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Locking horns with crooks: Wildlife crime on the rise in Southern Africa, driven by poaching in SA

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Rhino dehorning is one of the interventions introduced to curb rhino poaching in the Kruger National Park

- **Wildlife crime in South Africa is on the rise, according to the ENACT Organised Crime Index for Africa.**
 - **The index found wildlife crime to be the most pervasive criminal market in the region.**
 - **South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar and Zimbabwe have the four high levels of criminality.**
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Southern Africa is a hub for wildlife crime, driven mainly by activity in South Africa and a handful of other countries, according to an international crime index.

The ENACT Organised Crime Index for Africa, produced by the [Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime](#), offers insight into criminal markets, criminal actors and the state of resilience in Africa.

Although Southern Africa has the lowest regional levels of crime on the continent, certain countries exhibit relatively high levels of criminal activity and crime has steadily increased over the past four years, the report found.

Of the 13 countries in the region, four had high levels of criminality: South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar and Zimbabwe.

Fauna crimes were the most pervasive, with the region "serving as one of the world's largest hubs for live animals and animal parts". The report also found that this "extremely profitable market" had grown in Southern Africa between 2021 and 2023.

The report stated:

In most countries in the region, environmental crimes and drug markets, especially heroin and cocaine, are a threat and increasing. In some cases, the same transporters, dealers and brokers are involved in multiple criminal markets. For example, there are instances in the region of wildlife trafficking overlapping with drug trafficking or extortion practices at various stages of the supply chain.

It also said these networks were supported by "corrupt public officials who protect organised criminal groups" and facilitate the movement of illicit goods across borders.

"The region is home to large populations of animal species, from rhinos and lions to elephants and pangolins, which are at risk due to the persistent threat of wildlife trafficking.



The Cape or Ground Pangolin (*Manis temminckii*) is a mainly nocturnal anteater found in the southcentral and eastern regions of Africa. It is one of 8 Pangolins found in Africa and Asia.

"Organised crime syndicates, mainly from countries in south-eastern Asia, often work with their local counterparts and corrupt officials to establish highly organised routes for trafficking wildlife products to south-eastern Asia."

All countries in Southern Africa, except Eswatini, Lesotho and Mauritius, were found to have high levels of fauna crimes.

READ | [Robbers make off with 50 rhino horns from North West stockpile facility](#)

"Despite conservation efforts and the arrest of major kingpins in some countries, the poaching of wildlife, especially elephants, rhinos and pangolins (in Zambia, Malawi and South Africa), continues unabated.

The report said:

The consequences for local ecosystems and communities are serious, [including the] deterioration of natural capital, social stability and cohesion; extinction of animal species; and erosion of sustainable economic development.

South Africa is home to the world's largest rhino population and is a key source for the illicit supply chain.

In the first six months of this year, [231 rhinos were killed](#) in South African game reserves. Of these, 143 were in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment said there had been an 11% decrease in poaching nationally, compared with the same period last year, and that the figures showed a continuing trend of poaching moving away from the Kruger National Park to provincial and private reserves. This is reportedly due to a declined rhino population in the Kruger National Park, as well as the effectiveness of anti-poaching measures in the park.

News24 previously reported that South Africa has been linked to [half of all the rhino horns](#) that have been seized globally over the past decade, according to research by the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC).

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Highly organised crime syndicates target rhino horn stockpiles in the country and rely on corruption to move the illicit goods, the WJC said. It is estimated that, globally, around one-third of all seized rhino horns are diverted from legal stockpiles.

In July, 50 rhino horns were stolen in the early hours of a Monday morning from the North West Parks and Tourism Board in Mahikeng.

READ | [How do you get 50 stolen rhino horns out of SA? Coffee or corruption, say experts, or maybe as mugs](#)

In a [report](#) by the African Rhino Specialist Group and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, to the forthcoming CITES conference in Panama, the vast majority of horns which entered illegal trade between 2018 to 2020 originated from poached rhinos rather than from other sources such as stockpiles.