



Rhino Trust probes staff poaching rumours

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Namibia's Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) has launched an internal investigation in response to allegations that some of its staff members have been involved in the escalating rhino poaching that has hit the Kunene Region.

Most of the 24 rhinos poached last year were black rhino from the Kunene Region and allegations have surfaced pointing at a conspiracy between SRT rangers and poachers. The SRT yesterday confirmed in a statement that an internal investigation was launched last year after several "concerns" were brought to their attention. The CEO of the SRT, Simson Uri-Khob, yesterday told Namibian Sun that "there have been allegations that our staff have been involved in these activities, but it has no grounds. Only when there is proof can we pronounce ourselves on this." The internal investigation started in July 2014 and is led by an external investigator - veteran game warden Tommy Hall. It is expected that the investigation, which "is complex and still in process", will take several more weeks.

Uri-Khob said it could take up to the middle of February to be completed. According to the SRT, should any evidence or suspected criminal activity be uncovered the information will be provided to the Protected Resources Unit of the Namibian Police and the appropriate internal actions will also be taken. The organisation stressed that it is committed to being transparent with the results of its investigation. "SRT's stakeholders and the public do, however, need to understand that any ongoing police investigation that may arise may reduce the details that can be made public." The SRT announced towards the end of last year that it was being restructured into an anti-poaching outfit rather than just a rhino monitoring organisation. Therefore, Dr Axel Hartmann will assume the full-time role of Chief Operating Officer of SRT on February 1. Dr Hartmann is a well-respected veterinarian and has been a long-standing trustee of SRT in conjunction with his leadership in rhino treatment in Namibia. The SRT said the threats to Namibia's rhinos have intensified, and it remains committed to working with its partners in the communities, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the Kunene Rhino Protection Unit, and NamPol's Protected Resources Unit in protecting the black rhinos of the Kunene Region. WINDHOEK ELLANIE SMIT



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