

Rhino poaching on the rise in Namibia

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by Staff Reporter



THE arrest of three Chinese men found in possession of rhino horns and the killing of two hand-reared white rhinos on a farm close to Windhoek - in a space of a week - has cast the spotlight on the increase in rhino poaching in Namibia.

Marcia Fargnoli, the chief executive officer of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) in Namibia, yesterday said there is little doubt rhino poaching is on the rise in the country.

"Indeed, illegal hunting of rhinos in Namibia has increased in the past two years," she said.

She added that there "is no reason to believe that international criminal syndicates would target neighbouring countries but not Namibia. Namibia is certainly on the radar of these syndicates."

"At the moment there are more rhinos in South Africa and this is why it is the main target point. However, it doesn't prevent Namibia from also being a target".

Environmentalist and game ranger Mark Paxton agreed, saying there is "absolutely no doubt" it "was inevitable it was going to reach us. Just a matter of time".

He also said Namibia's wildlife cannot stay off crime syndicates' radar for long.

The concern, he further said, is that Namibia lacks the resources to effectively tackle these "highly organised and highly

financed syndicates”.

Dr Conrad Braine, an environmental officer and scientist at Wilderness Safaris also said the arrest last week of three Chinese men, Pu Xu Xin, Li Zhi Bing and Li Xiao Liang, at the Hosea Kutako International Airport, with 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin, and the white rhinos killed on farm Ongos north of Windhoek, strongly indicate that rhino poaching is “happening, we have to be very alert”.

He added that although poachers target black rhinos, white rhinos are most vulnerable because they are “so docile and placid. They are very easy targets. It's like shooting a cow”.

Environmentalist Charlie Paxton, who owns Shamvura Camp in the north-east of Namibia, yesterday said several aspects such as Namibia's rugged and vast terrain, its low population density, strong NGO presence and the conservancy programme among other things, have enabled the country “to provide a more effective rhino protection, with good monitoring systems and control”.

She also said private game farms have given intensive round the clock protection to rhinos.

However, she cautioned: “Namibia is yet to experience the high tech, highly skilled and well-equipped cartel type syndicate poaching that we are seeing in other countries like South Africa. The question is whether our Ministry of Environment and Tourism and affiliates are ready and able to counter this?”

Fargnoli said while “there never is enough funding ... it doesn't mean we cannot be effective with the funding we have. I believe that it is a matter of passion and will. Combining efforts with others can help to solve this problem. Communication and transparency are also key”.

Namibia's government and non-governmental organisations, Fargnoli explained, are working with neighbouring countries, to monitor and tackle the issue of cross-border poaching and smuggling.

However, no information is available on whether the government has approached countries like China and others in East Asia that are known destinations for rhino horns.

“This is a serious issue that all Namibians should be concerned with. I think it is time for all Namibians to take a firm stance against poaching,” Fargnoli said.

Police spokesman Edwin Kanguatjivi yesterday said the case of the poached white rhinos is still being investigated and no suspects have been arrested.

Charien Rowland, a manager at a game lodge close to Omaruru, said the white rhinos on the farm are “like children to us. If we call them, they come. We are very, very concerned about this whole situation”.

Rowland said she carefully monitored visitors to the lodge and has alerted staff to be extra vigilant when it comes to protecting the rhinos.

“We check on them every day. If they don't come, we immediately go out to look for them. It's so scary”.

* Send an alert sms to 55555 if you have any information regarding suspicious activities that threaten rhino and the safety of Namibia's wildlife. The sms is kept anonymous and is free of charge.