

Mpumalanga poacher sentenced to 18 years for rhino horn trafficking



Illegal rhino horns seized. File Picture: Supplied

By Ronewa Jessica Mashamba

Serial rhino poacher, Ntsaku Prince Letswele, 27, was found guilty and sent to jail by the Ermelo Regional Court on Monday, July 1, for hunting down and killing endangered rhino.

The South African Police Service (SAPS) said in a statement that Letswele was first arrested on December 8, 2022, and later released on bail. This is after Ermelo police received a tip-off about a Toyota double cab carrying rhino horns and firearms. When police stopped the vehicle, Letswele and his co-accused Junior Jorge Chauke, 42, tried to flee, but were quickly caught.

A search of the vehicle revealed four rhino horns hidden in the bonnet, valued at R876,000.

Despite being released on bail, Letswele continued his illegal activities. On March 9, 2023, police received another tip-off regarding a white Nissan Qashqai transporting rhino horns along the R543 road towards Piet Retief.

Upon interception, two rhino horns worth R607,260 were seized, leading to Letswele's rearrest. This time, bail was denied due to his previous offence.

“He was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment of which six years imprisonment is suspended for a period of five years on condition that the accused is not convicted of contravening Sec.57 (1) of Act 10/2004 committed during the period of suspension ITO of Sec. 35 (2) of Act 51/1977,” police said.

“The court ordered that the horns in question be forfeited to the State.”

Junior Jorge Chauke, the co-accused of Letswele, remains at large after failing to appear in court. Chauke, who previously skipped bail, faces charges of unlawful possession of six rhino horns valued at approximately R876,000.

Hawks spokesperson in Mpumalanga, Captain Dineo Sekgotodi said: “The Provincial Head of the Hawks Major General Gerber is requesting Chauke to come forward and hand himself over to authorities.

“He requests members of the public to assist with information about the whereabouts of Chauke by contacting the investigating, Officer Warrant Officer RR Mokoena on 082 303 9965.”

IOL News