters espouse extreme language and condone death, even those that try to control others are often viciously, and sometimes even personally attacked. All this makes the job of online moderators of Facebook groups, discussions fora or other platforms very difficult and demanding. In interviews, several of them expressed their frustrations at the violence online and stated that they have a hard time controlling discussions and have to keep repeating themselves to people.<sup>34</sup> In a way, even for these moderators, many of the extremely violent discourses are 'uncontrollable', though several of them do take active measures like blocking people from the online space that they moderate.

## Rhino affects

Besides the – sometimes quite overwhelming – discourses and imagines of violence online, I at the same time witnessed many affective acts of care, concern and love for rhinos and the

people that come to their aid. What was especially interesting – pace Lorimer and Whatmore (2009) – was that violence and care/concern seemed to often go together remarkably easily in these online discourses. A prime example of this was the felt need to portray ‘rhino rescuers’ as heroes and more generally to ‘heroize’ those that take care of rhinos.<sup>35</sup> Take, for example, the people behind ‘Rocking for Rhinos’, who introduce themselves as follows:

2012 sees the dawn of a new era as a new breed of Conservation Heroes emerge from the bloodied battlefields of the bushveld, they have been sent to Earth for one purpose... To protect South Africa’s Wildlife from the poacher scum that rapes and pillages the land on a daily basis. They are known around these parts as “Rocking For Rhinos”! No longer will South Africa’s threatened Wildlife be left alone to fend for itself, for as long as poacher scum invades the land, Rocking For Rhinos will be there in full force to CONSERVE, PRESERVE and PROTECT!<sup>36</sup>

These new ‘conservation heroes’ portray themselves as Rambo-style warriors (see Figure 3), as do many others. In a Sunday Times insert called ‘Rhino Rambo’ of 2 October 2011, the focus is on Australian former special forces commando Damien Mander. Mander ‘honed his warrior skills in the deadly crucible of Baghdad’ and now ‘the former soldier is using them to protect Africa’s Rhino’, according to the article.<sup>37</sup> He founded the International Anti-Poaching Foundation based on a ‘para-military style’ of conservation and hopes to enrol people into a ‘green army’ that aims to ‘protect wildlife in volatile regions’.<sup>38</sup>

Many more have been drawn by the lure to become a ‘conservation rambo’, including several US former elite soldiers in Animal Planet’s ‘Battleground: Rhino Wars’.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, according to an experienced ranger trainer at the Southern African Wildlife College, he regularly receives requests from former elite soldiers to come and ‘shoot poachers’ – something he ‘obviously cannot accommodate’.<sup>40</sup> These are all examples of highly visible and violent (wannabe) rhino heroes that were referred to in the social media spaces that I studied. But of interest are also the subtler discourses of care, concern and heroism on daily social media interactions. Since the start of the rhino-poaching crisis in 2007, many people have been stepping up to organise anti-poaching activities, raise awareness and funding or do other work. In contrast to the ‘conservation rambos’, these are often not the violent heroes, but, for example, nurturing heroes, such as those behind the oft-mentioned Rhino Orphanage, who take care of orphaned rhino calves after their mothers have been poached.<sup>41</sup>

One person that was mentioned especially often in my research was wildlife veterinarian Dr William Fowlds. Dr Fowlds became well known in ‘rhino circles’ after he took care of two surviving poached rhinos on Kariega Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape in March 2012.<sup>42</sup> One of these, baptised Themba, succumbed to injuries after two weeks but the other one, Thandi, survived and became an inspiration for many to undertake action: a woman from Scotland who volunteered at Kariega, founded an NGO ‘Thandi’s Fund Raiser’; a man from the Eastern Cape was inspired to start ‘The Rhino Run’, etc.<sup>43</sup> Both their websites and Facebook pages regularly refer to Dr Fowlds with adoration while the woman from Scotland also presented at a Rhino Fundraiser in Pretoria on 15 March 2014, and started crying when referring to Thandi and Dr Fowlds’ efforts.<sup>44</sup> Emboldened by these and other showings of support and his video going viral, Dr Fowlds has become somewhat of a (social) media star and positioned himself as such at the 2014 Annual South African Veterinary Association meeting on 6 March in Pretoria, attended by the author. He referred back to the video often and said that vets and people must show how much they care about rhinos and that this ‘emotional attachment’ was what was going to make the difference, as long as the (social) media story telling becomes more organised.<sup>45</sup>



Clearly, the goal of Dr Fowlds' presentation – as well as that of much of the social media spaces I surveyed – was to 'strategically invoke' images of rhino poaching and rhinos to catalyse 'different affective logics' (Lorimer, 2015: 124). Jamie Lorimer (2015) shows that these affective logics may stimulate and perform 'more-than-human micropolitics' with the objective of pushing 'for different, more convivial political/ethical sensibilities toward (non)human others' (Lorimer, 2015: 124, cf. Thrift, 2004: 67). In social media responses to the rhino-poaching crisis, these logics are clearly present yet I argue that a focus on 'micropolitics' alone is not enough to understand them, especially not if one takes into account the often extreme online violent responses. Hence this focus needs to be combined with a focus on the complex 'macropolitics' of these same responses, something that I will discuss in the concluding section when I return to and elaborate on the concept of a 'politics of hysteria'.

## Discussion and conclusion

The preceding empirical sections have shown that responses to the rhino-poaching crisis on new media often become hysteric, defined as a situation where emotions run so high that it leads to exaggerated, extreme or uncontrolled behaviour. How, then, does this hysteria become political, or, in the words of Donald Moore et al. (2003: 3), part of broader 'political articulations'? It is here that I believe my paper adds to much work on affective and emotional geographies and literature on race and nature, in particular that of Moore and colleagues. The latter understand 'political articulations' as 'assemblages of institutions, apparatuses, practices, and discourses' (Donald Moore et al., 2003: 4) and through a focus on these assemblages emphasise, as does much of the 'more-than-human' affective geographies literature (Lorimer, 2015; Lorimer and Whatmore, 2009; Thrift, 2004), the fluidities, contingencies and hybridities in the politics of race, nature, affect and violence.

In this paper, I have shown how these 'political articulations' work out in political economies of power where nuanced 'assemblages' often confront stark inequalities, rigid boundaries and various forms of brutal or violent power play. These, too, are characterised by fluidities, contingencies or hybridities, but my point is that they starkly vary in degree of applicability, with empirical consequences for certain actors – for example, the many *suspected* poachers that get shot, certain groups of people who structurally have fewer chances for upward social mobility or the fences that effectively keep certain groups of people out of parks – that are direct and austere. I therefore argue that it remains important to emphasise the structural political economies of racial inequality and its real-world differential consequences in the nuanced and fluid connections between race, nature, affect and control so important to understanding the violent online responses to the rhino-poaching crisis.

Hence, and following Kepe's (2009) call to pay attention to how conservation issues remain highly racialised, it matters that the far majority of people on new media responding to the poaching crisis are white. Obviously, there are exceptions, but in my research over three years, these have been rare (though sometimes very vocal). This is in line with broader laments of many respondents regarding the general dominance of whites in (online) conservation and anti-poaching discussions and activities, which, importantly, does not actually say much about the relations between race and violence in general (see Unterhalter (2000), for a discussion in relation to the struggle against apartheid). The question that arises is therefore not why so many (individual) whites feel the apparent need for hysteric responses to the rhino-poaching crisis, but what political work this hysteria does for them collectively.

My argument is that the employment of affective and emotive expressions that often become hysteric may serve to demand control over a situation 'out of control'.

Many whites seem to believe that the rhino-poaching crisis shows that control over important conservation spaces is lacking in the post-apartheid era and that the current state fails miserably in this role (see Figure 6). All this is significant in the South African context of shifting racial political–economic power balances and where whites have lost most of the control that they felt they had a God-given right to possess (cf. Hughes, 2010). Since the end of apartheid, there has been a simmering (and sometimes quite overt) sense of hysteria among parts of the white population in South Africa where they feel they are losing control over their lives, culture, language, education, businesses, etc. vis-à-vis the black majority. This was explicitly mentioned as such by several interviewees, who argued that the frustration over the rhino-poaching crisis needs to be seen in the context of a broader frustration over South African politics and the failure of basic things that many used to take for granted.<sup>46</sup>

The online hysteria, I argue, is both a response to this sense of loss of control and a potent political intervention. This ‘hysterical’ intervention works in two ways: it not only foregrounds or enlarges particular (political) interests focused on the safeguarding of certain conservation spaces as places of white control, but it also drowns out broader political–economic power structures that historically privileged, and continue to privilege, these interests. This is why I emphasise the *politics* of hysteria, as the very vocal expressions of a minority group of whites ultimately links with and serves certain broader socio-cultural and political–economic interests where an ‘out of control’ situation allows for the articulation of broader claims to control over socio-culturally and political-economically significant artefacts. It is here, also, that social media comes to play an important role, as it makes hysterical expressions seem more intense due to the speed, reach and (potential) volume of expressions, something that we saw can directly influence (offline) institutional politics.



**Figure 6.** Graphic about the failure of the state to protect rhinos. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/wildlifeatheart>.

One element in how this works is articulated poignantly by Ahmed (2004: 45–46, in Kuntsman (2012: 7)) who argues that ‘emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation’. Kuntsman (2012: 7) – further quoting Ahmed – adds that ‘emotions accumulate strength as they move between subjects and texts, and are “not contained within the contours of a subject”’. This, then, I argue, is also the role that social media plays in increasing the political potency of affective expressions: they enable the hyper-circulation of affects and emotions that help to increase the pressure on organisations and people, as the earlier referred interview with SANParks media officers showed. As such, the politics of hysteria through new media becomes a potent force for political mobilisation and intervention that does not only emanate from historical and contemporary political–economic connections between race, nature, affect and control but also reinforces these.

This, in conclusion, opens up important new questions about the relations between race, nature and violence in an age of new media. What I have not been able to show, for example, is precisely how online new media articulations become effectuated in offline environments and hence there is important work to be done in further investigating this link. Moreover, while online hysteria may be used to obscure fundamental political–economic structures that continue to rest on and reinforce racial privilege they may at the same time undermine this. In relation to the rhino-poaching crisis I have seen little evidence of this, but this may be very different in relation to other explosive political issues and hence needs attention.

Finally, a broader theoretical issue that the article points at concerns the relation between nuanced assemblages and austere rigidities. Building on literatures on race and nature, and more-than-human affective geographies, I have emphasised how matters of affect, emotion and race can lead to stark, extreme and rather less-than-fluid outcomes and implications for certain groups of people (here especially the death of suspected poachers and rangers). These outcomes and implications raise urgent political questions, both in terms of the emphasis in theoretical discussions (how to balance analytical, ontological nuance with stark, austere real-world consequences of matters of violence for certain groups of people?) and the political potential of academic work itself (how can academic analyses support more progressive political dynamics and outcomes that challenge violent discourses and materialities?). These seem crucial questions that defy easy answers, even or especially in an age where political interventions are highly influenced by fast-circulating new media.

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## Notes

1. <http://activateonline.co.za/rhinos-suffering-in-silence/>, accessed 4 April 2014.
2. <http://www.environment.co.za/wildlife-endangered-species/rhino-death-toll-continues-to-spiral-out-of-control.html>, accessed 4 April 2014.
3. [https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/update\\_on\\_rhino\\_poaching](https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/update_on_rhino_poaching), accessed 16 January 2014.
4. Including the revival of some long-standing and controversial debates such as those around the legalisation of rhino horn trade (see Biggs et al., 2013).
5. Including over 75 interviews in the Netherlands, US and South Africa, and over nine months of field research in South Africa.
6. See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hysteria> and <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hysteria>, accessed 7 April 2014.
7. Hughes has been criticised for rather bluntly generalising white experiences in Zimbabwe and not recognising (enough) the diversity of white positionalities (Hartnack, 2014). This critique is important and undoubtedly applies to some of the statements about whites in the present paper.
8. Key informant interview, 5 May 2014, Somerset West, South Africa.
9. And see the data referred to in note 8.
10. As also confirmed in an interview with a SANParks staff member, 20 August 2015, Pretoria, South Africa.
11. See also recent literatures on emotional and affective geographies, which have explored the relations between emotion and space more broadly, amongst others: Brown and Pickerill (2009) and Clough (2012).
12. [http://wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/endangered\\_species/rhinoceros/?src=footer](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/rhinoceros/?src=footer), accessed 27 December 2014.
13. <http://www.awf.org/wildlife-conservation/rhinoceros>, accessed 27 December 2014.
14. See, f.i. [http://www.savetherhino.org/rhino\\_info/threats\\_to\\_rhino/poaching\\_for\\_rhino\\_horn](http://www.savetherhino.org/rhino_info/threats_to_rhino/poaching_for_rhino_horn), accessed 27 December 2014.
15. <http://www.iam4rhinos.com/>, accessed 27 December 2014.
16. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/scitech/2013/09/19/world-rhino-day-aims-to-take-twitter-by-storm-with-iam4rhinos>, accessed 27 December 2014.
17. Interview staff members WWF South Africa, 3 January 2014, Cape Town, South Africa.
18. See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OSCAP/> and <http://www.oscap.co.za/>, accessed 27 December 2014.
19. <http://www.oscap.co.za/rhino-conference-2014>, accessed 27 December 2014.
20. Interview, OSCAP facilitator, 18 February 2014, Pretoria, South Africa.
21. As corroborated, for example, by members ensuring the facilitator that she speaks 'on behalf of' the members.
22. <http://fightforrhinos.com/about/> and <http://www.helpingrhinos.org/>, accessed 27 December 2014.
23. <http://www.earthtouchnews.com/conservation/endangered/gaming-for-good-online-game-runescape-is-raising-awareness-for-rhinos>, accessed 27 December 2014.
24. As also corroborated in an interview, SANParks media officer interview, 20 August 2015, Pretoria, South Africa.
25. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpaEWIQUORA>, <http://www.thandisfundraiser.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/ThandisFundRaiser>, accessed 28 December 2014.
26. Interview SANParks staff, Pretoria, 11 February 2013.
27. Interview facilitator, 5 May 2014; interview facilitator, 17 August 2015.
28. According to recent SANParks statistics from 2010 to 2015 on racial profiles of KNP visitors the current ratio of whites versus non-whites is approximately 75–25%, which is a slight improvement from 2007, when the ratio was roughly 80–20%. I am grateful to SANParks, especially its tourism department, for sharing this data with me.
29. This is confirmed by Elizabeth Lunstrum (2016), who did a quantitative analysis of several of the same online spaces.

30. One prominent example comes from Prince William and Prince Harry who founded 'United For Wildlife', which launched a major social media campaign under the banner #Whosideareyouon. According to Prince William, the choice is easy: either you are with the 'critically endangered species' or with 'the criminals who kill them for money'. See <https://twitter.com/hashtag/whosideareyouon> and <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/whosideareyouon>; <http://www.unitedforwildlife.org/#!/home>, accessed 17 July 2014.
31. All comments are copied literally as they appeared on various Facebook group pages and rendered anonymous.
32. I deliberately refer to 'spaces of exception' rather than Agamben's 'states of exception' to focus on broader space-making exercises by different actors rather than the narrow focus on the (sovereign) state, as in Agamben's work.
33. See, for example, this short documentary made by Earth Touch insider: <http://www.earthtouchnews.com/videos/earth-touch-insider/can-social-media-help-conservation/>, accessed 30 December 2014; and also Lunstrum (2016).
34. Interview facilitator, 18 February 2014, Pretoria, South Africa; Key informant interview, 5 May 2014, Somerset West, South Africa.
35. Links and references to individual websites outside of new social media where all derived at through reference in the social media sites that I studied.
36. <http://rockingforrhinos.org.dedi196.cpt3.host-h.net/>, accessed 28 December 2014.
37. See <http://www.timeslive.co.za/lifestyle/2011/10/02/wildlife-war-zone-hero>, accessed 28 December 2014.
38. <http://www.iapf.org/en/getinvolved/green-army>, accessed 28 December 2014.
39. <http://www.animalplanet.com/tv-shows/battleground-rhino-wars/>, accessed 28 December 2014.
40. Interview, 28 March 2014, Orpen, South Africa.
41. <http://therhinoorphanage.co.za/>, accessed 29 December 2014.
42. See for the story: <http://www.kariega.co.za/about-us/help-save-our-rhino-project>, accessed 29 December 2014.
43. <http://www.thandisfundraiser.com/>, <http://therhinorun.com/>, accessed 29 December 2014.
44. As witnessed by the author, who attended the event called 'Dancing for Rhinos'. See <https://www.facebook.com/Dancing-for-Rhinos-583771885030536/timeline/>
45. Notes from participatory observation at the South African Veterinary Association meeting, 6 March 2014, Stone Cradle, Centurion, Pretoria.
46. Especially important in this regard during fieldwork in 2014 and 2015 were the load-shedding periods where electricity was out for several hours during the week. This failure to 'keep the lights on' for many signified the 'darkness' South Africa was sinking into.

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