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Mounted against poaching

Anti-poaching dog unit has already achieved significant successes in Etosha

As early as next year, a new mounted anti-poaching unit is to become active in the Etosha National Park - by using the MEFT helicopter, combined with foot patrols and the dog unit already established in the park, cases of poaching are to be completely prevented.



The shepherd dog Nora is put to the test by her dog handler: During this exercise, she found a hidden piece of ivory and a ball in record time. Nora is one of four sheepdogs that has been used since July as part of an anti-poaching unit for the protection of game. Photo: Erwin Leuschner



Environment Minister Pohamba Shifeta (left) is impressed by the success of the new anti-poaching dog unit in the Etosha National Park. Manie le Roux, the head of the park rangers in the central national parks, explains that the dogs have plenty of space in the wagon that has been converted for the dog unit and that they have enough water and food. Photos: Erwin Leuschner

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By Erwin Leuschner, Okaukuejo

The Ministry for the Environment, Forestry and Tourism takes tough and consistent action against poaching. Some time ago a specialized dog unit was stationed in the Etosha National Park, now a mounted unit is to be added. "The Etosha National Park is Namibia's flagship. Tourists travel to the park and want to admire and observe the biodiversity - and that is exactly what we have to protect," said Environment Minister Pohamba Shifeta on Wednesday at Okaukuejo.

The minister is currently visiting the north and getting his own impression on site. Shifeta hopes, through the cooperation of several authorities and the anti-poaching units, to completely eradicate the poaching of rhinos in particular in the park. "We have a lot of experienced trackers, but it goes much faster on a horse - and more equipment can be carried," explained Manie le Roux, head of the park rangers in Namibia's central national parks.

For this reason the ministry wants to set up a mounted unit with 14 members - twelve of them on horseback. It is to be used as early as next year, while the accommodation for the staff has been built a few years ago near Okaukuejo. The reorganization of the existing infrastructure is to begin soon. "Two teams, each consisting of four riders and their horses, are permanently deployed," added the veterinarian Dr. Axel Hartmann. With the help of support vehicles, the unit will be deployed across the entire park.

The Ministry of the Environment bought expensive sheepdogs more than two years ago, and they have been rigorously trained since then. The dog unit was stationed in the park in the middle of the year and has been used since then. "The dogs are trained to track rhinoceros weapons, ammunition, ivory and nasal horns," explained le Roux. In the Etosha National Park alone, a total of 66 successes have been recorded since the dog unit was deployed - some poachers were also caught. "One of the sniffer dogs even found a poacher during training," reported le Roux proudly.

Situation now under control

According to George Shitana, spokesman for the police stationed in the park, five dog handlers and four trained detection dogs were officially assigned to the Etosha National Park in July this year. He also had some success stories ready. After a case of poaching in the park, the dogs were used in a search of the village of Otjenova, whereupon two people were arrested because they were "in possession of a sack filled with pangolin scales". As a result of extensive anti-poaching operations, 121 people were arrested. "The situation is now under control, with most of the poachers now behind bars," said Shitana.

According to Minister Shifeta, rhino poachers invade the park mainly via the northern border - they would cut the fence and then hunt the animals. The ministry is now using a new approach that is beginning to bear fruit. The number of cases of rhino poaching in Etosha has decreased significantly. "We are clearly seeing positive progress. Many of the female black rhinos currently have calves," he said, adding, "We want to see how the black rhinoceros population is increasing. That is why we have taken these various measures - we want to preserve biodiversity. "