



Making a killing

Shocking logging activity in Kavango before permits expire

29 March 2019 | Environment

A Namibian Sun investigation in Kavango, where it is alleged Chinese national Hou 'Josy' Xuecheng and others are continuing with logging, has revealed frenetic activity before transport and export permits expire this Sunday.

Hou has, however, again denied that he is continuing to harvest trees in the Kavango East Region.

Sources close to his operation have made the claim that his company, New Force Logistics CC, is still harvesting trees for export via the Walvis Bay harbour.

"I am mainly in the transportation business," Hou reiterated.

"So far no one has been logging [since the moratorium on tree harvesting]. The police, forest department patrol every day and the new cut wood, it is easy to see, will be confiscated and fined!"

However, a recent trip to the Kavango area showed frenetic activity before transport and export permits expire on 31 March.

Between the Mururani Veterinary Gate and Rundu, several trucks could be seen loading logs along the B8 road. After the suspension of timber harvesting licences on 26 November last year, all permits – including transport and exporting permits – were cancelled and according to the ministry of forestry no new logging permits have been issued.

However, on 6 February the forestry ministry announced that the environment ministry had authorised it to lift the moratorium on the transport of timber cut in the Kavango East, Kavango West and Zambezi regions before 26 November.

The issuing of transport and export permits for "already cut" timber resumed from 8 February and will cease on 31 March.

The forestry ministry has so far neglected to provide reasons why the transport and export permits were reissued for timber harvested illegally, since – with only two exceptions – all trees were felled without environmental clearance certificates.

Ongoing activities

Logging of slow-growing hardwood trees protected under Namibian law continues at fever pitch while the window for transport and export remains open.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-a-killing2019-03-290.jpg>)

STOCKPILE: Trees ready for loading 32 km from the Mururani Gate.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-a-killing2019-03-291.jpg>)

HOU'S OPERATIONS: Hou Xuecheng's camp on the D3401 road. Photos: Catherine Sasman



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-a-killing2019-03-292.jpg>)

'JUST HELPING': A New Force Logistics truck loaded and ready.

Evidence of these activities can be seen north of the Mururani Gate and elsewhere.

During the weekend of 16 and 17 March, about 32 kilometres from the Mururani Gate and at the turn-off to the Rooidag Gate, a huge stockpile of timber marked 'OPO' was lying on the side of the road, presumably ready for pick-up.

Ten kilometres further, a truck belonging to New Force Logistics CC was parked, fully loaded with timber. Next to it were some logs lying under a tree, presumably because the truck was filled to capacity.

A short distance from there, a group of men were standing around a small sedan car with a big pile of planks, which they said they had retrieved "from the bush" and were selling locally.

Yet another short drive from there – about 15 kilometres or so – another unidentified truck was being loaded with timber by a group of men who appeared angry when they were photographed.

By early evening, more trucks loaded with timber were lined up outside Rundu, presumably waiting for nightfall, the preferred time for the transport of timber to either Walvis Bay or "straight to South Africa", as one veterinary officer at the Rooidag Gate in the Tsumkwe West area said.

By the weekend the area in the Ncaute Community Forest along the D3401 road between Ncaute and Taratara was a hive of activity.

From Ncaute, the first activity was at Hou's "camp" – an unfenced area next to the main gravel road – where timber was being processed for transport. On one side there was a large pile of unprocessed and fresh-looking tree trunks; on the other, cut logs were being piled up.

Men operating a large front loader, chainsaws, a forklift and at least five large, yellow trucks were working there.

One of the trucks drove off towards the Taratara area, where it is alleged harvesting is continuing in dense forest along sandy roads that are becoming impassable because of the truck traffic.

Despite the evidence that stockpiles are not getting any smaller since the November harvesting moratorium, Hou remains adamant: "Namibia's forest ministry is heavily regulated. Confiscation, fine. No one breaks the law!"

He adds: "We take advantage of our machines and equipment to buy their wood. If they think the price is unreasonable, they can find a better buyer."

He also has advice for the government: "Reasonable logging and strict regulation. That is what the government needs to do. Public opinion cannot replace the law [and] cannot improve the living standards of the poor."

Hou insists that he is merely "assisting" Namibian small-scale farmers: "I have invested a lot of sawing machines to do supporting services, so it is easier to help them [the farmers] increase the sales price."

Still further down the D3401 at Vikota village, a Namibian was loading trees for a Chinese client, a certain Mr Fong, who is said to live at Rundu's Rainbow Village. Mr Fong could not be traced. The Namibian logger, Tony Vimbala, admitted to having harvested trees as late as January this year.

The most commonly used road out of Kavango East is through the Mururani Gate. However, some transport operators, like the truck Vimbala was loading, prefer to take a roundabout route past Tsintsabis and via Tsumeb to Walvis Bay.

Rooidag Gate connection

At the Rooidag veterinary gate, state veterinary officer Romanus Nyangana said that many of the timber trucks driving through the Tsumkwe West area came from farms along the border with Kavango East.

Nyangana said he found it puzzling that most of the transport permits for trees harvested in the Rundu area were issued at the Katima Mulilo forestry office.

Despite earlier denials by Hou, Nyangana said "some Chinese" were participating in tree harvesting.

Nyangana said trucks passing through the Rooidag Gate were searched for prohibited wildlife products such as elephant tusks, rhino horns or hides.

In Tsumkwe West, he said, only camelthorn trees were being cut, possibly unsustainably, to be used locally for fencing.

While the customs and excise department in the finance ministry is yet to provide statistics on the number of timber trucks that have recently crossed the border from Katwitwi, most of the trucks seen on the road between the northern regions carried wood originating from Namibia.

Tree experts, preferring anonymity, say a proper assessment of the logging frenzy in the two Kavango regions and Zambezi could only be done once the dust has settled.