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Rhino-Tracking in the Hegegebiet on the Huab River. Photo: Ultimate Safaris

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## MINING THREATENS HUAB'S RHINOS

## Conservation organizations want to take the minister to court A mining company is allowed to carry out its activities in the Huab area despite a poor environmental impact study and no consultations with affected conservation organizations. Frank Steffen, Tanja Bause

- 20 HOURS AGO - - 2022-11-14 00:00:00

Frank Steffen

"What use is a constitution in which the protection of the environment plays a key role if the politicians do not care about this section and later the course of justice is so slow that nature conservation in our country suffers from it?" wanted a critic to know about yet another mining project that seemingly directly undermines existing conservation projects.

This time the projects in question are Namibia's rhino protection program, the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), and the //Huab Conservancy which is campaigning for the conservation of the Huab conservation area.

After Canadian oil and gas company ReconAfrica's (ReconAfrica) exploration activities in the Kavango region were allowed unchallenged by the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism - even after the parliamentary standing committee on natural resources found gaps in the environmental impact study (EIA) and have found the execution of these activities - it is now the Huab conservation area's turn. The affected areas have been used as rhino protection areas for several years.

### TO COURT

Thanks to the efforts of residents of this area who - as a small community and initially without tourism-related initiatives - monitored the rhinos established in the area, there appears to be no recorded case of rhino poaching in this conservation area to date. The community of 600 people now faces the loss of their livelihood after the Ministry of Mines and Energy and the Ministry of Environment allowed the opening of an iron ore mine - despite numerous written objections. The conservation area now wants the minister of the environment, mr. Pohamba Shifeta, dragged to court.

The modus operandi is similar to that of ReconAfrica and the Russian company Headspring Investment, which aims to mine uranium in the Stampriet aquifer through a mining process known as in situ leaching. Just like in those cases, it is also claimed this time that the EIA was carried out during Covid-19 lockdown, when the public could not attend the public meetings.

### NO MEETINGS

"We were never even invited to a public meeting or survey by (the

environmental consultant) Healthy Earth Environmental Consultants (HEEC)," said Mr. Jeffrey Hanadaob, vice chairman of the //Huab Conservancy, claims.

He and the chairman, Ms. Emma Gomes, agrees that the community had no insight into Mr. Gerhardt Kariseb, the holder of the mining licence, does not have mining plans. When contacted, Ultimate Safaris, the operators of the nearby Huab Under Canvas rest camp, said neither they - which specialize in sustainable tourism - nor the SRT were invited to any meetings.

“Our conservation area has lost its primary source of income and our conservation members who were employed at the Huab Under Canvas lodge are being laid off.

In 2018, Huab Under Canvas received Nacso, Namibia's umbrella organization for the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Program (CBNRM), Best Conservation Lodge Award, as well as the Responsible Tourism Award (RTA), and received five flowers at the 2019 Eco Awards, the highest possible award for a sustainable tourism institution,” reads the //Huab Conservancy's media release.

#### MINISTER 'FAILS HIS DUTY'

Members of the conservation area agree that Shifeta has destroyed the community and the so-called Rhino Rangers' hard work over the last ten years. This is because the mine, which is believed to be largely owned by a Chinese company - despite repeated protests and official written requests to the minister - was allowed to bring in heavy mining equipment and start mining operations. It is believed to be so close to the rest camp that the machines can be heard there in the morning.

Investments of millions by private organizations and companies, including the Environmental Investment Fund of Namibia (EIF), which invested N\$2.5 million in the conservation area, have been lost, according to the statement.

"We don't want short-term harmful mining operations in our area."

The minister even insisted on a hearing after a number of consultations, but Mr. David Iyambo of HEEC apparently did not turn up.

"The minister finally asked us to submit our complaints in the form of affidavits so that he can put an end to the matter before the end of June 2022. But nothing happened and now it seems like it's too late. We already took the first steps in 2020 when we realized that the EIA was not being carried out correctly and decently. We knew we had to get in touch with the ministry before the mine brought in machinery. Now it is inevitable that there will be court cases that will drag on for years, and it is ultimately the affected community and also the rhinos that suffer. The mine has effectively destroyed our conservation area," said one player.

The spokesperson for the Ministry of the Environment promised to respond to questions soon.

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