

Government and experts meet to tackle poaching

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by Staff Reporter



A TOTAL of 11 rhinos have been killed by poachers in the past six years with eight animals poached in the past two years, a further two in 2021 and one in 2011 and 28 horns recovered during that period, a workshop on wildlife that was held in Windhoek was told.

The recovered horns include 14 confiscated from three Chinese men (now in custody), valued at N\$2,3 million, at the Hosea Kutako Airport in March this year. An additional eight horns were confiscated in 2013, two horns in 2012, and a further four horns during the preceding four years.

This increase in illegal rhino killings was the highlight of the workshop on Thursday and Friday, that brought stakeholders together to discuss strategies to prevent poaching in the country. Opening the workshop, Colgar Sikopo, the head of the Directorate of Regional Services and Parks Management in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), disclosed the number of rhinos killed by poachers and rhino horns recovered by MET and law enforcement officers in the past decade.

The workshop was held in response to a recent spate of rhino killings, which has highlighted the shift of attention in rhino poaching syndicates from South Africa to Namibia.

Sikopo said four rhinos were killed by poachers in the country this year, but no arrests had been made. Poachers killed another four rhinos last year. During his presentation on Thursday, Sipoko also said the "escalation in elephant poaching has been a source of concern" and that "recent cases of rhino poaching show a spread westwards".

He added that poaching "may have severe economic implications ... [and] needs to be rapidly brought under control" and told the workshop that the 14 rhino horns confiscated from Chinese men Li Zhibing, Pu Xuexin and Li Xiaoliang, were all confirmed through DNA tests to originate from Namibia.

Between 2005 and 2013, eight suspects were arrested in connection with the illegal possession of rhino horns.

Sikopo said rhino poaching impacts negatively on a number of sectors, including tourism and trophy hunting, species conservation, the management of protected areas, including conservancies and game farms, food security and the general security of the country.

By targeting valuable big game species such as rhinos and elephants, poachers are threatening the particularly valuable trophy hunting sector, which generates millions of dollars for Namibians, especially the conservancies.

Sikopo said the 28 poached elephants in Bwabwata National Park, Mudumu National Park and Nkasa Rupara National Park in 2012, had resulted in a loss of nearly N\$4 million.

He said five elephants had been poached in Namibia this year, 38 in 2013 and 78 in 2012, up from only one in 2011. In addition, 222 elephant tusks were confiscated between 2005 and 2013, with 78 tusks recovered in 2010, 65 in 2011, 39 in 2012 and 16 in 2013.

The Deputy Minister of MET, Pohamba Shifeta urged workshop delegates to help “stop this illegal killing of our wildlife now”.

Wildlife experts, magistrates, prosecutors and lawyers, police officers, intelligence experts, custom officials, immigration officials and other stakeholders took part in the discussions

Shifeta told delegates during his opening statement that government has “noted with great concern” an increase in poaching: “There is a high probability that (poachers’) attention will shift to Namibia as we have recently experienced”.

He added that following a period of low poaching in Namibia “there is a clear requirement for a strategy to upgrade law enforcement and crime prevention capacity in the country as well as for immediate action that should be part of, and feed into, the overall strategy”.

In particular, he noted that priority now should be to “control the emerging elephant poaching (for ivory) in the north east of the country and to prevent the westwards spread of rhino and elephant poaching into the Etosha National Park and beyond”.