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Killers of lions wanted body parts for sale – officials

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Kanungu Deputy RDC Gad Rugaaju (left) and UWA inspect carcass of a lion in Queen Elizabeth National Park at the weekend. PHOTO | COURTESY

Summary

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Last week, six lions were found dead and dissected in a suspected poisoning incident in the Queen Elizabeth National Park in Kanungu District, southwestern Uganda.

The lions were discovered with their heads and appendages chopped off, and their carcasses were surrounded by dead vultures, which raised suspicion that they had been poisoned. Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) said it could not rule out illegal wildlife trafficking. A joint investigation team consisting of the Uganda Police Force, Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), and UWA officers was constituted to find out what exactly caused the lions' death.

UWA has so far put a Shs10 million bounty for anybody with the information leading to the arrest and successful prosecution of the people behind the heinous act. Due to this, four people have so far been arrested to help in investigations, according to Mr Bashir Hangi, the Communications Manager at UWA. The suspects, who include; a 68-year-old, were arrested on Monday night during a

joint operation mounted by UWA, UPDF, and Police in Kihhi Sub County, Kanungu District.

The suspects led the security team to a location where four heads of lions and 15 legs were hidden. According to Mr Hangi, the suspects admitted to committing the crime.

Why lions were killed

Mr Gad Rugaaju Ahimbisibwe, the Kanungu Deputy Resident District Commissioner, said the lions were targeted for their parts which would later be sold.

“After being arrested, the suspects admitted to slaughtering lions for their teeth and claws, which to them is a big trade. They told us that they did it for business. A lion’s head is sold at Shs40,000, while its fat is sold at Shs60,000, nails and heart also sold at a yet-to-be-known price. Basically, they were killed for both commercial purposes and traditional medicine,” he revealed.

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Mr Paul Turyagumanawe, a tour guide, attributed the killing of lions to trade and witchcraft.

“It is highly suspected that the area witchdoctors engineered the attack and killing of lions because parts and oils were extracted from the carcasses. If these

medicine men knew the value attached to lions and what the country loses when they die, such things wouldn't be happening," he said.

Threat to the tourism industry

Mr Turyagumanawe told Daily Monitor that last week killing of lions is a big threat to the tourism sector in the area and Uganda at large.

"The southern sector of Queen Elizabeth national park is well known for climbing lions, but now that they are being targeted and killed, the number of tourists who have been coming to see climbing lions is going to reduce and this greatly affects the industry," he lamented.

Mr Hangi said the government is doing all it can to protect the animals from poachers. He noted that UWA has already employed stealth cameras and drones to monitor parks, though the project is expensive.

"We have animals because UWA is protecting them. We have stealth cameras already but we need more in all parks. It is a big project that requires a lot of money over a period of time. We have ventured into the use of drones to monitor parks but they are still few," Mr Hangi said.