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Botswana's imported rhino poaching crisis

Conservationists in the Okavango Delta urge the government to include local people in anti-poaching strategies

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(David Clode)

Moving rhinos from South Africa to Botswana's Okavango Delta without properly involving local people meant key chances to protect the animals from poaching were missed, scientists and community leaders have said.

As the Delta reels from a surge in rhino poaching, which has killed close to 100 of the animals in the last three years, the authorities have taken the unusual step of evacuating all remaining both black and white rhinos from the region.

Professor of Tourism Studies at the University of Botswana, Joseph Mbaiwa, told The Okavango Express that the recent spike in rhino poaching in the Okavango Delta was a disaster waiting to happen, owing to lack of community involvement in rhino conservation.

Professor Mbaiwa has challenged Botswana's Government to learn from the Namibian community rhino conservation model.

Rhinos were reintroduced into the Okavango Delta from South Africa between 2000 and 2013 under the Botswana Rhino Reintroduction Project, which was initiated through a partnership between the Government and safari companies. It followed a complete collapse of Botswana's rhino populations, with no known animals left in the wild across the whole country by 1993.

Professor Mbaiwa noted that the mistake in this ambitious relocation project was its exclusion of the communities.

Professor Mbaiwa said: "Communities were not consulted during this project. When the Government classified rhino conservation, they forgot that the Delta is a large area and the rhinos have to coexist with the resident communities."

Mbaiwa equated Botswana rhino conservation to what he called fortress conservation: a model based on the belief that biodiversity protection is best achieved by isolating ecosystems from humans.

"We should have benchmarked on how the Namibian Government involved their communities in the conservation of desert-dwelling critically endangered black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*). Namibian rhino conservation is a success because communities were involved from the word go," said Mbaiwa.

The Professor's sentiments were echoed by Luke Motlaleselelo, a representative of the Okavango Delta settlements in the local North West District Council.

Motlaleselo's council ward comprises the ungazetted settlements Quxao, Ditshiping, Xaxaba and Daunara, which act as a range for rhinos in the Okavango Delta.

Motlaleselo stated: "The Government should have known that in translocating the rhinos from South Africa they were also importing the poaching burden. It was obvious that poachers would soon follow the rhinos here.

"The best thing was to consult and partner with us, the communities who live alongside the rhinos. I hope they learnt a lesson that communities do not fake conservation. We are living it. We have lived with these animals since eternity. That did not happen. Instead they viewed us as poachers."

Motlaleselo further claimed that the rhino relocation was motivated by tourism interests more than conservation.

"Botswana was more concerned about the publicity it got with the story of rhino relocation from South Africa, where rhinos were massacred by poachers, to Botswana. The country projected itself as a safe haven for rhinos. But there was little preparation and engagement with communities where the rhinos were brought."

Senior community escort guide at Okavango Kopano Mokoro Community Trust, Monopane Namanga, told The Okavango Express that since the relocation of rhinos from the Delta, the level of poaching has gone down.

"The rhinos were putting a lot of pressure on us. There was too much poaching. However since the Government translocated the rhinos, the only poaching we are experiencing is subsistence poaching which is not that prevalent."

Director of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), Dr. Kabelo Senyatso, told The Okavango Express that issues of rhino poaching are classified operational issues which could not be shared with the public or the media.

"We are not going to be apologetic. These are issues of operation. That decision was taken owing to the gravity of the problem we were dealing with."

Dr. Senyatso said in future they will engage and work with the communities. "Consultation has always been the cradle of Botswana's democracy. As a

country we have always consulted and partnered with our communities for natural resources conservation through the Community Based Natural Resources Programme, and we will continue doing that.”

Dr. Senyatso further stated that Botswana is formulating an anti-poaching strategy that will enable the country to fight poaching more efficiently. He added that the strategy will be implemented by law enforcement agencies involved in anti-poaching: Botswana Police Service, DWNP, Directorate of Intelligence Services, and Botswana Defence Force.

“As the Environment Ministry, we have made our contributions to the strategy. We are waiting for the other agencies to make theirs and hopefully the strategy will begin to be implemented midyear.”

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