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327 rhinos were poached within government reserves and 124 were poached on private property. Picture: Shelley Kjonstad/ African News Agency (ANA)

451 rhinos were poached in 2021 says the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment

By Staff Reporter 3h ago

DURBAN – The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) Minister Barbara Creecy has revealed that a total of 451 rhinos were poached in South Africa last year.

Creecy said 327 rhinos were poached within government reserves and 124 were poached on private property.

She said while there was a 24% decrease in rhino poaching compared to the pre-Covid period in 2019, there has been an increase in poaching on private property.

“In 2021, 209 rhino were poached for their horns in South African National Parks – all in the Kruger National Park (KNP). This was in fact a decrease in comparison to 2020 when 247 rhinos were poached within the national parks. It is important to note that none of SANParks’s smaller rhino parks experienced any rhino losses from poaching in 2021; in comparison, two rhinos were poached in 2020,” Creecy said.

She said the steady decline in rhino poaching in the Kruger National Park was related to an increase in the intensity of anti-poaching activities in the park. A close working

relationship between the police's endangered species unit and the SANParks environmental crimes inspectorate had resulted in more arrests and convictions.

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One of the unintended consequences is that poaching syndicates are looking to other areas for easy prey and are targeting private reserves in Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

“Over the past year conservation and anti-poaching efforts have intensified countrywide as a joint effort is made by state-owned conservation areas, government and private landowners to reduce the poaching of rhino in South Africa. More targeted deployment of resources is being assisted by the roll out of a CSIR-developed situational awareness platform known as CMORE into the integrated wildlife zones. Through this single technology platform, all role players are able to collaborate, making use of real-time insights and analytical capability, linking, for example, camera traps and ranger patrols while integrating a range of other systems,” Creecy said.

She said the information collected flows through the Environmental Enforcement Fusion Centre (EEFC) which continues to support the teams at a tactical level and strategic level.

Their analysis capabilities have also improved, resulting in the increased identification of those involved in rhino poaching and trafficking and improved and expanded investigations by multidisciplinary teams.

Creecy said SANParks, provincial nature reserves and private rhino owners are dehorning rhino to deter poachers, while SANParks is investigating the feasibility of additional actions such as anti-poaching initiatives focused on apprehending poachers and establishing additional founder populations outside the Kruger park.

“The government continues to work closely with the private sector and non-governmental organisations through the Integrated Strategic Management of Rhinoceros approach and the draft National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking (NISCWT) to address rhino poaching,” Creecy said.

“In 2021 there were 189 arrests in connection with poaching activities: 77 within the Kruger National Park and 109 outside the park. This compares with 156 people arrested countrywide in 2020. In the 38 verdicts handed down by the courts, 37 cases resulted in the conviction of 61 accused rhino poachers/traffickers.”

The provincial and national breakdown for 2021 (in comparison to 2019 and 2020) is as follows:

| PROVINCES AND NATIONAL PARKS | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|
| SANParks | 328 | 247 | 209 |
| Gauteng | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| Limpopo | 45 | 18 | 38 |
| Mpumalanga | 34 | 13 | 39 |
| North West | 32 | 19 | 32 |
| Eastern Cape | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Free State | 11 | 1 | 24 |
| Northern Cape | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Kwa-Zulu Natal | 133 | 93 | 102 |
| Western Cape | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Total | 594 | 394 | 451 |

Successful prosecutions in 2021:

- Project Python: Three people were arrested and several properties seized. The three accused were charged with racketeering and money laundering relating to rhino horn trafficking. One of the accused, Ping Wu, was convicted on two money laundering charges in the Tembisa regional court. The case was remanded to February 9, 2022, for sentencing. The racketeering trial against the other two accused, Huang and Chen, continues and was postponed to March 3 for the state to lead further evidence.

- S v Arlando Mhlanga; Hlayisile Adam Hlongwane; Inancio Chauke were sentenced to 85 years' imprisonment, an effective sentence of 35 years' imprisonment after being convicted on 10 counts in relation to the killing of three rhinos in the Pilanesberg National Park, the possession, transport, and cutting off of six rhino horns, theft and the possession of a prohibited firearm and ammunition, and trespassing. In addition, the vehicle which was used in the commission of the offences was forfeited to the State.
- S v W Mhangani and two others were convicted for killing three rhinos in the Kruger National Park, for being in South Africa illegally, trespassing, possession of an unlicensed firearm and the possession of unlicensed ammunition. Accused one was sentenced to an effective 45 years' imprisonment and accused two and three were sentenced to an effective 30 years.
- S v GV Tibane and J Matshinga Sithole were sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment for trespassing in the Kruger National Park, contravention of the Immigration Act, illegal killing of a rhino, possession of a firearm with obliterated serial number, possession of a silencer, possession of a firearm with intent to commit a crime, possession of ammunition and possession of an axe.
- S v Emmanuel Mdluli was sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment after being convicted on charges of trespassing, possession of a firearm with the intention to poach a rhino, possession of a firearm with serial number obliterated, conspiracy to commit a crime, possession of a dangerous weapon, and contravening the Immigration Act.

Examples of work taking place between South Africa and those countries implicated in wildlife crime:

- A Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) process was successfully finalised between South Africa and Poland after a request from that country relating to rhino horn trophy hunting in South Africa;
- Operation Golden Strike, which relates to the co-operative work done between southern Africa and South East Asia, has set a platform for better co-operation between these countries with the aim of combating wildlife trafficking at international levels. Several successful operations, bilateral engagements and information sharing sessions were conducted during the reporting period;
- A controlled delivery between South Africa and Vietnam took place in July 2021, resulting from the work between the Hawks and the Vietnamese authorities on a consignment of rhino horns and suspected lion bones that were trafficked to Vietnam. The operation was successfully conducted and 138kg of rhino horns and an estimated 3 tons of suspected lion bones were seized at Da Nang Port in Vietnam. The investigation continues between the two countries;
- Cross-border investigations between South Africa and the People's Republic of China are under way as a result of a joint operation between the Hawks, assisted by DFFE and the transport sector, at OR Tambo International Airport in December 2021. A total of 32 rhino horns were seized. The information obtained during this operation was shared with the People's Republic of China authorities, which resulted in the arrest of one suspect in South Africa and two suspects in China as well as the seizure of additional rhino horns.

"South Africa remains committed to safeguarding the country's rhino populations, and will continue to work tirelessly, alongside the private sector, committed NGOs as well as authorities in transit and destination countries, to combat wildlife crime," Creecy said.

The public can report suspicious activity around wildlife to the department's environmental crime hotline: 0800 205 005, or the SAPS at 10111.