



Demand for ivory, rhino horn drops

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DROP: The global demand for African rhino horn and ivory has declined. PHOTO: FILE

ELLANIE SMIT

WINDHOEK

The illegal global trade in ivory and rhino horn has declined, while trafficking of pangolins has soared, according to a United Nations report based on four years of data. It suggested that demand for African ivory and rhino horn is in decline and that the size of the illicit market for them is smaller than previously suggested.

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National bans on selling ivory, particularly China's in 2017, appear to have helped further erode ivory trafficking after it peaked around 2011 to 2013.

This is according to the 2020 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Wildlife Crime Report that was last published in 2016.

It said rhino horn poaching appears to have risen from 2007, peaked in 2015, and declined every year since, with prices also declining during this period.

Pangolins most threatened

At the same time, trafficking of pangolins has surged.

Seizures of pangolin scales, mainly sourced in Africa, increased tenfold between 2014 and 2018 as trafficking moved away from pangolin meat, which was mainly seized in Asia.

In that time, 185 tonnes of scales were seized, for which roughly 370 000 animals would have been killed, the report said.

As a case study to demonstrate how mid-level traders operate in Namibia, the report referred to a case in which a Chinese citizen was arrested in a town in north-western Namibia for dealing in illegal rhino horns in 2014. According to the report, the man was arrested in a sting operation after police had received a tip-off that a Chinese trader was looking for elephant tusks and rhino horns to buy. At the time of the arrest, he was in possession of two rhino horns.

It said the locals were paid in cash. It was suspected that money was laundered through legitimate businesses and front companies in the construction, mining and tourism industries.

“The case study also indicated that it was commonly accepted locally that the Chinese community does not make much use of the financial system. Their businesses are cash intensive.”

Pandemic

This year, 17 rhinos have been poached in Namibia, compared to 46 last year and 78 in 2018.

As for elephants, two have been poached this year, compared to 13 last year and 27 in 2018.

A total of 35 pangolin skins and 612 scales have been seized this year in Namibia compared to 74 skins last year and 61 skins in 2018.

The report also emphasised that when wild animals such as pangolins are poached from their natural habitat, the potential for transmission of diseases from animals to humans increases. These zoonotic diseases represent up to 75% of all emerging infectious diseases and include SARS-CoV-2, which caused the coronavirus pandemic.