

## Rhino poaching and the inside job

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**PAYING THE PRICE ...** Several efforts by criminals to bribe law-enforcement officials have only landed the culprits in deeper trouble, with attempted bribery added to existing charges. Photo: Contributed



**THE TERM 'poacher' is often used for anyone involved in wildlife crime. In reality, wildlife crime functions through a complex web of criminals, where the poachers – the people carrying out the illegal killing of an animal to initiate the trade in its parts – are at the lowest level.**

Poachers are often rural community members with good “bush skills”. They need to find and kill an intended target, and get the products to a dealer. But bush skills are no longer enough to poach rhinos. The huge increase in rhino poaching in recent years has led to the pachyderms receiving specialised protection.

This includes establishing anti-poaching units, putting up electric fencing, surveillance cameras and other technologies and activities. To avoid all of this security, find and kill a rhino, and get the horns to a dealer is no longer easy. It requires inside information – the “inside job”.

Bribes are a central component of inside jobs. People are bribed to provide inside information, to look the other way, or to remove obstacles so that criminal activity becomes easier.

While poaching is often carried out by rural community members, wheeling and dealing business people tend to get involved in nefarious activities that include trafficking illegal wildlife products. They usually have access to significant amounts of cash, which they use to 'smooth the path' of crime.

Paying or receiving bribes is against the law, punishable with severe penalties. Any actions of aiding and abetting criminals are equally serious. In several cases over the past year, arrested suspects have attempted to bribe law-enforcement officers. Yet the officers immediately reported the incidents and the charge of attempted bribery was added to the wildlife-crime charges.

Inside jobs in wildlife crime can occur anywhere. People use privileged knowledge or positions of power to commit offences at all levels of the crime chain. It might be an employee of a protected area, perhaps even the security personnel tasked with safeguarding the rhinos.

At higher levels, it might be a police officer, a customs official or other government employee, or a community leader who uses a position of influence and trust to enable rhino killing, or the trafficking of rhino horns out of the country.

The most high-profile case in recent months of an inside job was the arrest (in January 2020) of a senior police officer from Oshakati, who used his status as a cover for his activities as a wildlife-crime kingpin. He coordinated rhino poaching in Etosha National Park, as well as the sale of the horns to international dealers. Several other government officials have been arrested in relation to rhino poaching in Etosha.

During a recent visit to the park, police inspector general Sebastian Ndeitunga, expressed the sentiment that it is a disgrace to the integrity of our security forces that civil servants have been arrested in connection with rhino poaching.

The transparency with which internal transgressions are being addressed by the government is commendable. People in positions of trust obviously have a heightened responsibility, yet no sector of society is immune to temptation. How infringements are dealt with is important. This is where public trust is tested.

The recent arrests have shown that in Namibia, security forces and other government officials are not above the law. Investigators carry out their work without bias. Suspects are being arrested, charged and prosecuted, irrespective of their status.

Wildlife crime cases involving government staff usually receive heightened public attention. This may lead to the impression that a large percentage of wildlife crimes are carried out by civil servants. Of the 91 suspects arrested on charges related to rhino poaching or trafficking during 2019, only six were government officials.

Three of these had direct links to the location being targeted, or used their position to facilitate the crime. Yet these numbers represent only a tiny fraction of the thousands of people involved in the protection of Namibia's rhino. The vast majority are dedicated, trustworthy women and men, who rarely receive recognition for their work, but are quickly cast in a bad light if anything goes wrong.

Importantly, inside information is a two-way street. Technological advances, including excellent surveillance and forensics techniques, are enabling an entirely new level of law enforcement. Combined with information provided by the public, this is allowing law enforcement officials to be a step ahead of the poachers in many cases.

During 2019, 91 suspects in 27 cases were arrested on charges related to rhino poaching or trafficking. Of these, 59 suspects in 15 cases were arrested before they could kill a rhino – and charged with conspiracy to poach. More than half of the rhino cases involving arrests were pre-emptive arrest cases.

Under Namibian law, conspiracy to poach is treated with the same seriousness as when the actual crime is committed.

The pre-emptive arrests have saved dozens of rhinos. They must be seen as one of the most significant successes in Namibia's battle against wildlife crime. They show that when legal systems function effectively and the public is on the side of the law, the power of the inside job is reversed.

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