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KZN's rhino population is being decimated by highly organised poachers

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Mntambo added that the government should also consider deploying the army into the parks to patrol both inside and outside the park, saying that this is because poaching is not only a provincial issue, but an international issue.



Rhino poachers are heartless and kill every rhino they see – young or old, with or without a horn – just to get rid of them from the reserve and to “try and make their job easier”, should they come back.

This is according to Ezemvelo Wildlife spokesperson Musa Mntambo. This week, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment Barbara Creecy said that KwaZulu-Natal recorded a loss of 133 rhinos in the first half of the year – which is more than triple the 33 rhino killed in the first six months of 2021.

Mntambo said that rhino poaching was a huge issue that needs addressing and that they need all the assistance they can get to combat the crime.

“ In the past, we have had communities that helped us try to combat rhino poaching, but now it is just us. However, sometimes the SAPS comes and helps us patrol inside the parks and the outskirts too, and we are very grateful for their assistance ... We had an incident where a female rhino was shot and its calf was next to it, so they also shot the calf – not for its horn because most of the time there is no horn since it's still small, but because the calf was getting in the way of them hacking off the mother rhino's horn. ”

Mntambo said they suspect that poachers work with local community members who know the area and even though they sometimes get tipoffs, it is hard to know which side they might be coming from because the parks are big.

“ It's usually three, four or five groups of people, using anti-material rifles. They come with a vehicle and park outside, cut the fence, climb on top of the fence, jump down and walk in. ”

He added that the whole of their parks are a “hotspot”, saying there is no specific spot targeted.

According to Mntambo, the manner in which they approach each suspecting poaching case is different and depends on the situation.

“ The obvious thing would be to get resources and get to the area where we hear something or see something, but we also deploy a chopper/ helicopter for every reaction we get to narrow down the area for us, and the use of K9s also assists greatly

He also added that perhaps a proper forward-looking infrared (FLIR) camera attached to a helicopter could help because it can also detect what’s happening at night. A FLIR camera is mounted at the bottom of a helicopter.

“ It also has a real-life display, so both the pilot and the person in the control room can see what is happening on the ground and it will immediately pick up humans hiding under bushes.

Mntambo added that the government should also consider deploying the army into the parks to patrol both inside and outside the park, saying that this is because poaching is not only a provincial issue, but an international issue.

KZN ‘a softer target’

The DA spokesperson on Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs in KwaZulu-Natal, Heinz de Boer, said he believes that rhino poaching levels are also related to the borders, the criminal justice system and poaching syndicates.

De Boer said that rhino poaching in KZN is directly linked to poaching in the Kruger National Park.

“ The Kruger National Park increased their security, their area surveillance and their policing, which meant that poaching syndicates had to find a softer target and, unfortunately, KZN has been a softer target. From what I know, the poachers are now operating as syndicates, they are very much like the gangs that attack our cash vehicles. They are, from what I’ve been told, not scared of dying or of being arrested and very often they are working for the real masterminds and have financial guarantees in place for their families should they get killed. They are brazen.

De Boer added that the figures that have been released by the minister are not startling to him because he has been tracking rhino poaching for about two-and-a-half years now.

“ I think that we have seen some action now, there is an increase in law enforcement and there are a whole lot of specialised operations in our main areas. However, it has only come now, after the slaughter of so many rhinos. ”

He said that the task team investigation report into rhino poaching in KZN that was commissioned five years ago should've been released a long time ago, instead of just recently. He said the report could have been used sooner to formulate anti-poaching operations.

De Boer also added that another issue is that there is not much consequence management at Ezemvelo and there is also not much consequence management for the political heads, particularly the economic development, tourism and environment portfolio.

“ If this was happening in any other country, where there was accountability, the minister or the MEC would've resigned or would've been sacked because rhino poaching is nothing new in KZN. We have had a succession of MECs who basically have not had the political fortitude and the vision and forward-thinking attitude to insist that Ezemvelo gets the correct amount of resources so that they can take on the fight with poachers. ”

He said that rangers who were fully trained by Ezemvelo should all be employed and that they need to find the necessary funds to employ them. He said the SAPS and other law enforcement agencies need to be at the borders and crime intelligence needs to start working more closely with Ezemvelo to track down the people behind the poaching syndicates.

“ Once the perpetrators are caught, they need to be prosecuted in a specialised court. I believe and a lot of people I have spoken to in the private sector believe that the rangers that are on the ground are doing an excellent job under a very difficult set of circumstances; they haven't had adequate budgets for many years. It's only recently that some of them have been given firearms and bulletproof vests and ammunition, and everything is procured for them. So we are on the right track. ”

He said they need to find a mechanism where the private sector can contribute more to NGO's that help the rangers on the ground and those that help protect the species.

“ Those NGO's need to be approved at a provincial government level so that people know that if they donate money to that specific NGO, then that money will go to Ezemvelo to equip rangers, to do anti-poaching operations. ”

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