

SANDF fighting abalone poaching in the Overstrand

Written by GUY Martin - 10th May 2021



A soldier on patrol in the Overstrand.

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has deployed to the Overstrand region of the Western Cape to combat poaching and related crime in conjunction with local law enforcement and other roleplayers.

The SANDF said Joint Tactical Headquarters Western Cape launched Operation Corona in the Overstrand on 6 May together with the Maritime Reaction Squadron, local law enforcement and Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries. The main goal is to stop the poaching of marine resources and enforce maritime security.

Pre-deployment preparations took place in SA Naval Base Simon's Town with Mission Ready Training in April, and law enforcement operations began last month. Many vehicle checkpoints were held

throughout the Overstrand region, stopping and searching dozens of vehicles whilst staying on the lookout for poachers, suspects, and wanted vehicles.

A South African Navy submarine was spotted off the coast of Gansbaai on 27 April as part of these efforts.

The SANDF said SA Navy divers also launched boats from Gansbaai harbour in support of the land patrols in case they required assistance in getting the divers (poachers) out of the water.

Various assets from the SA Army (armoured personnel carriers), SA Air Force (helicopters), SA Military Health Service and Military Police have been deployed as part of the operation, which is targeting illegal maritime activities from the air, on water and on land.

"Valuable information supplied from reputable sources also plays a vital role in knowing which areas to target and which divers' spots are frequently used. There are many Marine Protected Areas in the surrounding areas of operation, where diving, being in the possession of diving equipment and abalone within these areas are criminal and chargeable offences," the SANDF noted.

During a patrol in Hawston, Able Seaman G Pasha, a member of the Maritime Reaction Squadron deployed, found 29 shucked Abalone in a plastic bag under bushes. Not far from this position, close to the Hawston Harbour, another bag containing shells was found. This abalone was subsequently abandoned by poachers, which was later handed over to a Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries official.

During the same patrol in the Hawston area, Able Seaman T Kwebu came into contact with two suspicious males trying to hide in the bushes. After searching the surroundings, a bag containing one West Coast Rock Lobster and seventeen Alikreukels were found. The two suspects were handed over to the SA Police Service and taken into custody at the Hermanus Police Station.

Airborne patrol is executed by 22 Squadron, situated at Air Force Base Ysterplaat, which supplied an Oryx helicopter for the operation. Members from the Maritime Reaction Squadron boarded the Oryx helicopter to conduct aerial patrols of the area of operation, the SANDF said.

"So far the mission is a success as a number of illegal activities have been impeded due to the presence of the SA National Defence Force in the area. The SA National Defence Force's efforts have been welcomed by the surrounding communities and its people in support of their aim to eradicate poaching," the SANDF said.

The SANDF regularly deploys to the Western Cape to combat poaching and in a November 2020 operation netted several suspects and abalone worth more than R5 million. Two boats and two vehicles were also confiscated. Also in November/December, a number of suspects from the Overberg were also arrested during a similar operation near Robben Island. Another suspect was apprehended by members of the Saldanha Sea Border Patrol unit after a high-speed chase on the ocean.

It has been estimated that around one ton of abalone was harvested illegally on any given day pre-COVID-19, with abalone fetching prices of up to R1 700 per kilogram on the black market. Poaching is responsible for the loss of an

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