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Of body bags and poached rhinos

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👤 CORRESPONDENT (index.php?wid=101&aid=475) 🕒 Friday, February 14, 2020

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Endangered: Poachers have launched a war on the countries rhinos PIC: PHYS.ORG

I refer to your article, Mmegi, February 7th.

Shoot-to-kill policies just don't work, are immoral and unlawful too. To my knowledge, the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) and Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) anti-poaching squads have killed well over 60 alleged poachers since the late 1980s with no discernible effect.

The BDF has shot DEAD seven alleged rhino poachers in the past year and no arrests have been made. The bodies of the seven dead alleged poachers are lying unclaimed in the mortuary at Letsholathebe hospital in Maun.

They are almost certainly foreign nationals, most probably either Caprivian or Zambian. Nor, so far as I know, has anyone tried to trace the serial-numbers of the several firearms seized. Consequently, the main potential sources of information as to who might be behind the rhino poaching has been lost.

The foot-soldiers who actually kill the rhinos are mostly semi-educated poor boys from rural backgrounds who have excellent bush skills. There is an unlimited supply of such people all over Africa, who can see no lawful prospect of bettering their lives so opt to go rhino or ivory poaching. They can be replaced as fast as the BDF can shoot them.

The authorities have no idea who might be behind this upsurge in poaching activity because they are killing the foot-soldiers who could tell them who is behind it.

Is it elements in the Chinese trading community in Maun or Francistown, the long established rhino horn traders in Zambia or some shadowy South African outfit? No one knows! If the BDF and DWNP continue to shoot alleged perpetrators they won't find

out either.

Shooting alleged poachers is murder under our law unless they present an unavoidable threat to the lives of the anti poaching units. Since most of these so-called poachers were shot in the back, while running away, it is clear that they posed no threat and were murdered.

This policy is immoral, unlawful and utterly ineffective. In the 1980s/90s, Zimparks (in Zimbabwe) shot dead 900 alleged poachers for the loss of 18 of their own men. This 50:1 kill ratio is a clear indication that most were shot out of hand and in cold blood.

Despite this slaughter, free-living wild rhino were exterminated in Zimbabwe for all practical purposes. On the other hand, the elimination of two traders in Lusaka and two very senior Zimbabwean officials would have stopped the slaughter of both rhinos and alleged poachers stone cold dead.

The only country to have rhino poaching under control is Namibia that has developed CBNRM (Community Based Natural Resource Management) and related policies to a high level, such that free-living wild rhino can be found on communal tribal land and freehold farm land. Under the Khama regime, Botswana eviscerated its CBNRM programmes in favour of re-asserting centralised 'control' and we are seeing the consequences.

In conclusion, we need to radically change policy – we must arrest and get the necessary intelligence from the foot-soldiers and re-boot CBNRM and address the failings of its earlier iteration. It isn't rocket science but it requires imagination, political will and commitment. It can be done.

***White is a veteran wildlife specialist and environmentalist**



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