

Opinion - Wildlife crimes on a downtrend

2021-04-26 **Staff Reporter**



Angolo Landuleni Lineekela

It is imperative that African countries as a continent recognise that we are faced with a similar issue, rhino poaching as a Wildlife crime. According to the non-profitable organization Save the Rhino Trust, Namibia holds almost a third of Africa's black rhino population, with a stronghold for the South Western black rhino subspecies.

The ever-present threat of rhino poaching haunts the future of the black rhino in Namibia and this depends largely on our nation's ability to protect this important rhino population.

In recent years, we have observed a downtrend in the poaching of rhinos as the Namibian government has taken new law enforcement measures, mechanisms, and legal frameworks to minimise wildlife crimes.

According to the Legal Assistance Centre, the retail revenues for ivory or rhino horn per kilo can be equal to or greater than the equivalent amount of cocaine or heroin, yet the legal penalties for

poaching were up to now considerably more lenient than the punishments for dealing in such drugs. In developing countries, wildlife trafficking crimes rob local communities of much-needed revenue streams and have negative impacts on the environment, security, rule of law and only a little profit goes into the national economy.

Moreover, it is quite evident that Namibia's economy partially relies on tourism, which not only reduces unemployment but also attracts investors. Hence, it is very vital that wildlife crimes are reduced so that our country can restore its wildlife resources and generate more revenue.

The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism is responsible for the safeguarding of Namibia's environmental resources. Thus, the ministry strives to maintain and rehabilitate essential ecological processes and life-supported systems, to conserve biological diversity, and to ensure that the utilisation of natural resources is sustainable for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future, as well as the international community, as enshrined in the constitution.

Since the cases of wildlife crimes were alarming, in the fight against wildlife crimes, the Namibian government amended the penalty provisions under the Nature Conservation Ordinance 4 of 1975.

These amendments have already been done and the provisions significantly increased the penalties for the illegal hunting of elephants or rhinos, from a minimum fine of N\$200 000 to a maximum fine of N\$25 million or potential imprisonment which can be imposed along with the fine and that has been increased from 20 to 25 years.

International conventions have been put in place to protect threatened animals, but they can only be effective if the nations which are parties such as Namibia make wildlife crime a serious crime in their national legislation.

Hence, a new provision in Namibia provides that a foreign national convicted of any offence under the ordinance will be automatically declared a prohibited immigrant and deported.

Current technological advances, including excellent surveillance and forensics techniques, are enabling an entirely new level of law enforcement.

Combined with the information provided by the public, this is allowing law enforcement officials to be a step ahead of the poachers in many cases.

Importantly, intensified intelligence operations such as anti-poaching patrol at Etosha National park, tight roadblocks by the Namibian police force, and collaborations between the ministry of environment and tourism, and the private sector has led to the increasing number of arrests that have shown that in Namibia, criminals, suspects and any other person involved in this kind of crimes are not above the law. Investigators carry out their work without bias. Suspects are being arrested, charged, and prosecuted, irrespective of their status.

Overall, the Namibian government and its unsung heroes and community members from rural areas along with several other activists and international organizations should be seen as patriotic and should be highly appreciated on their staggering yet inspiring journey of fighting for full rights to sustainably manage Namibian wildlife resources and their protection.

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