

Downward trend in rhino poaching numbers

The department said that during the first six months of 2024, 229 rhinos were poached in South Africa (compared to 231 for the same reporting period in 2023).



Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife rangers dehorn a rhino in an attempt to prevent poaching. Photo: Supplied

There has been a slight downward trend in rhino poaching.

Dion George, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment noted a downward trend during May and June.

In a press release, the department said that during the first six months of 2024, 229 rhinos were poached in South Africa, compared to 231 for the same reporting period in 2023. Of those rhino poached, 191 were killed on state properties and 38 on privately owned parks/reserves/farms.

“A significant drop was noted during May and June this year with national losses reported at 21 and 22 respectively (May and June of 2023 were recorded at 42 and 34). This reduced loss is thought to be attributable to the dehorning of rhino populations in KwaZulu-Natal and specifically in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park where over 1 000 rhinos have been dehorned since April 2024,” said the minister.

The statement added that the Kruger National Park (KNP) lost 45 rhinos to poaching from January to June 2024 compared to 42 during the same reporting period in 2023.

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The statement added that the KNP continues to implement its Rhino Conservation Plan which focuses on guarding and protecting rhinos in the core rhino areas.

At the end of 2023 South Africa reported 16,056 rhinos comprising 2,065 black and 13,991 white rhinos.

These figures compare with figures estimated for the end of 2021 when there were 2,056 black and 12,968 white rhinos in the country. South Africa had 1,032 more rhinos in 2023 than what there were in 2021 despite the poaching.

In 2022 and 2023, 2.9% and 3.2% of South Africa's rhinos respectively were poached. These were lower than the threshold of 3.5% beyond which rhino numbers will decline.

The statement added that the implementation of the Year 1 targets of the Implementation Plan of the National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking (NISCWT) is well under way and cooperation between all stakeholders including government and the private sector is being promoted.

The implementation of NISCWT is overseen by the NATJOINTS Priority Committee on Wildlife Trafficking.

During the reporting period, over 60 suspects have been arrested and 20 heavy calibre firearms recovered in relation to rhino poaching and rhino horn trafficking.

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The statement read that the successful joint operations and investigations between SAPS Stock Theft & Endangered Species Unit, Environmental Management Inspectors (EMIs), the Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations (DPCI) and private security teams are to be commended for their sustained effort.

There also have been a number of successful convictions were received in the past six months:

Two rhino horn traffickers were sentenced to 18 years imprisonment of which 6 (six) years imprisonment was suspended for 5 (five) years in the Ermelo regional court on 1 July 2024. This came after the two traffickers were arrested in December 2022 for the possession of four rhino horns.

On appeal the conviction and sentence of three Botswana Nationals were confirmed. They entered the country illegally and were convicted on one count of murder, after one of their accomplices was killed during a confrontation on the farm, the illegal possession of a prohibited firearm and ammunition, illegally entering the country and hunting a rhino without a permit and sentenced to 36 years imprisonment, effectively to serve 25 years imprisonment.

In the Skukuza court, an accused was sentenced to 35 years imprisonment on charges of trespassing, hunting of one rhino, possession of a prohibited firearm, possession of an unlicensed firearm and ammunition, possession of a dangerous weapon and conspiracy to commit an offence.

In the Free State, three accused were convicted on conspiracy to hunt a rhino and was sentenced to five years direct imprisonment. In addition, a Silver Audi A4 to the value of R100 000-00, which was used as an instrument to the offence, was forfeited to the State.

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A courier on her way to Malaysia was arrested at OR Tambo International Airport. After she booked her suitcases in at the airport, an operator at the scanner section identified that the suitcases contained 12 rhino horns. The accused was convicted and sentenced to five years direct imprisonment.

George said the department is currently in the process of finalising the consultative process for the publication of the revised Biodiversity Management Plan for Black and White Rhinos (BMP) for

implementation.

“This is in line with the provision of the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act. All comments from the consultative process, which included over 700 individuals, will be processed and synthesised to revise the draft plan before the end of 2024,” said George.