



Elite unit nails 73 poachers

Top sleuths on the trail of poaching syndicates

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A multi-disciplinary taskforce that has been operating since the end of July has made significant inroads in the fight against poaching, making 73 arrests.

According to the head of the police's Protected Resources Unit, Commissioner Barry de Klerk, the Blue Rhino Taskforce started operations on 30 July and has had phenomenal results.

De Klerk, says they realised that although there were specialised anti-poaching units in the regions, they were overloaded and therefore the taskforce was put together. The taskforce consists of fewer than 20 people who were selected from specialised fields to combat the scourge of poaching in the country.

According to De Klerk, several poaching and trafficking syndicates continue to operate in Etosha National Park and on private farms. They have not been dismantled and their enablers have also not been identified.

He said Blue Rhino seeks to identify, arrest and charge all syndicate members, while also establishing linkages between syndicates.

"This operation seeks to ultimately provide a clearer picture of the flow of illicit wildlife products and to provide a pathway for the in-depth investigation and successful prosecution for the organised crime syndicates responsible for the trafficking of wildlife products."

De Klerk says from 30 July to 31 October Blue Rhino arrested 73 suspects and opened 22 new dockets. Twelve of those arrested were linked to previous cases.

The team also seized three rhino horns, 31 pangolin skins, 15 live pangolins, 18 elephant tusks, one honey badger skin, one polecat skin and two fake rhino horns.

The team seized four AK-47s, four .303 hunting rifles, one Dragunov sniper rifle, one .300 hunting rifle, one .308 hunting rifle, one R4 assault rifle, one G3 assault rifle, one shotgun, ammunition, 1 365 unpolished diamonds, N\$500 000 in cash and eight vehicles used for rhino poaching.

"These guys are armed and dangerous that is why the environment ministry has for the past few years reinforced its officials in the parks with the defence force and special forces."

According to De Klerk, the serial numbers of 99% of the seized firearms had been filed off.

He said the team was committed to consolidating all existing poaching case dockets by verifying all witness statements and confessions.

They also scrutinise all the physical evidence collected and analyse the results of laboratory, ballistics and DNA tests to confirm links between different cases.

Blue Rhino also traces and arrests fugitive suspects, gathers and analyses intelligence.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asset-unit-nails-73-poachers2018-11-300.jpg>)
ELITE FORCE: The new Blue Rhino taskforce has had phenomenal success in the fight against wildlife poaching. Photo: NWR

De Klerk says despite financial support from the Rooikat Trust, financial constraints are hampering Blue Rhino's operations.

The unit's members work around the clock and since they started in July they have only been home for one week.

"We want to get more people on board, provided we have the finances.

"They are working on old cases and some are old detectives who know how to interrogate poachers, get confessions when they are caught and get information on the handlers."

Advocate Danie Small also forms part of the team and helps them to prepare cases for court.

"It is amazing to see how these syndicates are operating and how they are interlinked. There are a few poaching syndicates that are operating and they are organised."

Magistrate Alexa Diergaardt has pointed out that the poaching kingpins use low-level poachers to do the killing and there rarely is direct evidence linking them to the crimes.

De Klerk explains that the bottom-level poachers are dispensable and usually know nothing about the syndicate's workings.

He further said that the long, unguarded border with Angola offers an escape route to poaching suspects. After they are granted bail they slip into Angola, get new identification papers on that side and disappear.

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