

It's better to show tourists a dehorned rhino than nothing at all-Magosi



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By **Thobo Motlhoka**

The Director of the Directorate of Intelligence and Security (DIS) Brigadier Peter Magosi has defended government's decision to dehorn Botswana's rhinos as an anti-poaching control measure.

Magosi has said the dehorning of rhinos was the only way they could ensure protection of the animals from poachers.

The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) earlier this year embarked on a dehorning exercise in a bid to combat poaching and safeguard the future of the declining rhino species.

"This exercise was prompted by the surge in rhino poaching over the past few years," the DWNP had said.

Appearing before the Parliamentary Accounts Committee (PAC) earlier this week Magosi said should government abandon the ongoing dehorning exercise they can forget about saving the rhino.

In response to sentiments that dehorning of the animals takes away from the experience of tourists Magosi said the exercise was the best option under the circumstances.

"It is better to show a dehorned rhino than no rhino at all," Magosi said. He dismissed reports that the exercise had proved futile with poachers continuing to kill dehorned rhinos saying the few cases reported were just cases of frustrated poachers who couldn't get what they wanted.

The spy boss said while rhino horns do grow back within two years such an exercise at least buys the government some time.

The Director admitted there have been increased poaching activities in recent months attributing the escalation to an increase in demand outside Africa. He said as a result of the demand poaching has shifted from elephants to rhinos. DWNP has said the Okavango Delta rhino population has been hard hit by the recent increase in poaching with almost animals reported poached as of 04th May 2020.

The department said both white rhino and black rhinos have been severely affected necessitating the implementation of critical and impactful interventions to arrest the situation.

"These measures include relocation of highly endangered black rhinos, intensification of surveillance and monitoring and dehorning of all rhinos. Dehorning entails removal of most of the rhino horn under the guidance of experienced veterinarians," they have said, adding "The process is painless and is done as humanely and quickly as possible to limit stress on the animals. The animals are then monitored to ensure that they fully recover and go about their normal activities."

The DIS Director General Magosi told the PAC this week that infiltration of the security forces by the poaching syndicates makes their anti-poaching campaign even more difficult.

The number of poachers killed by the Botswana Defense Force (BDF) has increased significantly in 2020. The intensified BDF anti-poaching campaign has resulted in the killing of almost 20 poachers this year alone. Botswana has adopted a shoot-to-kill approach to poachers.

Rhino horns reportedly sell for as much as P650, 000 (\$65,000) on the black market making it one of the most valuable natural commodities on earth, worth more than gold.

The escalation in cases of rhino poaching comes at a time when the Botswana government is still grappling with the mystery behind the death of hundreds of elephants.

The Director of the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) Dr Letlhogile Modisa told Sunday Standard recently that their investigations into the mysterious deaths of scores of elephants in the Okavango panhandle have been a complex process. An "urgent and confidential" report from a wildlife conservation NGO called Elephants Without Botswana (EWB) to the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources, Conservation and Tourism has warned that more elephants could still die from the mysterious illness that has claimed the lives of at least 350 elephants.

"Personal observations of elephants near waterholes suggest more elephants could die of this mysterious ailment," writes EWB's Director, Dr. Mike Chase, in a report titled "356 Dead Elephants in the Okavango Panhandle" that he compiled for the Director of Wildlife and National Parks.

EWB puts the first deaths at as early as April 2020 and has concluded that they have been continuing for three months to June 2020. The report says that the EWB team also observed live elephants that appeared to be weak, lethargic and emaciated.

"Some elephants appeared disorientated, had difficulty walking, showed signs of partial paralysis or a limp in their legs. One elephant was observed walking in circles, unable to change direction although being encouraged by other herd members. We saw a dead horse in the middle of a natural waterhole (pan). Carcasses of other wildlife species were not seen. Although we expected to see more vultures, those observed on fresh carcasses showed no signs of concerning abnormal behaviour. We saw no signs that humans had attempted to chop skulls to remove tusks," the report said.