Two charged over rhino horn and abalone

News - National | 2016-02-04

by Werner Menges

THE discovery of close to 100 kilogrammes of dried abalone and more than a kilogramme of rhino horn pieces in Windhoek this week landed a Chinese citizen and a Namibian man in the dock in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court yesterday.

Chinese national Zhi Geng (37) appeared before magistrate Justine Asino on counts of dealing in or possession of rhino horn, and possession of abalone, which is a controlled wildlife product. His Namibian co-accused, James Barron Wallace (47), is charged only with possession of abalone.

Public prosecutor Tatelo Lusepani told the magistrate that Zhi is being charged with having dealt in or possessed 27 pieces of rhino horn, weighing 1,15 kg and valued at about N$91 000, in Windhoek on Monday this week. Zhi and Wallace are both charged with having possessed 95 kg of abalone, valued at N$235 000, on the same day.

A police spokesperson, deputy commissioner Edwin Kanguatjivi, said yesterday that the two men are alleged to have smuggled the dried abalone from South Africa into Namibia.

They allegedly were about to smuggle the abalone from Namibia to Hong Kong, he added.

Kanguatjivi said that during a search of Zhi's residence in Ludwigsdorf in Windhoek, pieces of rhino horn were also found by the police.

He remarked that it appeared to be a new tactic of smugglers of controlled wildlife products to cut up rhino horns and elephant tusks into pieces in an attempt to avoid having their contraband detected by scanners when they try to take it out of the country.

The two men were arrested in a joint operation by the Namibian Police and the country's customs authorities, he said.

Abalone is in high demand in parts of east Asia, where the shellfish is regarded an expensive delicacy. In South Africa, wild populations of abalone, which is also known as perlemoen, are under threat of being wiped out by widespread illegal harvesting of the molluscs, often by crime syndicates.

Zhi and Wallace were both remanded in custody when their case was postponed to 23 February for further investigations to be done.

Wallace's defence lawyer, Norman Tjombe informed the magistrate that he had instructions to bring a bail application to court before the two men are scheduled to return to court in nearly three weeks' time.

Zhi was represented by defence lawyer Willem Visser.

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- It's down to the Judge now to send a message out there that it's not acceptable at all. - ÐIILÖW MÖNTANÄ | 2016-02-04 [18454]