

## Abalone charges withdrawn after Chinese man flees

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by Werner Menges



**THE charges against a Windhoek man who allegedly helped a Chinese national export abalone from Namibia two years ago were withdrawn in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court yesterday.**

With Chinese citizen Zhi Geng (38) absent from the court after he jumped bail last year, public prosecutor Tatelo Lusepani informed magistrate Gerrit van Pletzen yesterday that the state was provisionally withdrawing the charges against Geng's co-accused, Windhoek resident James Barron Wallace (49).

Geng has been at large since failing to appear in court in September last year, when his and Wallace's case was postponed to yesterday for the start of their trial.

Following Geng's failure to appear in court, the bail deposit of N\$250 000 that was paid to have him released from custody near the end of February 2016 was forfeited to the state.

The prosecutor general decided in August last year that Geng and Wallace should be prosecuted on charges of unlawfully dealing in or possessing controlled wildlife products, unlawfully exporting controlled wildlife products, possessing or obtaining illicit goods, which is an offence under the Customs and Excise Act, submitting false information or making a false declaration on customs documents, and irregular dealing in goods, which is also a contravention of the Customs and

Excise Act.

Geng and Wallace were arrested on 1 February 2016. After 25 days in custody, Wallace was granted bail of N\$30 000, while Geng was released on N\$250 000 bail.

Geng was charged with having dealt in or possessed 27 pieces of rhino horn, weighing 1,15 kg and valued at about N\$91 000, while he and Wallace were both charged with having possessed 95 kg of abalone, valued at N\$235 000, in Windhoek on 1 February 2016.

Wallace admitted during their bail hearing that he had tried to send dried abalone from Namibia to Hong Kong. Saying he received the abalone from Geng, he denied that he knew he needed a permit to export the prized seafood.

Geng was arrested after the police allegedly found more abalone in a fridge, a freezer and in dried form at the house where he was living in Ludwigsdorf in Windhoek. Police officers allegedly also found 29 pieces of rhino horn, weighing about 1,15 kg, in Geng's bedroom.

Abalone is in high demand in parts of east Asia, where the shellfish is regarded as an expensive delicacy. In South Africa, wild populations of abalone, which is also known as perlemoen, are under threat of being wiped out by widespread illegal harvesting of the molluscs, often by crime syndicates.

Wallace was represented by defence lawyer Norman Tjombe.