

Poaching could wipe out rhino population

News - National | 2016-09-27

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by Werner Menges



NAMIBIA could lose its entire rhinoceros population in the next 10 years if the rate at which poachers have been killing these endangered animals in recent years continues unchecked.

Poachers have killed 201 rhinos in Namibia since 2011, and their crimes have not only had an environmental impact, but also an economic one.

If a direct price tag had to be put on the 201 rhinos lost to poaching since 2011, they would have a total value of about N\$281 million – a substantial national asset that has been lost. That does not include their value as an attraction for photographic tourism, though.

Not only has Namibia lost such valuable national assets as a result of rhinoceros poaching, but government efforts to clamp down on the killing of these endangered species and protect Namibia's remaining rhino population is also costing millions of dollars that could have been spent on other pressing needs.

This was the testimony of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism's director of wildlife and national parks, Colgar Sikopo, in the Windhoek Regional Court on Friday last week, when he gave evidence in aggravation of sentence in the trial of four Chinese citizens convicted of having attempted to smuggle 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin out of Namibia in March 2014.

Sikopo told magistrate Alexis Diergaardt that Namibia has experienced unprecedented levels of rhino poaching recently. The country's rhino population was hit especially hard last year, when 127 rhinos were killed, he said.

Sikopo said only one rhino was recorded poached in 2011 – but since then, the number of animals illegally killed has increased sharply. Two rhinos were recorded killed by poachers in 2012, four in 2013, 24 in 2014, and 127 in 2015. So far this year, Namibia has already lost 43 rhinos to poachers, Sikopo said.

Poachers have killed about 10% of Namibia's rhinos in recent years, he added. "If this trend continues, by 2026 we will have no rhinos left in this country," he stated.

Black rhinos – the more endangered of the two rhinoceros species found in Namibia – have borne the brunt of the sharp increase in poaching, according to figures that Sikopo provided to the court.

Out of the 201 rhinos killed by poachers since 2011, 184 were black rhinos and 17 were white rhinos, he said. Eleven white rhinos and 137 black rhinos have been killed in Etosha National Park, while 40 black rhinos have fallen victim to poachers in conservancies, he said. Poachers also killed six white rhinos and seven black rhinos on private land.

Sikopo added that government was spending about N\$10 million a month on the protection of rhinos and other wildlife, and that the dehorning of 352 rhinos in some areas has also cost about N\$10 million so far.

Magistrate Diergaardt heard the testimony a week after she convicted Chinese citizens Wang Hui (41), Pu Xuexin (51), Li Zhibing (55), and Li Xiaoliang (32) on two counts of attempting to export controlled wildlife products from Namibia. The two Lis and Pu were arrested at Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March 2014, after 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin were detected in the luggage of the two Lis before they and Pu were scheduled to leave Namibia on the first leg of a journey to China.

Wang was arrested at a hotel in Windhoek in May 2015.

In her verdict, the magistrate found that the evidence before her proved the four accused jointly planned to smuggle the wildlife contraband out of Namibia, and that they acted with a common purpose when they committed their crimes.

Magistrate Diergaardt is due to hear further evidence from the state in the presentencing phase of the four men's trial on Thursday.

State advocate Simba Nduna is prosecuting. Defence lawyer Orben Sibeya is representing the four accused, who are being kept in custody.