

Two rhinos saved, four suspects arrested

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WHAT was described as excellent cooperation between the Omaruru District Watch and the police resulted in two white rhinos being saved from poaching and four suspected poachers arrested.

It all started last Friday when a rhino cow was wounded by the suspected poachers. She and her calf fortunately managed to escape; the poachers hoping to track her down to take her horns for the Asian sex market.

The calf, which stayed with her, may have been killed too – just for being in the way.

The Omaruru District Watch (ODW), which was assisted by police reservists, was informed that five shots were heard on a game lodge near Omaruru (name of lodge withheld).

A team was sent out to investigate and find the animal before the poachers did. She was located well before the poachers got hold of her, and a local vet was called in to dart her and clear the projectile.

She was also given antibiotics.

“She and the calf will be fine,” said ODW leader Alexander Steyn.

The poachers were still at large.

Three days later on Monday morning, the ODW were called again. This time, two shots were fired near the lodge house. It came to light that this time, a rhino bull was shot and wounded in the neck – but it also escaped certain death by running into the thickets of the rugged mountainous terrain.

From Monday to Tuesday, the ODW, the police's resources' protection unit, a special team from the national crime intelligence unit and a vet were on the farm trying to find the wounded bull, and also to track the poachers.

The shooter was caught on the farm on Monday, carrying a home-modified heavy-calibre rifle with which he had shot the rhino.

A second man was arrested at Omaruru town the same day with the vehicle in which the suspects were transported to and from the lodge. They allegedly watched the lodge for three weeks before they decided to shoot the rhino.

It also came to light that there were three more suspects – one of whom was apparently the kingpin.

Two more suspects were arrested on Tuesday at Kalkfeld – but the bull was still missing by late Tuesday evening.

By Wednesday morning, the bull was discovered in the mountainous terrain, where it was also darted and treated with

antibiotics.

He, too, will survive and continue life as a valuable living resource on the game lodge.

The fifth suspect, who is regarded as the 'kingpin' poacher, is still at large, but police investigations continue.

The police confirmed the matter to The Namibian when called for comment, but did not give more information as the investigations are still ongoing on the farm.

"I am extremely impressed with the urgency, diligence and professionalism in which the police treated this case. I take my hat off for them. It is because of them helping us that we were able to have so much success in the operation," Steyn said.

Attempts to get comment from the lodge owner were not successful.

The suspects, who are expected to make their first appearance in the Omarutu magistrate's court, face charges which include the illegal possession of a firearm, the unlawful hunting of protected game and trespassing, among others.

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- Poaching will continue as long as there are rich people overseas who want to buy the products and middlemen willing to facilitate the trade and make huge sums in the process.

The poachers themselves are simply meeting the demand and are doubtless exploited too, since they are the ones placing themselves in danger for scant reward. I am sure if they had other economic options available to them, many would abandon this practice.

I am not excusing what they do because it is cruel and reduces valuable populations of wildlife but if poachers were to be offered meaningful incentives - shorter prison sentences - to act as whistleblowers facilitating the arrest of the dealers and the end consumers, then we would see some real progress in reducing this type of killing. -

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