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RHINO POACHING RISES AGAIN IN 2022

Protection 'extremely challenging'

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

Yandy Du Plessis

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Ellanie Smit - Rhinos were the most targeted high-value species in Namibia during 2022 accounting for 24% of all recorded incidents of wildlife crime - with losses to poaching the highest since 2015.

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

"Rhino syndicates have clearly refocused their attention on Namibia with changed tactics, which may have been influenced by a reduction in accessible targets in other countries," the report said.

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

So far this year, 23 rhinos have been poached.

"At a combined figure of around 3,500, the national population [of black and white rhinos] currently remains viable, although 2022 has uncovered new vulnerabilities," the report said, further describing the protection of these animals as "extremely challenging".

NEW INCREASE

Proactive arrests in conspiracy to poach cases continue to be an essential intervention to reduce losses, while poaching gangs continue to be tackled, the report said.

Meanwhile, rhino areas are being targeted in various parts of Namibia, with the Etosha National Park and a number of private reserves targeted by poachers.

According to the report, the renewed rise in rhino poaching experienced during 2022 highlighted the extent to which these crimes are driven by organized crime gangs with extensive networks.

Insiders also apparently play an important role in facilitating access to rhino farms or carrying out the poaching themselves.

WORRYINGLY LOW

While poaching numbers have risen alarmingly again after declines from 2018 to 2021, the completion of cases and convictions in these cases remains alarmingly low, the report highlighted.

Of the 682 suspects arrested since the beginning of 2015, only 40 (5.9%) were found guilty by

the end of 2022.

The report noted that the reasons for this are complicated as all cases in this regard require guidance from the Office of the Attorney General before prosecution, which lengthens the duration of the cases.

"Businessmen and prominent members of society arrested for illegal trade in rhino horn are able to obtain excellent legal representation - which can prevent swift convictions."

Another challenge is that links between rhino carcasses, firearms used and confiscated horns require forensic evidence, which takes time to complete, the report argues.

NEW TACTICS

Seizures of rhino horns were extremely low in 2022 compared to the high losses due to poaching, indicating a successful change in tactics by criminals, according to the report.

In 2022, only five rhino horns were seized.

There is also a significant percentage of rhino-related cases referred to higher courts during 2022, reflecting the complexity of these cases.

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