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1. [Prince paid thousands into wildlife sting; The World Wide Fund for Nature is disowning a secret project to fight rhino poachers, which collapsed with funds and horn stocks missing. Stephen Ellis documents the scandal](#)

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Prince paid thousands into wildlife sting; The World Wide Fund for Nature is disowning a secret project to fight rhino poachers, which collapsed with funds and horn stocks missing. Stephen Ellis documents the scandal

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Body

THE World Wide Fund For Nature is striving to dissociate itself from a project set up by **Prince** Bernhard of the Netherlands, its former International President, and a senior official from its Swiss headquarters.

"Operation Lock" was set up in 1987 by **Prince** Bernhard and Dr John Hanks, then Africa Programme Director of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). It aimed to gather intelligence on the international trade in rhino horn by infiltrating the market and buying rhino horn to trace the dealers.

The **prince** donated pounds 500,000 to fund the secret "**sting**". But it collapsed, with some horn and purchased material unaccounted for.

According to a statement by Dr Hanks, endorsed by **Prince** Bernhard, they conceived the project in 1987. **Thousands** of rhino have been killed in the last decade by poachers who sell the horn, mainly for use as dagger handles in the Middle East and medicinal purposes in the Far East. Black rhino numbers have dropped from 100,000 in 1960 to less than 4,000 in 1987. Dr Hanks pointed out to **Prince** Bernhard that while millions of pounds were spent protecting rhino, little was done to halt the horn traffic. According to Dr Hanks, **Prince** Bernhard said it would be an "extremely dangerous and sensitive subject, and made it clear that it would not only be contrary to WWF policy to fund such work directly but also that it would be undesirable for it to be seen as being even remotely connected with such activities".

Prince Bernhard agreed to fund the operation in a private capacity and on the strict condition that the WWF should not be involved or even told about it. But according to documents obtained by The Independent, the WWF Director-General, Charles de Haes, knew from the start about Dr Hanks' plans to investigate the trade.

To implement Operation Lock, Dr Hanks commissioned KAS Enterprises Ltd, whose chairman was the late Sir David Stirling, the founder of the Special Air Services. Many KAS staff were former members of the SAS. Although the initial aim was to gather intelligence, it developed into a more ambitious project to employ former SAS men for paramilitary anti-poaching work throughout Southern Africa and purchased equipment from the South African Defence Force. At least pounds 75,000 of **Prince** Bernhard's donation was used for the purchase of rhino horn. But then the company went out of business - having failed to account for the equipment, the rhino horn or its funds, which included a large slice of Sir David's personal fortune.

Operation Lock was based in South Africa - which has a vigorous conservationist movement but is also the centre of the trade in ivory and rhino horn. Many of the ivory and horn traffickers in Southern Africa are also known to deal in drugs, weapons and ammunition, sometimes with the connivance or involvement of senior officers of the South African Defence Force. Colonel Jan Breytenbach, formerly a leading Special Forces officer, has testified to the

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involvement of senior security and military officials in the illicit trade. Although traders have been arrested by a special unit of the South African Police, this has failed to net any of the big operators. KAS worked closely with South African security men and South African nature conservation officials.

Sir David Stirling had himself been thinking along similar lines as **Prince** Bernhard. He claimed that, in company with some friends in Britain, he had conceived a dual strategy for Southern Africa. One was a project to conserve **wildlife**, and the second a plan to persuade South Africa's white rulers that they could enjoy security under black majority rule. In November 1987, Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Crooke, managing director of KAS Enterprises Ltd and a former officer in the SAS, submitted his preliminary proposals to John Hanks of WWF. Dr Hanks forwarded these to **Prince** Bernhard, who **paid** the first instalment of an eventual pounds 500,000.

Prince Bernhard and Dr Hanks withdrew from the project in 1989 and KAS ceased trading in 1990. According to Dr Hanks, Operation Lock had some success "and stimulated a great deal of related activity in Southern Africa which is still under way . . . When the project started we were not aware of how long the work would take, nor how difficult it might be if corruption were uncovered at high levels." Others close to the operation say there is no evidence that it saved a single rhino and suggest that the operation was outwitted by the dealers themselves.

KAS also tried to persuade officials in several other African countries to pass on information concerning the horn trade to the project and to employ KAS to train game wardens. But it appears officials in most of these countries were suspicious of the project because of its South African connections and turned down the offer. KAS is known to have approached conservation officials in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Tanzania and Kenya. Nevertheless, KAS succeeded in working with Zimbabwean game wardens and funding a helicopter for anti-poaching operations in the Zambezi Valley.

In Namibia, KAS trained an anti- poaching team in mid-1989, when South African forces were being demobilised prior to independence elections. The trainees almost certainly included members of Koevoet (Crowbar), the South African counter-insurgency unit. KAS also trained game wardens for Mozambique inside South Africa.

Although Operation Lock itself is now defunct, the paramilitary training of game wardens is continuing in South African tribal "homelands". Some youths have complained that after being recruited as nature conservation officers, they have in fact been trained as soldiers at secret military sites.

WWF's international headquarters in Switzerland say that Operation Lock was a private matter between Dr Hanks and **Prince** Bernhard, carried out without the knowledge of WWF personnel. The full extent of Dr Hanks' involvement only became apparent by the middle of 1990, by which time he had returned to South Africa to take up a post as director of the South African Nature Foundation - the South African branch of WWF. Dr Hanks, a British citizen, had worked for 10 years in South Africa before taking up a post with WWF in Switzerland. As soon as the nature of his involvement in Operation Lock became clear, the current president of WWF International, **Prince** Philip, commissioned an independent inquiry. This is understood to have found that no WWF funds were spent on the project and no staff were aware of it other than Dr Hanks.

However, Ian Parker, an ivory consultant, says he was first consulted by Dr Hanks in January 1987 about investigating the rhino horn traffic. According to Mr Parker, Dr Hanks assured him that money could be provided in an unaccountable manner, channelled through companies and individuals, and that only Dr Hanks and the WWF director-general, Charles de Haes, would know about the project.

Mr de Haes joined WWF as personal assistant to **Prince** Bernhard while the **prince** was International President. For the first three years, Mr de Haes's salary was **paid** by his former employer, the South African businessman Anton Rupert, a trustee of WWF International and president of the South African Nature Foundation.

Classification

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