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Call for urgent action on rhino poaching at KZN reserves



File Picture: A rhino at Kruger National Park. Stats from 2022 show that rhino poachers have moved into KZN with 244 rhino poached last year in the province. Picture: Armand Hough African News Agency (ANA)

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Durban - EZEMVELO KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife says it has adopted a number of measures in its efforts to deal with rhino poaching in many of its parks.

However, opposition parties have questioned the entity's urgency to deal with the poaching threat.

The entity recently made a presentation before the meeting of the economic development portfolio committee in the KZN legislature where members decried the failure to deal with rhino poaching and the declining standards at Ezemvelo-owned facilities.

A total of 244 rhino were killed in poaching incidents in KZN last year, according to statistics from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

It said the poaching threat has shifted to KZN with the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park being specifically targeted.

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According to Ezemvelo, several steps have been taken to deal with poaching including appointing a security manager and hiring a helicopter for safety and de-horning operators.

It said that the construction of fencing in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and deployment of fence liners would help in dealing with poaching. Fence liners conduct regular walkabouts in the reserves, usually during mornings, to determine whether animals have escaped, and if poachers have entered the premises through the fence.

DA committee member Heinz de Boer questioned Ezemvelo management's sense of urgency in dealing with the problem of rhino poaching, warning that a

failure to act swiftly, which includes a comprehensive de-horning plan and improved security, could result in the rhino population getting wiped out. He said that most of the entity's problems had been discussed before.

"This is not a political matter because whichever party you ask, they will tell you of problems with Ezemvelo, and this is something that dates back years now," said De Boer.

Regarding accommodation facilities, he said a recent report to the portfolio committee showed that the overall occupancy rate was just 31%.

"The figure ranks at least 50% below other popular tourism destination occupancy rates and is testimony of discerning visitors not willing to pay five-star prices for two-star accommodation," said the committee member.

IFP MPL and committee member Steven Moodley said they wanted to see progress in the entity, with action taken against staff that were not performing.

"More can be done when it comes to curbing rhino poaching. Proper fencing, security and control measures must be implemented as well as lobbying for harsher sentences for poachers," said the MPL.

Committee chairperson Siyabonga Mshengu pointed to leadership instability as the primary reason for the problems at the entity.

"When you do not have a permanent chief executive officer and the chief financial officer, it is always difficult to hold people accountable," said Mshengu.

Ezemvelo KZN spokesperson Musa Mntambo said they had noted the concerns from committee members.

"Our staff, which includes rangers, work overtime and we are doing all we can with the resources that we have," Mntambo insisted.

He added that they are exploring working with other operators to help improve the conditions and look of their facilities.

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