



AFRICA

Namibia rhino poaching on rise in first quarter of 2024

April 17, 2024 3:03 PM

By Vitalio Angula

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA — Environmentalists in Namibia have accused local wildlife officials of hiding the real extent of rhino poaching in the Etosha National Park, which holds the highest concentration of black rhinos in the world. The Ministry of Environment recently acknowledged that rhino killings at the park quadrupled during the first quarter of 2024.

Namibian police apprehended two suspects Sunday for the killing of an adult female black rhino and a medium-sized male calf black rhino at the park's waterhole earlier that day. The two were found in possession of four rhino horns with an estimated value of \$55,000.

The park has seen a steep increase in rhino poaching, with 28 rhinos killed during the first three months of the year, compared to seven in 2023.

Environmental activist and journalist John Grobler attributed the increase, in part, to a three-week mourning period for the passing of Namibia's president, which led to a security lapse by law-enforcement officials.

But Grobler suspects officials are still not disclosing the full extent of the rhino poaching.

"They still refuse to show us the rhino horn stockpile to show if everything is there, if all the ivory is there," he said. "When you ask them things like this, they tend to sit on their hands for as long as they can before they make any kind of disclosure. My fear is that it could actually be worse than 28 rhinos, it could be more than that."

A large number of rhino carcasses were discovered during the annual dehorning exercise undertaken in March. The media is usually invited but were not this year, further fueling concern that police did not want the public to know the real extent of rhino poaching in the area.

Police spokesperson Kauna Shikwambi said he could not verify or deny the extent of rhino poaching at the Etosha National Park and referred all queries to the newly appointed police commander for Etosha, Theopolina Nashikaku.

Nashikaku also refused to comment on the extent of poaching in the park.

“All I know is that the Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, through the spokesperson of his ministry, has shed light on the number of rhinos discovered during the dehorning exercise,” Nashikaku said. “The ministry has enough scientists with the capacity to establish how long the animal has been dead. Perhaps for now let me just concentrate on my mandate.”

Rhinos are critically endangered, and Namibian authorities have previously said that disclosing the number of rhinos in the national park only puts them in harm’s way.

That idea is rebuffed by some conservationists, who say that organized poachers, because of their high level of sophistication, already know the rhino population, estimated at 6,000 black rhinos and 15,000 white rhinos globally.

A spokesperson for the environment ministry, Romeo Muyunda, said the plight of Namibia’s rhino population is a priority.

“Based on the urgency of this situation, the ministry is undertaking an assessment to establish the full extent of this problem and, also based on that urgency, we have called for an urgent meeting with the security cluster which includes the police and NDF [Namibian Defence Force] to make sure that we dissect the matter and come up with possible interventions,” Muyunda said.

In addition to the arrest of two men Sunday, Namibian police are reaching out to communities for assistance in identifying and apprehending more suspected rhino poachers.