

Alleged ivory dealers deny guilt on charges

News - National | 2020-03-13

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In the dock are (from left) Dirk Vermeulen, Edgar Clarke and Michael Lusse.

THREE men accused of dealing in or possessing two elephant tusks at Walvis Bay last year denied guilt on the charges they are facing during an appearance in the Walvis Bay Magistrate's Court on Thursday.

Dirk Vermeulen (50), Edgar Clarke (41) and Michael Lusse (60) were arrested in September last year and charged with illegal possession of or dealing in protected wildlife resources. They successfully applied to be released on bail later the same month, when Walvis Bay magistrate John Sindano granted each of them bail in an amount of N\$30 000.

Making a further court appearance on Thursday, they were asked to plead to the charges before their case would be submitted to the Office of the Prosecutor General to decide on the way forward. The three men pleaded not guilty.

Last year, the police received a tip-off and a sting operation was arranged during which Vermeulen and Clarke were arrested when they were allegedly arranging for the sale of two elephant tusks, weighing 33 kilograms and 31kg respectively and worth about N\$104 000. They allegedly wanted to sell the ivory for N\$500 000. Lusse was arraigned soon after being implicated.

It came to light during the men's bail hearing that the tusks were apparently trophies from a permitted elephant hunt at Maun in Botswana during the 1990s.

Lusse testified that in 2012 he was requested to keep the tusks for the original owner, who moved to South Africa and then died there – leaving Lusse stuck with the tusks.

Lusse said he later contacted Vermeulen to take the tusks as he did not want them anymore. All three of the accused men said they were convinced the tusks were legitimate as certified hunting and possession registration numbers were still set on the tusks – even when they were confiscated after the arrests.

With an idea of selling the ivory having been born, Vermeulen told Clarke of the tusks and asked him if he knew of buyers – which eventually led to their arrest during a sting operation in which two undercover policemen posed as buyers.