

Ministry doubts poaching of rhino

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Page no: 1



by Werner Menges



THE Ministry of Environment and Tourism has doubts whether a rhinoceros cow that was found dead at a game farm in the Otjiwarongo area on Monday was poached as initially thought.

In a statement issued today, the ministry's spokesperson, Romeo Muyunda, said preliminary findings of an investigation of the death of the rhino were that there was no evidence that the animal had been poached. Although the rhino was found with a wound on her neck, that could be the result of a fight with another rhino, Muyunda said.

He also stated that the rhino's carcass was scanned for ballistic evidence and no signs of foul play could be detected. The investigation of the matter is continuing, Muyunda said.

The owner of the rhino, game farmer WP Barnard, had reservations about the ministry's view when he was contacted yesterday.

He said his experience from many years of working closely with rhinos was that when the animals were involved in a fatal fight, multiple wounds would be found on the rhino killed as a result of such a conflict.

The animal found dead at Otjiwa Safari Lodge on Monday – a 30-year-old white rhino cow named Maria – had only one wound on her neck and had bled heavily, Barnard said. She was also found to have blood in her lungs, he added.

The cow's behaviour over the days before she was found dead was also unusual, in that she separated from her eight-month-old calf, Barnard said. Rhinos normally have a close bond with their offspring and keep close to their calves of that age.

Regardless of the cause of the cow's death, he is now trying to cope with the situation of the calf that has been without its mother since Thursday last week, Barnard said. He is trying to make arrangements to have the calf moved to a place of care, he said.

The cow had last been seen at its daily feeding session on Wednesday last week, Barnard has told *The Namibian*. A search was launched for her when she was missing from the feeding station on Thursday, and she was last spotted on Friday, before her carcass was discovered on Monday about 10 kilometres from the area that was her usual territory.