

# Africa Sustainable Conservation News

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**AFRICA WILDLIFE AND CONSERVATION NEWS, FIGHTING WILDLIFE CRIME, RHINOS, SOUTHERN AFRICA**

## South Africa – delay in reopening Skukuza court a problem for rhino conservation



**Date:** August 21, 2020 **Author:** somervillesustainableconservation  0 Comments

**Citizen** (South Africa)

Nica Richards



The Skukuza Regional Court has been closed since August last year. Photo: Lowvelder

Specialist state prosecutor Advocate Ansie Venter confirmed that the court remains closed, pending Mpumalanga regional court president Naomi Engelbrecht's petition to the Supreme Court of Appeal.

The fate of the Skukuza Regional Court continues to teeter as the conservation community waits for the outcome of a petition for leave to appeal a court ruling earlier this year.

The court is significant in fighting against rhino poaching, in its recent heyday boasting a 99.8% conviction rate, and 100% success rate in opposed bail applications.

But Mpumalanga regional court president Naomi Engelbrecht opted to close the court with immediate effect in August 2019.

Since then, a battle between Engelbrecht and Mpumalanga High Court Judge President Francis Legodi ensued, after Legodi opposed the move.

Engelbrecht wanted the court to be moved to Mhala Court, nearly 100km away from Skukuza because, among other reasons, she said the building had not been proclaimed a legitimate regional court.

Legodi told *Lowvelder* in September last year he believed it was important to have a court close in proximity to the victims of crime, and preferred to have the Skukuza Court be operational.

Legodi, Engelbrecht's senior, instructed her to reverse her decision, which she said she chose to ignore.

Specialist state prosecutor Advocate Ansie Venter confirmed to *The Citizen* on Thursday that the court remains closed, pending Engelbrecht's petition to the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Engelbrecht intends to overturn a decision in the North Gauteng High Court in April that ruled the court in Skukuza was legitimate, that Legodi's directives were binding, and that her decision to reject moving cases from the Mhala court back to Skukuza was invalid.

It is not yet clear how long Engelbrecht's petition will take before it is taken up by the Supreme Court.

But with lockdown Level 2 regulations allowing for interprovincial travel, anti-poaching efforts may have to be ramped up as conservationists and rangers brace for an inevitable increase. The aid and presence of the Skukuza Regional Court is essential to the country's anti-poaching arsenal, due to its successful conviction rate.

Stop Rhino Poaching founder Elise Serfontein raised concern over the morale of anti-poaching rangers, who often face alleged poachers they helped catch being let out on bail.

An anonymous ranger told *The Citizen* last week that a poacher could be arrested one day, and end up bumping into rangers at the shops in a few days' time.

Serfontein said it was demoralising that the justice system cannot be relied on.

She said the lack of urgency has a significant impact on the psyche of rangers involved in trying to bring justice to animals that are poached purely for profit.

"This whole process has been dragging out for just short of a year now. How can one person be allowed to cause so much harm? We need to believe in our justice system, especially so the rangers who this affects directly."

◀ PROSECUTION OF POACHERS   ◀ RHINO POACHING   ◀ SKUKUZA COURT



Published by somervillesustainableconservation