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## Anti-poaching units active amid Covid-19

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Page no: 7

by [Helge Denker](#)

COVID-19 has had significant effects in Namibia, as it has in every other country on planet Earth. The Namibian tourism industry has been temporarily disrupted, which has halted the tourism income which usually supports conservation initiatives.

One may expect this would result in an immediate surge in wildlife crime. This is not the case.

In spite of the massive challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic, Namibia has not experienced a spike in wildlife crime, as the number of registered cases is not higher than the same period last year.

In fact, weekly wildlife crime data compiled by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism and the Namibian Police indicates it is lower.

This is due to a variety of factors, not all of which can be easily analysed or explained.

One thing is certain – anti-poaching and law-enforcement activities have been neither stopped nor disrupted by the pandemic. Together with their many partners, the ministry and the Namibian Police are actively ensuring that conservation, anti-poaching and law-enforcement efforts continue unaffected. In several areas, capacities have actually been increased.

The ministry is continually expanding its capabilities to conserve Namibia's natural heritage and to protect high-value species such as rhino and elephant.

In this endeavour, the ministry recently employed 40 new staff members in its Wildlife Protection Services Division. The new recruits are being deployed in a number of different positions, including in the ministry's Intelligence and Investigation Unit (IIU).

The IIU works with the Namibian Police's Protected Resources Division under the Operation Blue Rhino initiative. Since its inception in mid-2018, the Blue Rhino Task Team (BRTT) has been instrumental in transforming wildlife-crime investigation and prosecution.

Investigators also support the prosecution of perpetrators, and a number of important sentences have been handed down by Namibia's courts in the past few months.

The K-9 Unit, the ministry's anti-poaching dog unit, was recently transferred to Etosha to operate in the park and surrounding areas. This will include deployments to community conservancies and freehold farms in the Kunene, Omusati, Oshana, Otjikoto and Otjozondjupa regions. The well-trained and highly motivated unit has an extremely high success rate in locating search targets.

Of course some wildlife crime cases have been registered in the past six months.

Nonetheless, Namibia's rigorous monitoring efforts show that increased capacities to ensure effective anti-poaching, law enforcement and prosecution continue to suppress wildlife crime to comparatively low levels – even in turbulent times such as a global pandemic.