

Call to break the silence on rhino poaching in Namibia

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by Staff Reporter



THE deafening silence by government and prominent conservation organisations in Namibia on the issue of rhino poaching that has reared its ugly head during the past few months has left many shaking their heads in frustration.

Some people say Namibia was put in the spotlight early this year when a permit was auctioned for a rhino hunt in the country, resulting on the world focusing on how Namibia responds to a possible rise in rhino poaching in the country.

An environmental expert, who preferred to remain anonymous, said government and respected conservation organisations' silence on the matter could have a negative impact on Namibia's international standing as a conservation role-player and tourist destination.

"The Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) seems to be extremely quiet about this. The same goes for the NGO community. Why is there not more outrage? Why the hush hush?" the environmental expert asked, adding that this could imply that "nothing is being done".

"If people perceive that we are not doing anything about this rhino poaching, it will not look good for us and people (especially tourists) will lose any positive perceptions on Namibia," she said. "We need more outrage! The poaching of rhinos is robbing Namibia of our treasure. People should be more vocal about it, and put their foot down. The scary thing is that they are not..."

One environmental expert noted that the fear of recriminations from MET as a result of speaking publicly about the issue is "ridiculous". He urged that the issue should be approached with all experts on board, and trying to sideline some for speaking out would unnecessarily squander valuable skills.

He said MET should at least "be putting out a holding statement to all the people who are interested locally and international, who are looking at us".

It was understandable, he further said, that MET would not put all their cards on the table "but saying nothing at all, does not paint them in good light. At least come out and say what they are doing".

Conservation scientist and acting executive director of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation Julian Fennessy says a statement from MET on the status of rhinos in Namibia would be a positive step.

He conceded that "they may well have their reasons for trying to keep things quiet" in particular regarding the possible ongoing investigations.

However, Fennessy added, "the issue is a Namibian issue, and all Namibians would be interested to find out what is happening, where they can take action, what they can do".

Fennessy, a former director at the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF), added that there is no doubt rhino poaching in Namibia has “escalated to a point where we need to start looking in detail at the issue and work collaboratively between all stakeholders ... not just MET, but the private landowners need to take action. Not just an internal discussion in MET, the discussion needs to be broader”.

Fennessy warned that action should “happen today, not tomorrow, because who knows what will happen tomorrow”.

The environmental communication expert also warned that poaching would have a “huge impact on communities that live in conservancies, as they benefit greatly from the wildlife. Now is the time where we need to start mobilizing people in different regions, especially those in the conservancies. They have a right to know exactly what is going on, because their lives will be greatly affected by the poaching”.

She added that government has to reach out to the Chinese government to “start working together so that they can get involved in a partnership to fight this poaching issue” and to make their diplomatic engagement public knowledge.

To date, one Chinese national, 32-year-old Dejin Xu, who owns a business in Oshakati, was arrested during a sting operation in Opuwo in February. He is out on N\$20 000 bail.

Three other Chinese nationals were arrested in possession of 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin in March, and two hand-reared, tame white rhino were killed and their horns removed by unknown poachers in late March. No arrests have been made.

The World Wildlife Fund in Namibia (WWF Namibia) declined to comment on the issue of rhino poaching in Namibia, when approached for comment earlier this week.

At the time of going to print, a statement, which was due from MET, had not yet been released, despite several attempts over several days to be provided with an official statement.