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Environment Minister Pohamba Shifeta on one of the 13 horses purchased by the ministry for use against poaching. Photo: Ellanie Smith

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WORLD RHINOCEROS DAY CELEBRATED

Horse unit to combat poaching in Etosha and Waterberg

On the occasion of World Rhino Day, which was celebrated last Friday, Tourism Minister Pohamba Shifeta announced that 39 rhinos were poached in Namibia this year. Compared to last year, the number stood at 92 and 50 in 2021.

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Tourism Minister Pohamba Shifeta presented these figures at the World Rhino Day commemoration ceremony held in Okaukuejo in Etosha National Park.

According to Pohamba, the ministry is introducing the use of a horse unit to preserve and protect rhinos. A total of 13 horses were purchased by the ministry with financial support from the Game Product Trust Fund for N\$10,000 each. Accordingly, eight horses will be stationed in Etosha National Park and five in the Waterberg Plateau Park.

Shifeta said mounted patrols will help cover greater patrol distances, carry more equipment than when patrolling on foot, and have better off-road mobility and tracking capabilities compared to vehicles. “Rangers on horses can move faster than foot patrols, but are quieter than vehicle patrols and provide a better view from a horse's perspective.” With horses, the reaction time is much faster than with a foot patrol and they provide an intimidating presence for illegal actors out, he said. “Over the years we have observed illegal activities involving horses in Etosha National Park, and perpetrators have been able to evade arrest due to their superior speed and mobility in the difficult terrain.”

According to Shifeta, illegal hunting of rhino horn is primarily responsible for the decline in African black rhino populations from around 100,000 animals in the 1960s to a low of around 2,410 in 1995. “Thanks to strict protection programs, the population in Africa has since increased again and stood at 5,081 animals at the end of 2012.”

The Environment Minister pointed out that Namibia is the stronghold of one of the three remaining black rhino populations in southern Africa. In 1993, the national Rhino Custodianship Program was launched to facilitate the recovery of the Namibian rhino population while allowing conservancies and private landowners to become state-owned guardians of black rhinos and benefit through ecotourism.

He said that while all black rhinos in Namibia remain in government ownership, the program allows nature reserves and private landowners with areas to apply for guardianship of black rhinos. The number of black rhinos under care is now so large that the program has become its own source of animals for further resettlement and a few animals can even be resettled into national parks if necessary.

Namibia now has white rhinos in both private and public ownership, both on its own and state-owned land. Namibia has the second largest white rhino population in the world after South Africa.