



- [HOME](#)
- [LOCAL NEWS](#)
- [POACHING: RHINOS THE MOST TARGETED IN 2022](#)



Private rhinos

- [LOCAL NEWS](#)

POACHING: RHINOS THE MOST TARGETED IN 2022

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Rhinos were the most-targeted high-value species in Namibia during 2022, comprising 24% of all registered wildlife cases, with poaching losses at their highest since 2015.

This according to the wildlife protection and law enforcement report for 2022, which indicated that a total of 430 wildlife cases were reported last year - of which 106 were rhino poaching cases.

“Rhino syndicates have clearly returned their attention to Namibia with altered tactics, possibly influenced by a reduction in accessible targets in other countries,” the report read.

It estimated that 93 rhinos were poached in 2022, compared to the 47 in 2021 and 43 in 2020.

So far this year, 23 rhinos have been poached.

“At a combined total of around 3 500, the national population of [black and white rhinos] currently remain viable, though 2022 has exposed new vulnerabilities,” it said, further describing the protection of these animals as “extremely challenging”.

Renewed spike

Pre-emptive arrests in conspiracy-to-poach cases continue to be a vital intervention to reduce rhino losses, while still dismantling poaching gangs, it said.

Meanwhile, rhino ranges in various parts of Namibia are being targeted, with the Etosha National Park and a number of private reserves being the focus of poachers’ attention.

According to the report, the renewed spike in rhino poaching experienced during 2022 has underlined the extent to which rhino crimes are driven by organised crime gangs with extensive criminal networks.

Insiders are also playing a significant role, it said, facilitating access to rhino ranges or carrying out poaching themselves.

Alarming low

The report further pointed out that while poaching numbers have again risen alarmingly after declines from 2018 to 2021, case finalisation and convictions in these cases remain alarmingly low.

Of the 682 suspects arrested since the start of 2015, only 40 (5.9%) had been convicted at the end of 2022.

The report noted that the causes for this are complex as all rhino cases require guidance from the Office of the Prosecutor-General prior to prosecution, which lengthens the duration of the cases.

“Businessmen and prominent members of society who have been arrested for rhino-horn trafficking are able to secure excellent legal representation that is able to block rapid convictions.”

Another challenge is that linkages between rhino carcasses, used firearms and confiscated horns require forensic evidence, which takes time to secure, it said.

Change in tactics

Seizures of rhino horns were extremely low in 2022 compared to the high poaching losses, which the report said appears to represent a successful change in tactics by criminals.

Only five rhino horns were seized in 2022.

There has also been a significant percentage of rhino cases referred to higher courts during 2022, reflecting the complexity of cases.