



South Africa is engaged in a never ending battle to preserve its wildlife against the deprivations of illegal poachers and smugglers. Our correspondent **Rob**

Krott was allowed to penetrate the inner sanctums of the Endangered Species Protection Unit (ESPU), the tough, macho organisation whose task is to crack down on the crime syndicates which are targeting Africa's wildlife. He came up with a fascinating story.

Catching the ivory poachers

It was a pleasant Sunday afternoon on 24 December 1994 when two South African game rangers sitting in their camp along the Umlolzi River heard the shots.

Running towards the sound they stop in the bush, panting, four kilometers later to hear another burst of gunfire. Now, having a better idea of the source of the shooting, they began crawling up to a creek feeding the Umfolozi river.

Two men were sawing the horn off a poached rhino. One of the rangers fired a warning shot and the poachers fled. The rangers began running through the bush again, but this time in pursuit of armed rhino poachers. A third poacher was spotted and shooting broke out. The firefight continued as it began raining and with dusk approaching the rangers broke contact.

The crime scene was inspected in the morning. There, amidst the AK-47 cases littering the ground, the rangers found one dead poacher, a .303 calibre hunting rifle, a shotgun, and the carcasses of four white rhinos.

Endangered animals

With millions of dollars of ivory, rhino horn, and exotic animals at stake, protecting endangered species is a demanding and dangerous job for any law enforcement agency. Especially in South Africa where the illegal traffic in endangered flora and fauna seems to increase every day.

Eager buyers for endangered species of birds, snakes, plants, as well as valuable ivory and rhino horn are found in nearly every corner of the world. Little wonder as the annual value of wildlife crime now exceeds \$8 billion.

In 1989 South Africa was accused of participating in international ivory smuggling. This was especially embarrassing for South Africa as it was a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the international controlling body for endangered species which came into existence in 1982.

It was feared that there would be a replay



of what had happened in Angola where one of Africa's largest elephant populations along with a healthy rhino population were virtually destroyed by roving bands of soldiers and poachers armed with automatic weapons. There were documented instances of involvement by some South African government officials and there was a demonstrated lack of protection afforded certain endangered species. Such is not the case now.

The law enforcement professionals who turned the tide in South Africa's war against