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## SA police praised for following illegal wildlife money

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Rhino dehorning is one of the interventions introduced to curb rhino poaching in the Kruger National Park. About half of the park's rhino population has been dehorned over the past two years. Photo: Laila Majiet/City Press

## NEWS

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Even though wildlife criminals the world over use money-laundering techniques to disguise the origin of their proceeds, there is only one case in South Africa in which money laundering related to poaching is being investigated.

According to the Wildlife Justice Commission's July report – Dirty Money: The Role of Corruption in Enabling Wildlife Crime – tackling financial flows and recovering proceeds from these crimes is key to removing profits from criminality and preventing investments to perpetuate crimes.

The report said:

However, there are few examples of investigations or prosecutions of money laundering related to wildlife crimes and even fewer examples of investigations of money laundering deriving from corrupt acts that were linked to wildlife crimes.

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A rare example is the arrest of two former Kruger National Park field rangers – Chikwa Maluleke and Solly Ubisi – in April 2022 in relation to providing tactical information to rhino poaching syndicates in exchange for payment. They were charged with fraud, money laundering and corruption.

In December 2022, nine of their relatives were arrested on money laundering charges, after the rangers' bribery payments were allegedly funnelled through their family members' bank accounts.

The elite police unit, the Hawks, did a comprehensive investigation of the suspects' financial affairs by enlisting the services of audit firm KPMG to trace the money flowing into and out of their accounts. The investigation, according to the Hawks, conclusively showed that millions of rands were being generated through the illegal sale of rhino horns.

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The report said that apart from the use of third-party bank accounts to make and receive payments, wildlife traffickers appeared to make very little effort to hide or disguise their financial activities.

Corruption in the whole wildlife chain, the Wildlife Justice Commission said, could include – among other things – the bribery of rangers to provide information to poachers, the involvement of government officials in stockpile theft and embezzlement, the bribery of customs officials to facilitate the safe passage of shipments, the use of fraudulent export and import documents, and bribery to secure bail and release from custody.

The report said:

Corruption greases the wheels of the illegal wildlife trade, facilitating the movement of wildlife shipments along all stages of the supply chain from source to market, and serving criminal networks by obstructing the criminal justice response, allowing them to operate with impunity.

The commission mentions that it collected intelligence on the leader of a rhino poaching network who indicated he was working with rangers in the Kruger National Park. The rangers forwarded him information on where rhinos were roaming so that he could arrange for his poaching teams to deploy to those locations.

“There are reported estimates that up to 40% of Kruger National Park’s law enforcement staff could be aiding poaching networks or be involved in corruption in some way; and some estimate that figure could even be as high as 70%,” the report said.

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The report said that corruption facilitated the poaching, transportation, processing and sale of illegal wildlife products at every step of the global supply chain, from source location to destination market. It frequently occurred in the process of applying for licences, permits, or other documentation, or at border control or other inspection points where officials may be bribed to facilitate the movement of contraband.

The Wildlife Justice Commission also found that criminal networks used sophisticated approaches to entrap officials or used threats and violence to coerce them into supporting their operations.

“Most of Kruger’s staff live in villages and towns around the park. They are particularly vulnerable to the poaching and criminal gangs that live alongside them. There are no safe spaces. The western boundary ... is a landscape of fear. Illicit markets abound and violence and murder are all too common,” the report said.

High-profile murders in the Kruger landscape have included Hawks investigator Lieutenant Colonel Leroy Bruwer in 2020; Timbavati Game Reserve ranger Anton Mzimba in 2022; and two alleged rhino poaching kingpins, Petros Mabuza in 2021 and traditional leader Clyde Mnisi earlier this year.