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Kruger Park records ‘steady decline’ in rhino poaching

In recent years, the government has tightened security in Kruger and stepped up efforts to tackle the illegal trade in wildlife parts.



Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Barbara Creecy briefs media regarding the Rhino situation in the parks of South Africa at SANPARKS head office in Pretori, 1 August 2023.
Picture: Neil McCartney / The Citizen

The government said on Tuesday its world-famous Kruger park had witnessed a steady decline in rhino killings as better patrols and the onslaught it suffered in recent years pushed poachers elsewhere.

The government said 42 of the park's rhinos were killed for their horns from January to June this year, almost half the numbers poached in the same period last year.

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Overall, 231 rhinos were killed across South Africa in the first six months of 2023 — an 11 percent drop on 2022, according to the environment ministry.

Rhino numbers declining?

Asked if the decrease in Kruger went hand-in-hand with depleting animal numbers, Environment Minister Barbara Creecy said it was “no secret” that the rhino population there “has been severely battered through almost 20 years of poaching.”

“This is why you see a displacement to other areas,” she told a press conference, adding that however she attributed the overall downward trend in poaching to the “incredible work” of rangers and law enforcement agencies.

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Creecy declined to say how many rhinos were left in the park — a tourist magnet bordering Mozambique — as she did not wish to provide criminals with “intelligence”.

Kruger's estimated tally in 2021 was 2,800 rhinos, around 70 percent down compared to 10,000 in 2008, according to statistics from the national parks authority, SANParks.

New focus

Illegal hunters have increasingly turned their sights on regional parks and private reserves, the government said.

The eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal has been particularly affected, with 143 rhinos killed there in the first half of 2023, 10 more than in the same period in 2022.

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Home to nearly 80 percent of the world's rhinoceroses, South Africa is a poaching hotspot, driven by demand from Asia, where horns are used in traditional medicine for their supposed therapeutic effect.

In recent years, the government has tightened security in Kruger and stepped up efforts to tackle the illegal trade in wildlife parts.

As of 2023, new SANParks employees have to take a lie detector test amid concerns that some workers might be in cahoots with poachers.

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