# South African Researchers Inject Radioactive Material into Rhino Horns to Combat Poaching



**South African Researchers Inject Radioactive Material into Rhino Horns to Combat Poaching**

Mokopane, South Africa—Researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand's Radiation and Health Physics Unit have injected radioactive material into the horns of 20 live rhinos. This initiative aims to reduce poaching by leveraging radiation detectors at national borders to help authorities detect and intercept trafficked horns.

Veterinarians and nuclear experts tranquilized the animals before drilling holes in their horns and inserting the nuclear material. Professor James Larkin, leading the project, stated that this method utilizes global radiation monitors designed to prevent nuclear terrorism to detect trafficked rhino horns.

The global rhino population has drastically declined from about 500,000 at the start of the 20th century to around 27,000, primarily due to black market demand. South Africa, home to approximately 16,000 rhinos, has faced significant poaching challenges, with over 500 rhinos killed annually.

Rhino poaching decreased notably during the COVID-19 pandemic but surged again as lockdown restrictions eased. Larkin emphasized the need for innovative methods to counter this trend.

Despite some industry support, the project has faced ethical scrutiny. Pelham Jones, chairperson of the Private Rhino Owners Association, expressed skepticism over the method's effectiveness, noting that poachers might use non-traditional routes to evade detection.

Professor Nithaya Chetty, dean of the science faculty at Witwatersrand, assured that the low dosage of radioactivity poses minimal risk to the animals after extensive testing.