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Namibia's special rhinos under severe COVID-19 threat



Black rhino poaching

from **AFRED SHILONGO** in Windhoek, Namibia

WINDHOEK, (CAJ News) – ALREADY facing extinction at the hands of rampant poachers, the endangered rhino's future is in more jeopardy in the wake of the escalating outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Namibia's free-roaming black rhinos, extraordinary than any other herd globally, is bearing the biggest brunt, directly and indirectly, from the pandemic.

Efforts to conserve this special species in Namibia largely depend on a vibrant tourism industry.

With the sector among the hardest hit by the eruption of the COVID-19, the impact on initiatives to save the animal has been adverse.

Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), which has been monitoring and protecting the black rhino for close to four decades, explained the impact of the declining tourism sector.

“The global lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shut down tourism almost overnight, resulting in a huge loss of income for both rhino conservation programmes and local communities,” SRT stated.

The agency bemoaned that its programmes were in crisis mode.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is putting rhinos in real jeopardy,” SRT stated.

It added its trusted long-term partners needed urgent support to carry on their vital conservation work.

“They are desperately reducing rations for field teams, looking for ways to cut vehicle maintenance costs and embedding new health and safety protocols.”

According to SRT, with so many people facing real poverty, coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19, the risk of poaching only increased.

The trust described the current predicament as unprecedented.

“Today, the crisis they face is like nothing seen before.”

The agency bemoaned that following the decline in tourism and the global economic situation worsening, it was preparing to lose a significant amount of income.

“This loss will impact rhinos.”

SRT is appealing for donations. Half of the proceeds will be channeled to programmes in Namibia.

The black rhinos roaming Namibia's Kunene region are a rare breed.

They have adapted to go without water for up to four days to survive in the punitive desert.

They are the last-known free-roaming black rhinos in the world, with no fences surrounding their 25000 km² home.

According to conservationists, without firm boundaries, there is no way to keep rhinos in, or to keep criminals out.

Romeo Muyunda, Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism spokesperson, recently disclosed Namibia had lost 11 rhinos to poaching since the beginning of 2020.

Rhinos are poached mainly for their horns, to address the demand for the product in Asian nations, mostly China.

The horn is predominantly used in medicine but is increasingly becoming a symbol of wealth.

An analyst nonetheless said China's ban on the consumption of wildlife, following the outbreak of COVID-19, was a positive move.

COVID-19 was first detected in China at the end of last year. Months later, it has infected over 3,741,269 million people as of Wednesday. Equally, more than 258,509 have died as of Wednesday.

At the time of publication, Namibia had confirmed 16 cases of the pandemic, with no casualties.

– *CAJ News*

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