



Perlemoen Plunder: South Africa's battle against R1 billion a year abalone poaching rings

A recent report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime has unveiled a disturbing surge in the illegal trade of South African abalone, with sophisticated smuggling operations threatening the species and robbing the nation of critical revenue. File Picture: Independent Newspapers

Published 12h ago

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The west coastal waters of South Africa are under siege, not from the waves of the Atlantic, but from an insidious tide of environmental crime that is sweeping away one of its most precious marine resources.

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime has sounded the alarm on the rampant [illicit trade of South African abalone](#), with the country's *Haliotis midae* species, locally known as perlemoen (abalone), facing potential extinction due to soaring demand from East Asia.

So rampant is this environmental crime that the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime report released earlier this month estimates that \$60 million (around R1.1 billion) worth of illegal abalone leaves the country every year.

The report was written by Kristina Amerhauser and Robin Cartwright and looked at the illicit financial flows from environmental crime.

It said that in South Africa, the State's response to [abalone smuggling has even been described as "captured"](#).

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"Previous reports suggest that there is evidence that every government agency tasked with [combating abalone poaching](#) has been compromised to some degree by corruption linked to the trade, ranging from bribes paid to low-level inspectors to serious allegations against senior officials," the report said.

Environmental crimes, a broad term that includes illegal wildlife trade, logging, mineral extraction, and unregulated fishing, have seen a dramatic increase over the past two decades.

These activities, driven by urbanisation, consumer demand, and instability in source countries, are not merely ecological issues but complex economic crimes that fuel corruption and violence.

The report said that [sophisticated transnational criminal networks](#) are exploiting this demand, with the digital revolution and the Covid-19 pandemic facilitating a shift from physical to virtual marketplaces, making the illicit trade more accessible, cost-effective, and anonymous.

The financial impact of these environmental crimes is staggering, with estimates valuing them between \$110 billion and \$281 billion annually, making it one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises.

This research aims to expose the economic devastation of environmental crime, revealing the illicit financial flows and the revenue losses to states, which are crucial in understanding the broader harm inflicted on communities worldwide.

In South Africa, the legal abalone farms contribute a mere fraction to the global market, with less than 3% share.

The deficit is met by an underground network of divers, carriers, and exporters who are part of a complex smuggling operation that spans across various African states, including landlocked nations like Zimbabwe and Zambia.

These countries, which do not report exports of dried abalone, show significant import figures in Hong Kong records, the global hub for this marine delicacy.

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Hong Kong imports over 6,000 tonnes of abalone annually, valued at over \$250 million, with no legal distinction at sale between wild and farmed abalone.

Dried abalone, easier to smuggle and a significant portion of the imports, is predominantly sourced from South Africa.

This has led to a staggering estimate of \$891 million worth of illegal abalone trade over 16 years, as revealed by the legitimate production of abalone from South Africa, combined with the official export and import data.

Seizure statistics provide a glimpse into this illicit trade, with numerous cases of dried abalone being intercepted in transit and raids on illegal drying facilities. However, these reported seizures are believed to be just the tip of the iceberg.

Tax evasion plays a role in facilitating this illegal trade, with South Africa's zero-rated export tariff on most abalone products and Hong Kong's status as a free port imposing zero tax on almost all imported goods, creating a fertile ground for non-tax-paying enterprises to thrive.

According to the report, this illicit trade not only undermines conservation efforts, but also robs the South African economy of valuable tax revenue and threatens the sustainability of marine biodiversity.

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