

SANParks apparently sets rhino poaching "target"

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Rhino in a boma at Skukuza.

Among its many responsibilities as custodian of South Africa's natural heritage, the national conservation agency SANParks ensures the survival of rhino, black and white, in the face of continued poaching of this Big Five species.

This responsibility, Democratic Alliance (DA) shadow forestry, fisheries and environment minister Dave Bryant maintains, is at least partially undermined by the agency's setting of a rhinos poached "target".

Speaking after a recent forestry, fisheries and environment portfolio committee meeting in Parliament he said: "SANParks continues to set an annual poaching 'target' of 250 rhinos and with 241 rhino killed by poachers this year, SANParks is currently deemed to be on target".

"The disturbing reality is these 250 rhino represent roughly seven percent of the Kruger National Park's total estimated rhino population of 3 529. With an estimated rhino growth rate of between five and six percent a year it means Kruger's rhino population will continue to decline even if SANParks targets are achieved."

Bryant asks how the national conservation agency can continue to set a target of 250 rhinos to be poached every year.

"Rhino poaching is a criminal offence and setting targets for acceptable levels of criminality should be condoned in any instance. The DA believes the target for rhino poaching in Kruger should be revised to zero a year and that SANParks and their partners in the SA Police Service (SAPS) should be marked against compliance with this target.

"To successfully stop rhino poaching SANParks needs to take drastic measures and these will require additional budget.

"Instead government chose to cut SANParks budget putting more rhino at risk," Bryant said, adding "the many good people in SANParks truly want to do more to fight rhino poaching but are not provided with the required budget".

This lack of financial support is one factor leading to ongoing incursions via Kruger's "porous borders" with more than a thousand incursions estimated last year.

"SANParks appears to be moving desperately to protect the last few thousand rhinos by corralling them in protected zones in the park," he said, pointing the finger at government which "appears to have chosen to look the other way while the last great herds of South Africa's wild rhinos are picked off one by one".

SANParks had not publicly responded to Bryant's allegations at the time of publishing.

SANParks did on Friday announce the sentencing of three rhino poachers to a total of 105 years in prison for rhino poaching and other offences. They were sentenced by the Skukuza Regional Court prosecuting team on 2 September.

The three poachers were arrested in 2017 after killing three rhinos in the Marula (southern) section of the Kruger National Park. Two of the convicted poachers – Accused 2 and 3, Shangani Mathebula and Emmanuel Mdhluhi, are from Mozambique; while Accused 1 – Walter Hendrik Mangane – is South African.

Whist handing out the sentences, the magistrate explained in detail the manner in which the three poachers killed three rhinos in execution style and were caught red handed.

Reacting to the sentences the Managing Executive of the KNP, Gareth Coleman congratulated the Environmental Crime Investigative Unit and Ranger Services for working closely with the Investigating Officer and the other South African Police Service Units.

"These sentences should serve as a deterrent to those intending to come and kill our natural heritage and destroying the livelihoods of our people. We have in the past few months intensified our security efforts in the Park to good effect but successful convictions requires that the prosecutorial and justice pillars in our society are operating effectively. These sentences will motivate the teams who work tirelessly day and night to protect our fauna and flora," concluded Coleman.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment has welcomed the hefty sentences handed down to the three rhino poachers as it sends a strong message that the illegal killing of this iconic species will not be tolerated.

In a statement on Monday, the department said the convictions come ahead of World Rhino Day, which is celebrated annually on 22 September. World Rhino Day is a day of awareness for all five rhino species and the work being done to save them.

"This sentence is a welcome example of the successes being achieved through the collaborative approach taken by government to combat rhino poaching. In this instance, the success is attributed to the teamwork by the rangers, police and prosecutors to secure this conviction," the department said.

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