



South Africa grapples with escalating environmental crimes: Global Crime Index

The illicit abalone economy, deeply entrenched in the Western Cape province, is controlled by Chinese criminal groups in alliance with local gangs, the 2023 Global Crime Index has revealed. Picture: MARK HUTCHINSON

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South Africa's struggle with environmental crimes is multifaceted, involving illegal trade and poaching of flora and fauna, and the illicit trade of non-renewable resources.

The [2023 Global Crime Index](#) released this week has shed light on the urgent need for stringent measures, enhanced prosecution, and increased funding to

combat these escalating crimes and protect the country's rich biodiversity and precious resources.

South Africa, despite being considered a low-risk area for illegal logging, is grappling with a surge in environmental crimes, the Global Crime Index has shown.

The country is not just a consumer of illegal timber and other flora products from neighbouring southern African countries, but is also a significant source country for wildlife crime, involving high-value species such as rhinos, lions, and elephants.

Flora Crimes on the Rise

[Illegal trade of cycads](#) is generating substantial profits, with some specimens fetching up to millions on the international market. The country has also witnessed a spike in incidents of violence between rangers and poachers, with the latter destroying wild plant specimens to inflate their value and reduce trading competition. The poaching of conophytum species has become more prevalent than illegal logging, with plant crime rarely prosecuted and minimal funding allocated to combat it.

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Wildlife Crime: A Persistent Threat

The report says that South Africa is a hotspot for illegal wildlife trade, particularly from the Kruger National Park. The [illicit trade of animal parts](#), mainly to Asian markets, has seen a slight uptick post the Covid-19 pandemic, reversing the declining trend in rhino poaching since 2014. However, illegal killings of elephants have been consistently declining since 2015, suggesting the absence of large-scale elephant poaching networks in the country.

The Underworld of Abalone Poaching

Not surprisingly, the report notes, the illicit [abalone](#) economy, deeply entrenched in the Western Cape province, is controlled by Chinese criminal groups in alliance with local gangs, linking to violence, gun running, and the drug trade. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, primarily targeting crayfish and sharks, is driven by demand mainly from the Chinese market, with most products ending up in Hong Kong.

Rampant Illegal Trade of Non-renewable Resources

The illegal trade of precious metals like gold, diamonds, and copper is rampant, with crime syndicates, known as [zama zamas](#), dominating the illicit market.

These illegal miners operate in abandoned or working mines, entering through deserted shafts, posing severe risks of injuries, deaths, and gang violence. The laundered gold is primarily exported to the UAE, Switzerland, India, and China, with the theft of copper escalating to unprecedented levels in South Africa.

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