

African rhino specialists work to curb poaching

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ABOUT 45 members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Africa rhino specialist group yesterday met at Okahandja to discuss ways to curb rhino poaching.

This is the 13th meeting of the group, and runs from 4 to 11 February. The meeting takes place every three years.

The discussions included delegates from SADC members Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Kenya, eSwatini (Swaziland), Malawi, Tanzania, Botswana, Angola, Mozambique as well as Namibia, and are a collective effort aimed at contributing to the sustainable management and protection of the rhino.

Deputy environment minister Bernadette Jagger said whilst opening the meeting that the level of rhino poaching across Africa is on the increase, and it would threaten the existence of rhinos if not dealt with promptly.

"Wildlife trafficking has become a multimillion-dollar criminal enterprise that has expanded from being just a conservation concern," she stated, adding that the increased involvement of criminal syndicates in poaching and wildlife trafficking promotes corruption.

Jagger said this would also threaten the species, strengthen illicit trade routes, and destabilise economies as well as the communities which depend on wildlife for their livelihood.

She added that Namibia has been hard-hit by poachers since 2012, with the worst year being 2015 when 97 rhinos were poached.

Since 2015, the country has lost an average of 50 rhinos annually to poaching. Jagger mainly attributed the reduction in cases to the combined efforts of the Namibian Defence Force, Namibian Police, private rhino owners, and the environment ministry.

The white rhino population in the country exceeds 2 000, while the black rhino population exceeds 1 000, despite the continued poaching. This was in line with the vision of the national rhino strategy – which encourages that healthy breeding rhino populations are established.

A senior conservation scientist at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Piet Beytell, emphasised that the meeting focused on anti-poaching solutions, as well as looking at how to grow rhino populations.

“Specialists from all over the world have come and put their minds together to come up with solutions for rhino conservation,” he said.

The chairperson of the IUCN Africa rhino specialist group, Mike Knight, expressed gratitude over the deputy minister's attendance, saying it was the first time a representative of the ministry had opened their meeting.

“Although you [Namibians] are a small country in people terms, you are not a small country in land terms,” Knight said, noting that Namibia probably has some of the best wildlife conservation legislation in the world.

The IUCN is a membership union which was created in 1948 to enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation.