

Elephant poaching on the rise

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WHILE South Africa battles with increasing rhino poaching, Namibia has been rocked by the discovery of 18 elephants killed for their ivory in the Caprivi Region.

Namibia was recently among countries lining up to get permission from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) to sell its large ivory stockpile.

The selling of ivory stockpiles was again to serve at a Pan African meeting in Arusha, Tanzania that started yesterday where country's such as Namibia were again to make another pitch to sell their ivory.

Namibia's ivory stockpile is over 30 000 kg and the Government said in July that it would not end up on a bonfire like Gabon recently did.

The revelation of the elephant poaching will damage the country's good reputation of wildlife conservation and its efforts to get permission to sell its ivory stockpile.

Namibia, together with some African states with stable elephant populations, is trying to convince the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites) to be granted permission to auction its ivory stockpile.

Most of the stockpiled ivory in Namibia is said to be from animals that died of natural causes, management practices and seizures.

In 2008 Namibia, Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe were allowed a one-off sale of ivory from their stockpiles to China and Japan.

But the upsurge in ivory seizures that followed this sale, led Cites and country officials to question whether one-off sales stimulate illegal trade rather than stem it, as was once thought.

Tanzania is one country which was going to push for the sale of its ivory stockpile at a Pan-African conference which started in Arusha yesterday.

Most nations that have signed up to Cites, including Kenya, oppose Tanzania's plan, fearing that it would boost poaching rather than empower Tanzania to crack down on poaching. The same may befall Namibia's attempt to be granted another auction.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism was tightlipped yesterday, saying the investigation into the poaching was at a sensitive stage and any information might jeopardise it.

However, it did confirm the reported killing of 18 elephants in the Caprivi Region over the past year. Of these, 13 were killed in the Mamili National Park over the past four months.

The discovery of the carcasses without tusks has 'caused great concern that we have to put strategies in place to break this case' , said Colgar Sikopo, the ministry's director of regional services and park management.

The ministry was not eager to share information about the killed elephants because of the 'sensitivity' about the poaching of endangered species such as elephants and rhinos.

The poaching of rhinos has increased substantially in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia but this has not been reported in Namibia. And judging by the way the Ministry of Environment and Tourism is treating the Caprivi poaching incidents, it is suspected that the authorities do not want to share information to hide the extent of poaching or the absence thereof.

It could not be established whether the latest discovery is confined to the Caprivi Region or whether other regions with elephant populations are also affected.

It is feared that local people may be tempted to become poachers for financial rewards because of their persistent complaints about the damage elephants cause to their property.

Although elephants are migratory animals, in northeastern Namibia the population is estimated at 8 000.

A foreign syndicate is suspected to be at work in the Caprivi Region, which is said to be in cahoots with local people. Sikopo would not divulge any information about the number of suspects and their nationalities.

'These cases are still being investigated. I can't say exactly which foreign nationals are involved with the locals in the region. However, we do know who the locals are but we can't reveal their names to the media either, as they are merely suspects under investigation,' Sikopo said.

He denied knowledge of 80 elephants reportedly killed this year, saying the ministry was only aware of the 18 reported cases.

Cites recently said that while collective efforts across elephant range, transit and consumer states should be made to reverse the rise in poaching, steps should not just result in seizures, but also in prosecution, convictions and strong penalties to stop the flow of contraband ivory.