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Fight against wildlife crime in 2019 successfully

Blue Rhino task team gets stuck

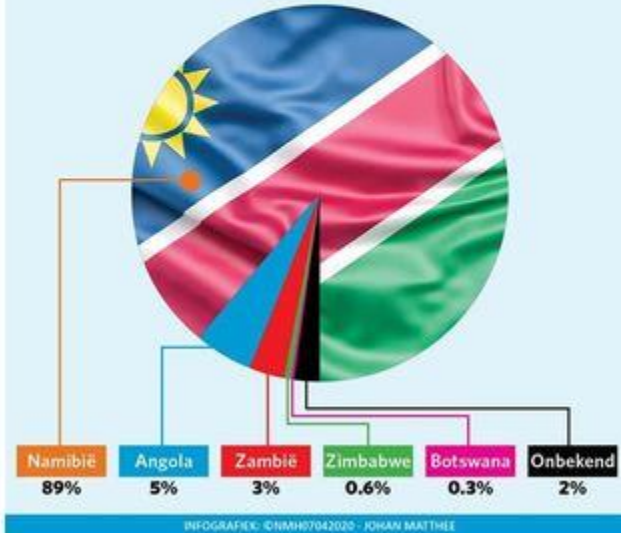
April 09, 2020 | [Environment](#)







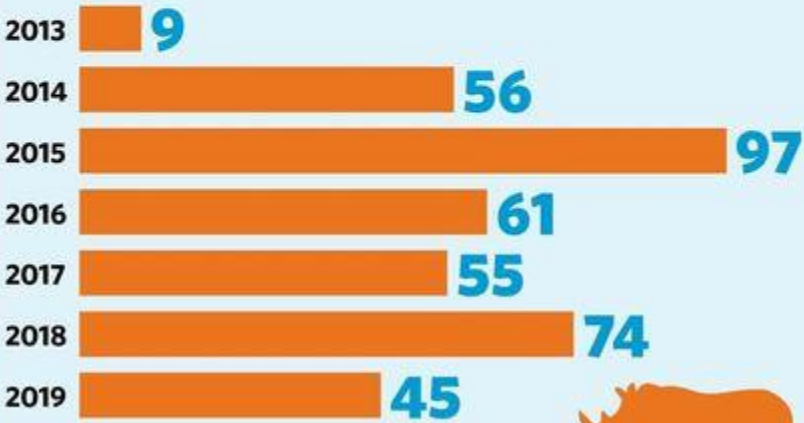
Nasionaliteit van die verdagtes



Opsomming van wildmisdaad in 2019



Renosters gestroop (2013 - 2019)



INFOGRAFIEK: ©NMMH07042020 - JOHAN MATTHEE



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Francoise Steynberg - The Ministries of the Environment, Forestry and Tourism and Safety and Security issued their 2019 wildlife crime report last week.

Last year, 45 rhinos were stripped versus 74 in 2018.

In 2019, more suspects (112) were arrested in connection with rhino-related crime than in 2018 (84).

The report was led by the Blue Rhino task team. Barry de Klerk composed.

Operation Blue Rhino was launched in July 2018.

Some of the success stories of capturing and judging wildlife criminals are:

BEFORE Buried

In June, a Namibian man was arrested who allegedly was in possession of 11 elephant teeth weighing a total of 219 kg.

He buried the elephant teeth under his bed in the ground. The ivory may have been buried under his house in the Zambezi region for years.

"This indicates that criminals are prepared to store smuggled goods until they have an opportunity to sell it, or think enough time has passed that they are safe," says De Klerk.

The origin of the elephant teeth is not yet clear.

HORN THEFT ON OUTJO

De Klerk says the investigation into the theft at Outjo, where 33 rhino horns were stolen from a home's safe in August, has led to a complicated crime trail.

The horns are from white rhinos of a private game reserve adjacent to Etosha National Park, which is dehorned to protect the rhinos from poachers.

"Using state-of-the-art detection and forensic technology, investigators were able to identify and arrest seven suspects - all Namibians -" De Klerk said.

The group of suspects consists of two thieves, two smugglers and three rhino horn dealers.

Three of the suspects are old criminals with previous charges against them and they remain in custody.

The other four were released on bail.

Nine of the horns could be traced to two different transactions in Angola, but neither the horns nor the other could be retrieved, according to De Klerk.

The investigation is still ongoing.

This case was also one of 2019's challenges, and in particular it indicated how soon horns from Namibia will be smuggled.

"The rate between the seizure of horns compared to the arrest of rhino poachers remains low. Searches at strategic border posts need to be improved to achieve greater success," De Klerk explains.

He says better incentives for suspects to point horns can also be effective.

POST OPINION FOR STRAPERY

De Klerk says arresting poachers before they can steal an animal is one of the best and most fulfilling ways to prevent wildlife crime.

In 17 different cases during 2019, 69 suspects could be arrested and charged with conspiracy to steal a rhino.

"These arrests probably saved many rhinos' lives. The conspiracy to steal a rhino is handled with the same seriousness as offenders who stole an animal," explains De Klerk.

He says those successes are due to monitoring and information provided by local communities that do not endure poaching and report suspicious actions to authorities.

CONTINUOUS INVESTIGATIONS

"In the case of four rhinos poached on a private game reserve in 2018, arrests continue with the last suspect arrested in June 2019 - a year after the incident," says De Klerk.

A total of 16 Namibians - 14 men and two women - who were involved in the case were arrested.

They include poachers, game reserve security guards and a customs officer.

"This case emphasizes the complexity of wildlife crime syndicates and the importance of ongoing investigations and the gathering of evidence against suspects," De Klerk said.

CHINESE HORN MUGGALS

A highlight of 2019 is the four Chinese horn smugglers who lost their appeal in the Windhoek High Court in April 2019.

They were caught in 2014 at Hosea Kutako International Airport with 14 rhino horns in their possession.

They were sentenced to 14 years each in September 2016, but they filed an appeal.

"A previous case of money laundering was brought against them during their appeal and they were each sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. It sends a warning to other criminals," says De Klerk.

In another complaint filed against an 80-year-old Chinese citizen in January 2018, he was sentenced to N \$ 156,000 or 10 years imprisonment in April 2019.

He was arrested with one rhino horn, 60 pieces of ivory, one leopard skin, as well as a cheetah skin in his possession.

De Klerk said the man paid the fine and he was released.

HARDER PENALTIES FOR FOOD MAGGOTS

Eatermagos is the most smuggled wildlife species in Namibia and worldwide. 123 food maggots were seized in 2019. About 60% of seizures are skins, according to De Klerk.

"Most of those confiscated alive could be rehabilitated and released."

De Klerk says that food smuggling has exploded: "400 suspected food smugglers or smugglers have been arrested over the past eight years, of which 40% in 2019 - 33% more than in 2018."

He says the seriousness of food smuggling is also recognized by lawyers. The case of a Namibian who wanted to smuggle a food truck into September 2019 was quickly settled.

The smuggler was sentenced to N \$ 40,000 or three years behind bars in November.

"He could not pay the fine and was jailed."

According to De Klerk, it is the highest sentence ever imposed in Namibia for a crime related to food maggots. Appropriate judgments are important to discourage foodie smugglers.

IVOORSMOKKELARY IN KAZA

Namibia's northeastern regions are the heart of the

Kavango – Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (Kaza), home to the largest elephant population in the world.

"Of course, it attracts elephant poachers who target animals in all Kaza member countries. Ivory is being smuggled to the end markets in Asia by various countries," says De Klerk.

"Suspects trying to smuggle ivory in Namibia are regularly arrested. The arrest and conviction of a Botswana citizen is a good example.

"The famous ivory smuggler was arrested during a raid in March. Although the ivory was seized, the suspect fled to his homeland. "

De Klerk said continued investigations led to the arrest of the suspect in October.

The trial was completed within a short time and the ivory smuggler was sentenced to a fine of N \$ 100,000 or four years in prison.

"He couldn't pay the fine and is now behind bars," says De Klerk.

Determining the origin of ivory is a challenge.

"In 2019, 116 elephant teeth and various ivory pieces have been seized in the country. The seizures represent at least 58 stripped elephants (that could be many more)."

De Klerk says the origin of the ivory remains uncertain.

"It is estimated that only 12 elephants were killed in Namibia in 2019. The other elephants could have come from Angola, Botswana, Zambia or Zimbabwe.

"Criminals are frequently arrested for ivory possession when they come from neighboring countries across the border. DNA analysis is costly and time-consuming, but reducing poaching is important in identifying the origin of ivory," explains De Klerk.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

He says criminals work across international borders to target goods or animals or move smuggled goods to potential markets.

"Cooperation between law enforcement officers from neighboring countries is indispensable in the fight against wildlife crime."

De Klerk says there is good cooperation with Botswana and Zambia and it is also being strengthened with destination countries such as China and Vietnam.

RESISTING REQUESTS

He says bribery is an important aspect of wildlife crime: "Bribes are regularly offered to park staff to provide information on targeted animals inside the park."

Customs officials are again offered bribes to smuggle goods across borders.

"Investigators are being bribed to abandon investigations. Several cases were reported in 2019 where criminals attempted to bribe Namibian investigators.

"The officers immediately reported the offenses and the suspects were charged with an additional charge," says De Klerk.

"It is clear that attempts at bribery can put criminals in greater trouble," warns De Klerk.

Report any game crime at 55 555.