

Rhino poaching in the Kunene – a field perspective

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SENSATIONAL disclosures are the stuff of journalism. Good journalism however, requires that these disclosures are accurate and the interpretation of the facts is rational and reasonable.

A recent front page lead “Wildlife staff probed in Kunene rhino poaching” requires a response.

The Save the Rhino Trust provides a soft target for the lack of progress in the current anti-rhino poaching initiatives in Kunene region. Quite correctly SRT's board hired an experienced investigator to establish whether any of its staff had colluded in the poaching. Pending the outcome, I must point out some inaccuracies in the article, based on my long-term and ongoing involvement in the region.

For a start, John Grobler got two names of the 'Big Three Conservancies' wrong, showing his lack of knowledge of Namibia's CBNRM programme, how conservation is now being practised in Kunene region, who the main role players are, and their responsibilities.

SRT's role is to monitor rhinos and provide data to the MET. This they have done effectively, with limited resources (three

field vehicles to cover two million hectares) for 30 years. Their staff does not have the authority to enforce the law. The MET has the overall responsibility for conserving Namibia's rhino population, but Nampol's Protected Resources Unit (PRU) has been mandated to investigate all serious wildlife crimes.

The conservancies have been granted the responsibility to conserve the wildlife within their borders, but have no law enforcement authority. However, to provide more field manpower, each conservancy with rhinos has also appointed two dedicated rhino rangers, but their role has been limited by having only one vehicle between them all.

IRDNC provides the conservancies with technical support and training, and they and the SRT provide support to the conservancy rhino ranger project.

Based on this, it would be more correct for the article to talk about "a complex set of political problems that pits the local community (which has given their full support to protecting the rhinos and have been responsible for the only two arrests made to date) against a non-local businessman and his associates" – the alleged prime suspects mentioned.

The article quotes a letter to the SRT: ". . . it was impossible for anyone to be poaching in what amounts to the SRT's backyard ... without the active collaboration of people with intimate knowledge of both the rhinos and the extremely rugged area ..." However, the alleged suspect named in his report has grazed his cattle here for more than 10 years, including during the 2014 drought in the exact area of Palmwag Concession where most rhino have been poached.

Other non-local herders (from the Epupa area) also graze their livestock where more rhino have been poached and would not need SRT "collaboration".

Last April, shortly after the drought ended and the main suspect removed his cattle from the Palmwag concession, the fresh carcass of a rhino bull was found here by the SRT's camel team, who immediately reported it to the MET and PRU. A month later the carcasses of a rhino cow and calf (which appeared to have been killed around the same time as the bull) were found by SRT trackers in the same area and also reported to the PRU.

The reason why both these cases were uncovered by SRT field staff is because no one else was then regularly patrolling this very remote part of the concession. In fact, if it were not for the SRT monitoring, it is unlikely that we would have known rhinos were being poached in Kunene region. A case of blaming the messenger?

Grobler states that: "The 24 December case also occurred close to Mbakondja, in the same area around the Komagorras fountain."

In fact, the two places are more than 20 kilometres and a very rugged watershed apart, but the important difference is that local people are living around Mbakondja – the reason why the carcass was found within 48 hours, whereas Komagorras is in the concession, where no local people live and only the SRT regularly patrolled. Because they found these carcasses, they were interrogated by the PRU as if they must be the poachers.

Having spent time in the field with them I know how difficult it is to find carcasses in such a vast and rugged area, and also how demoralised they were when their dedication was turned against them.

Grobler also states that "one of the SRT trackers bought a vehicle for N\$40 000 (hardly a luxury vehicle) in December – while earning a monthly salary of N\$1 000." In fact, this long term SRT worker's salary is considerably more, plus a bonus

for every rhino his team identifies and records for MET's data base. Every organisation can have bad eggs, but unless there is hard evidence to back up the insinuations, the article has only served to further de-motivate the SRT rhino monitors.

Grobler has used his version of events to attack the SRT, which has no law enforcement authority, while the real problem lies in no arrests having been made since early 2014, when a conservancy rhino ranger uncovered a case of the horns being cut off a rhino that died of natural causes. The suspect, also from Ruacana area, has still to be tried in court.

Since then another 17 rhinos have been killed, and while the local community has continued to provide the PRU with information, no thorough on-the-ground investigation appears to have been carried out. The result is a situation that could have been nipped in the bud, but has now escalated to where the poachers seem to be acting with impunity, the MET has resorted to crisis management, and the NGO that has delivered on its mandate is being made a scapegoat for the lack of success.

For the poaching to stop all the parties need to work together. The conservancies, local communities and the NGOs have shown their willingness to do so.