

# "WE ARE LOSING THE BATTLE"

## Private rhino owners face financial difficulties

**Protecting rhinos against poachers is a costly endeavor. The financial burden mostly lies with the farmers who privately own rhinos on their land – without government support. They see themselves in a precarious situation.**

**Françoise Steynberg**

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By Françoise Steynberg, Windhoek

Private rhino owners fear that Namibia is losing the fight against poaching – while the government is not contributing enough. "We're fighting a war we're not going to win," an outraged rhino owner who lost his white rhinos to poachers told Namibia Media Holdings (NMH).

Earlier, the Ministry of Environment was shocked to announce that 28 rhinos had been poached in Namibia in the first three months of the year.

"Two-thirds of my rhino population is gone! We rhino owners no longer know where to turn and how to put pressure on the government to help us," said the farmer, who wished to remain anonymous. "You can't expect private owners to just write off these kinds of financial losses, especially during the drought."

He said rhino owners were fed up with the way they were being treated after spending huge amounts of money to preserve the animals. "Since the government is not actively intervening, one has to wonder if there are not perhaps high-ranking officials who profit from these crimes," the farmer expressed the suspicion. "We get rhinos to attract tourists to our country, but it costs us between N\$30,000 and N\$100,000 a month to take care of the animals."

He also called for the legalisation of the rhino horn trade and asked why members of the Namibian defence forces do not help protect rhinos.

According to private rhino owners, the biggest problem is that court proceedings against poachers are ineffective and suspected poachers are released on bail. "The courts, especially in the Otjiwarongo district, grant bails of between N\$3,000 and N\$8,000 to poachers on the grounds that the horns were not found in their possession, regardless of the fact that they are actually involved in these crimes." In such cases, the suspect will be charged with attempted poaching or trespassing, a rhino owner said. He added that these suspects are arrested over and over again for the same crimes.

The chief scientist at the Ministry of the Environment, Piet Beytell, admitted to NMH that the courts are a big problem, but stressed that a specialised court for wildlife crimes is being set up in Otjiwarongo. "It's frustrating for us as well. Everyone works together to catch rhino poachers, but then they are released on bail," he said.

Beytell explained that as part of the rhino conservation project, farm owners apply to have rhinos on their farms and on the City of Windhoek's Rehobotho Game Reserve. The ministry covers the costs of the rhinos. The United

at our expense. We dehorn the rhinos every two years, with the cost of a helicopter alone being N\$18,000 per day," he said.

According to him, a strategy for incentives related to the rhino conservation project is currently being developed, in which farmers are to be rewarded with donations.

In the meantime, the rhino owner demands the Minister of the Environment and the Chief of Police to find a solution. If the legislation doesn't change, you can't blame the private owners for taking matters into their own hands and pursuing Botswana's "shoot on sight" policy, he said. "If all private rhino owners get rid of their rhinos, where is the state going to get the money to preserve the rhinos and save them from extinction?"

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