



## Elephant poaching up, rhino down

13 January 2017 | Crime

While the poaching spotlight is intensely focused on rhino in Namibia, official poaching statistics released by the environment ministry this week show that rhino poaching declined in 2016 while elephant poaching doubled compared to 2015.

In total, 216 black and white rhinos have been killed over the past four years, while 266 elephants have been killed by poachers since 2013.

According to official figures released by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism this week, poachers killed 63 black and white rhinos in 2016, compared to 91 killed during the previous year and 61 slaughtered in 2014, in addition to one reported case in 2013.

No poaching figures from previous years were provided, although some reports indicate that the poaching epidemic has been continuing for longer than officially reported.

In contrast, the ministry's records show that elephant poaching skyrocketed in 2016, with 101 cases reported in 2016 compared to 49 in 2015, 78 in 2014, and 38 in 2013.

The locations of the poaching events were not released this week, though media reports from last year show that north-eastern Namibia is a primary elephant poaching area. The majority of rhinos are killed in Namibia's premier national park, Etosha, followed by the Kunene Region.

According to the ministry, the latest figures are based on the estimated date when the animal was killed, and not the year in which the carcass was discovered. That is why previously reported statistics differed from the latest figures.

"All [rhino] carcasses have been examined, except two old pending cases in Etosha," ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda told Namibian Sun this week.

He said the rhino statistics from 2014 and 2015 appear to be different, but the latest results provided clearer timelines of the year in which they were killed.

The rise in elephant poaching in Namibia is in line with a survey conducted on the state of African elephants, which showed a decline of as much as 30% in savannah elephant populations in 15 of 18 countries surveyed.

Namibia declined to participate in the survey, the Great Elephant Census, although it cost nothing to participate.

Official records provided by Namibia to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) claim the country has a population of around 22 700 elephants, a number many say should have been verified during the recent elephant census.

International figures further show that Namibia remains home to the largest population of free-roaming rhino. The world population of black rhino is estimated at 5 000, with Namibia's population accounting for an estimated 40% of that number.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/poaching-up-rhino-down2017-01-130.jpg>)  
IT'S WAR: Anti-poaching units are in the frontlines of the fight against poachers threatening the critically endangered rhino and elephant species. PHOTO: UNDP NAMIBIA

According to recent international reports, ivory can fetch up to N\$15 000 per kilogram on the black market currently, while rhino horn is valued between N\$900 000 and N\$1.3 million per kilogram.

At that price, rhino horn is more valuable than gold and platinum, and on the black market, diamonds and cocaine.

Muyunda said a detailed report on poaching, including a list of the number of black and white rhino killed, arrests and poaching locations, was being compiled and would be submitted to Minister Pohamba Shifeta this month.

Newspaper reports from 2016 show that dozens of suspected poachers have been arrested in the past three years, many linked to poaching in the Etosha National Park and the Kunene Region.

Nonetheless, poaching convictions have been negligible and poaching suspects, including repeat offenders, have been routinely released on bail, often amid public protest.

One report stated that the ministry estimated that at least 100 rhino had been poached in Etosha. There were allegations that the official rhino poaching figures were significantly lower than the reported numbers, due to various reasons.

While poaching syndicates continue to thrive, and the money at stake attracts willing poachers, the risk taken by those doing the actual killing has risen. At least three poachers have been killed and one critically wounded in armed clashes with anti-poaching units in the Bwabwata National Park last month.

In December, Minister Shifeta and the police publicly announced intensified efforts to "eradicate" poaching in Namibia. These included increased anti-poaching units and patrols in poaching hotspots such as Bwabwata and Etosha.

The anti-poaching units have been strengthened by armed soldiers and police officers, and they have been instructed to defend themselves if they come under fire from poachers.

Various estimates exist of what the bottom-rung poachers earn, with prices allegedly ranging from N\$15 000 to N\$25 000 per rhino killed.

The middlemen earn up to four times more than that for supplying horns to buyers who ship the horns to China and elsewhere.

The poaching kingpins at the top receive millions of dollars per animal killed, reports have suggested.

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