



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

**Fish and Wildlife Service**

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### USFWS INVESTIGATION CULMINATES IN LANDMARK EXTRADITION OF ACCUSED SOUTH AFRICAN WILDLIFE SMUGGLER

In a landmark action, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Justice Department and other Federal agencies, has obtained the extradition of an accused international wildlife smuggler from South Africa, the first extradition ever from a foreign country on wildlife-related charges.

Marius Meiring, a former major in the elite South African Defense Forces, was arraigned today in the U.S. District Court in New Haven, Connecticut. He will be tried in the United States on charges of making false declarations for the purpose of illegally importing protected wildlife, automatic weapons, and hand grenades.

Meiring is alleged to have used his official position as the second-highest-ranking South African Defense Force officer in Namibia to acquire and transport rhinoceros horns, automatic weapons, and hand grenades, and smuggle them into the United States.

Meiring's alleged American accomplice, John Lukman, Jr., a resident of Newington, Connecticut, has been prosecuted for smuggling. He was convicted and served 27 months in prison.

"This extradition is a sure sign the world is becoming a riskier place for those who smuggle endangered species and other protected wildlife," said John Turner, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Those who wantonly kill threatened animals for profit and seek to hide in other countries should take note -- the game is up. You will be found and prosecuted."

Turner applauded the government of South Africa, the Justice Department, the State Department, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and

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Firearms, and the Customs Service for the high level of cooperation in the investigation and eventual extradition of Meiring.

The extradition follows an eight-month undercover investigation by the Service. The case had its origins in February 1988 when the Service learned Lukman was attempting to sell a leopard mount. Lukman subsequently sold a Service undercover agent two leopard rugs, a leopard head mount, a cheetah rug, and a cheetah head mount. The sales violated both the Endangered Species Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

The investigation's scope broadened when Lukman told Service undercover agents he had access to Soviet-made firearms and he could obtain what he termed an unlimited number of rhinoceros horns. Rhinoceros horn is sold as an aphrodisiac in illegal markets throughout the world.

Lukman told the agents both the weapons and rhinoceros horns came from Major Meiring and his wife, Patricia. Meiring then became the subject of a joint investigative effort. Lukman said he and Meiring obtained the horns in Angola and transported them to Namibia using South African military vehicles prior to smuggling them into the United States.

The species population has been decimated in recent years. Illegal poaching operations pose the greatest threat to the rhinoceros. The black rhinoceros herd of Africa (an endangered species of wildlife from which the horns involved in this case are believed to have come) numbered over 65,000 in 1970. However, by 1985 their population had shrunk to 11,000, and fewer than 4,000 remain today.

All species of rhinoceros are listed on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora to which both the U.S. and South Africa are signatory countries. Pursuant to this treaty, the importation of rhinoceros, or any part thereof, into the U.S. is generally unlawful.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Customs Service must be congratulated for the quality of this joint investigative effort," said U.S. Attorney Albert S. Dabrowski, whose New Haven, Connecticut office handled the extradition proceedings. "Organized criminal operations focusing on exploiting endangered species of wildlife are as pervasive and detrimental as other major illegal activity. Environmental crimes such as these have severe and long lasting consequences. This investigation demonstrates the close ties existing between smugglers of wildlife and other illegal commodities."