



Namibian links to SA 'rhino mafia'

24 September 2014 | Environment

A South African poaching kingpin linked to the killing of more than 22 rhinos valued at nearly N\$22 million was rearrested shortly after a court appearance on earlier poaching charges in which a co-accused has been linked to Namibia. In the latest case, it has emerged that the same tranquilliser was used in a rhino killing spree for which professional hunter and game farmer Hugo Ras and two veterinarians were arrested more than two years ago. It was then believed that they were distributing these tranquillisers to a poaching syndicate, but it now appears that Ras has been operating his own syndicate the entire time. The South African media have dubbed them the 'Boere rhino mafia'. Ras was first arrested on rhino poaching charges alongside a world-renowned wildlife veterinarian who



(<https://d3rp5jat0m3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse>

has worked on several projects in Namibia. The two are the former head of the Kruger Park's game-capturing unit, Dr Douw Grobler, and private veterinarian Dr Johannes Gerhardus Kruger. The three were arrested for contravening the Medicines and Related Substances Control Act. The group allegedly supplied a rhino poaching syndicate with tranquillisers. The M99 drug, also called etorphine, was used to dart rhinos to enable the removal of their horns. Grobler's responsibilities during his tenure at the Kruger National Park included various relocation projects involving elephants, rhino and disease-free buffalo to Namibia, Malawi, Botswana, the US, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. He was also involved as an elephant specialist at the Erindi private game reserve in Namibia. It is believed that Ras has been managing a poaching syndicate for about five years. In the latest case, nine other alleged members of a poaching syndicate were arrested with Ras. These members include his wife, Trudie Ras; his brothers, Anton Ras and Arno Smith; Bonnie Steyn, a pilot from Ficksburg in the Free State; Warrant Officer Willie Oosthuizen of the Hawks elite police unit in Pretoria; Joseph Wilkinson, an attorney from Pretoria; Christoffel Scheepers; Mandla Magagula; and Willem van Jaarsveld. They have all appeared on poaching-related charges and have been remanded in police custody for seven days until their formal bail application hearing on September 29. They are between the ages of 30 and 50. The arrests came after a year-long investigation. The group was alleged to have contributed to the brutal slaughter and mutilation of 24 rhinos in state-owned and privately owned South African game reserves. Only two of the 24 rhinos that were attacked survived, but were dehorned after they were darted. The ruthless killings took place between 2008 and 2012. The syndicate members are alleged to have obtained at least 84 rhino horns and sold them to dealers in Southeast Asia and Vietnam. Besides 41 horns obtained by means of poaching, at least 14 horns were allegedly stolen from a government building. The ten suspects are expected to face numerous counts of theft, fraud, damage to property (related to the killing and mutilation of rhinos), racketeering, money-laundering, intimidation and illegal possession of firearms and ammunition when they go on trial. WINDHOEK ELLANIE SMIT