

Shifeta says poaching not a crisis

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THE poaching of rhinos and elephants in Namibia is not a crisis because only about 1,2% are poached per year, said environment minister Pohamba Shifeta.

Shifeta, who was speaking at State House on Tuesday during the Harambee Prosperity Plan's mid-term performance review, said the growing incidents of conflict between humans and wildlife is instead a crisis.

At the same occasion, however, President Hage Geingob said: "We condemn what is going on. We must intensify (the fight against) what is going on. It is unacceptable. Poaching, there must be inside jobs also. Chinese cannot come here and know everywhere to get the rhinos."

Shifeta said Namibia has an estimated more than 2 500 rhinos, with the birth rate per annum of rhinos (black & white) standing at 5% to 6%, compared to a death rate of less than 1,5% per year, including natural mortality and trophy hunting causes.

He said elephants are estimated to be more than 22 000, with a birth rate of 6% to 7% a year, compared to a less than 1% death rate for both non-natural and natural mortality causes (including permitted killing).

"Mortality caused by poaching is less than 1,2% per annum. That means there is no threat to the existence of both species. It is a matter of managing it," Shifeta said.

His concern rather, the minister said, is the number of people killed by animals this year in growing incidents of conflict between humans and wildlife.

"The wildlife population surpassed the capacity of the available space for land use. These are roaming animals in open parks. The only ones not giving problems are those in Etosha because they are closed in by the fence. At Musheshe, green scheme projects are destroyed every day.

We are trying to look for a way of preventing damage by perhaps fencing off the projects with an elephant-proof fence, but this will be a costly exercise," he said.

The Save The Rhino Trust Namibia chief executive officer, Simson Uri-Khob, agreed with Shifeta's assertion that the poaching crisis is under control.

"Compared to a few years ago, I think we have the situation under control. The fact that we hear about arrests being made almost every day means we are making progress," said Uri-Khob.

However, the director of the Namibian Association of Community-Based Natural Resources Management support organisations, Maxi Louis, said the country still has reason to be worried.

"Judging by the number of poaching incidents which I read about in the papers, the situation is still very alarming. But I commend the police, who are working around the clock to ensure that poachers are arrested," she added.

Although there are no latest figures, in May four people were killed by wild animals. The director of parks and wildlife in the ministry, Colgar Sikopo, said at the time that there have been 109 recorded cases of livestock killed; an average of 218 hectares of crops destroyed; and four people killed in the process.

He said 16 people were killed in conflict between humans and wildlife last year. A child was injured, while 554 livestock were killed. Shifeta said 222 hectares of crops were damaged.