

Closure of Endangered Species Unit threatens SA wildlife and tourism

The closure of the police's Endangered Species Unit puts wildlife at risk, potentially increasing poaching and weakening conservation efforts.



Biscuit the pangolin rescued from the wildlife trade.

LIMPOPO – The closing of the police’s Endangered Species Unit (ESU) is a devastating blow to conservation.

Amy Aucamp-Clark of Scales Pangolin Rescue Fund in Hoedspruit said that the closure of the ESU will have severe and far-reaching consequences for endangered wildlife in South Africa.

Aucamp-Clark said that Umoya Khulula Wildlife Centre has started a petition in protest of the closing of the unit. She said poaching and illegal wildlife trade will spike if the unit closes. “Without it, criminal networks will operate with less risk of being caught, leading to more scales, horns, tusks, and skins smuggled across borders.”

According to her, the loss of expertise and the rapid response are also problematic. “The ESU was staffed with highly trained officers who understood the complexities of wildlife crime. Their absence means slower response times to wildlife emergencies, including poaching incidents, a lack of trained personnel to investigate and shut down illegal wildlife networks and conservation organisations losing a key partner in law enforcement, making their work harder,” said Aucamp-Clark.

She said the ESU played a crucial role in collaborating with NGOs, game reserves, and conservationists.

“Without their support conservation groups will struggle to protect high-risk species, wildlife sanctuaries and rehabilitation centres may face higher security risks and South Africa’s ability to meet global conservation commitments will be weakened.”

According to her, it will also impact tourism. “Wildlife conservation drives eco-tourism, which is a major economic contributor in South Africa. With an increase in poaching tourist numbers may decline, affecting communities that rely on conservation-based tourism and the loss of key species could damage ecosystems and biodiversity.”

She said wildlife crime is often linked to organised crime syndicates which engage in other illicit activities like arms smuggling and drug trafficking. “A weaker ESU means greater criminal activity that extends beyond conservation and increased risks for rangers and law enforcement officers on the ground. This is a step backwards for conservation”



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