



Rhino security under spotlight

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An audit will be conducted to ensure the safekeeping of not only rhino horns held legally in Namibia, but also that the permits held by all the rhino horn owners in the country are up to date. This is according to Dr Malan Lindeque, permanent environment and tourism secretary.

Moreover, rhino owners in Namibia have raised concern about the management, the legality and the safekeeping of rhino horns in the event of the death the animal.

Namibia's owners of white rhinos and custodians of black rhinos met last week with ministry officials at a security workshop to come up with strategies in the safeguarding of the animals as privately owned rhinos have now become the target of poachers. Speaking at the event, Kenneth Uiseb, deputy director of scientific services at the environment ministry, said that Namibia's black rhino population stood at 2 085 prior to and this figure has decreased to 1 827.

He said the growth of the black rhino population in the country stands at a meagre 4.7%, however, this has also been influenced by the recent drought years.

According to him the white rhino population in the country stands at 936 with 700 that are privately owned and 236 that are in national parks owned by the ministry.

The growth of the white rhino population is currently 6.7% per year.

At this time, the good news is that the level of poaching and natural deaths of rhino has not yet exceeded the birth rate of the animals, but will reach a tipping point at some stage if poaching continues unabated.

Figures from 2014 to date indicate that 470 black rhino were dehorned and 96 white rhino have been dehorned. "This is a very expensive undertaking and a huge investment."

Of concern to the ministry and NGOs alike, is that conservation efforts, maintenance of parks, and training is falling by the wayside because the bulk of the available funds are being directed to combat poaching. Brigit Kötting, of the chief control warden at the ministry, explained the importance of the black rhino custodian programme to those attending the workshop in Windhoek.

She said especially with the unprecedented levels of poaching the custodian programme is essential for saving rhino in Namibia. The programme has since it was established in 1993, grown from 11 rhinos on two freehold private farms to 500 rhino on 23 freehold farms.

Fillemon Iifo of the scientific services directorate in the ministry also made a presentation and indicated that the white rhino population has grown from 128 in 2014 to 700 last year. According to him 31 white rhino were imported to Namibia, 23 last year, and 64 permits have been issued for importing white rhino to Namibia this year.

Furthermore, 18 white rhino have been trophy hunted since 2015.

The head of the Special Protected Resource Unit in Namibia, Deputy Commissioner Barry de Klerk said since 2012 poaching levels have increased to alarming rates.



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NOT SAFE: Rhinos are targeted both on custodial and public land and nowhere is safe for them anymore. PHOTO: FILE

“Although police and members of the defence force have been deployed in national parks, the repulsive determination of poachers has shifted and now focuses on private farms.”

However, he added that tracking and capturing poachers after incidences on private land is less complicated.

The reasons for this, he explained, include a smaller area which makes tracking easier, insider involvement and generally the carcasses are fresher and the evidence better preserved.

“Our success rate in Etosha is being hampered because carcasses that are found are mostly old and bullets can become corroded in these incidences. We would love to have a carcass as fresh as possible.”

He also pointed out that technological advances have allowed for the tracking of suspects and these have been employed with great success. The methods are known to Namibian Sun but cannot be made public as this may impede future probes.

He urged rhino owners to do regular patrols on farms, vet employees, do record-keeping of current and old employees and even occasional workers as they might be recruited by poachers.

He also said rhino owners should ensure that a crime scene is not disturbed when a poaching incident occurs and to cordon it off at a 300-metre radius. Many times owners drive over the crime scene and destroy vital evidence.

“Do not collect anything from the scene as even the most insignificant piece of evidence may be important.”