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Shortage of rangers at Kruger Park endangers rhinos

'It is essential funding be prioritised to filling the 82 vacant ranger posts as a matter of urgency.'



Picture for illustration: Nigel Sibanda

While official rhino poaching numbers are down, a lack of conservation personnel – specifically rangers – could see the small gains in numbers disappear.

Warning bells on the lack of rangers in South Africa's iconic Kruger National Park, as well as in KwaZulu-Natal, come from Democratic Alliance (DA) public representatives at national and provincial level.

Forestry, Fisheries and Environment Minister Barbara Creecy this year revealed there were less rhinos poached last year than in 2021 when the national population lost 451 of the herbivores.

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The 2022 figure was three less, which Creecy attributed, in part, to collaboration between conservation authorities, the SA Police Service, revenue authorities and international agencies.

Shortage of rangers

In 2022 Kruger lost 124 rhinos, a figure David Bryant, shadow forestry, fisheries and environment minister, believes will rise because SANParks filled just five of 87 vacant ranger posts in the Kruger Park.

“Filling these posts will contribute to fighting rampant wildlife poaching, in particular rhino,” he said, adding Kruger’s rhino population continues to decline.

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“It is essential funding be prioritised to filling the 82 vacant ranger posts as a matter of urgency. This will assist in the ongoing fight against rampant rhino poaching and its associated criminal syndicates.”

KwaZulu-Natal reported a marked increase in rhino poaching in the 2022 calendar year with 228 killed in provincial parks. Creedy said it was unfortunate the “poaching threat” moved to the eastern coastal province and pointed out its flagship reserve – Hluhluwe iMfolozi – was “specifically targeted”.

Pointing directly to personnel shortages, DA provincial shadow economic development, tourism and environmental affairs spokesperson Heinz de Boer said the provincial conservation agency – Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife – has a field ranger vacancy rate of 37%.

“This equates to 354 posts not filled and boots not on the ground to combat the scourge of poaching in KwaZulu-Natal.

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“Last year alone, more than 220 rhinos were killed, while at least 15 elephants and scores of plains game were taken from parks across the province.

“Compounding the situation is the province’s unenviable reputation for having some of the only not dehorned rhinos in South Africa. Again, budgets and a lack of capacity all but stopped dehorning operations.”

‘Unfair’

He said Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife set an internal goal of 962 field rangers. Against this, International Union for the Conservation of Nature guidelines indicate the provincial conservation entity should have 1 744 rangers on duty. This equates to a ranger per every five square kilometres.

“It is patently unfair to expect the current ranger cohort to face armed poachers in the new bush war being waged in KZN. Likewise, it is unfair for this ANC-run government [in KwaZulu-Natal] to expect the public to continue swallowing bitter statistics on poaching each year.

ALSO READ: [Light sentences for poachers take toll on anti-poaching rangers](#)

“The DA calls on economic development, tourism and environmental affairs MEC Siboniso Duma to rework the proposed Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife budget.

“These figures should include immediate employment of the 17 fully trained, but never employed, rangers and absorbing all newly trained staff.”

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