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All hands on deck against rhino poaching

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Sunday Mail Reporters

IN the past three years, gun battles between rhino poachers and the Zimbabwe National Parks and Wildlife Authority (ZimParks) rangers have killed about 20 people.

Wildlife economists say a country like Zimbabwe, which has a large rhino population, needs to continue to remain alert as the endangered species to be under threat from poachers.

According to America-based wildlife organisation, World Animal Foundation, the rhino horn is estimated at US\$65 000 per kg, which is more than the value of gold or diamonds.

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One black rhino horn weighs about 1,5kg and an average rhino has two horns. A white rhino horn's average weight is 2,5kg and the average white rhino has two horns weighing about 5kg. These lucrative prices, which are mainly driven by a ready market in Asia, have sparked poaching wars and perilous dealings in rhino horn trade.

Zimbabwe is home to more than 1 500 black rhinos, which remain under threat from marauding poachers.

In the past three years, the country has witnessed some fatal battles between poachers and rangers, especially in the South East Lowveld, where rhinos are concentrated.

In 2019 alone, 10 rhino poachers were shot dead, and one incident at Buby Valley Conservancy still haunts ZimParks rangers.

In a scenario that resembled scenes from an action-thriller, poachers opened fire on rangers and scouts who immediately retaliated resulting in the death of three poachers.

Rifles and ammunition were recovered at the scene. Another suspected poacher was killed in a shootout with ZimParks rangers at Save Valley Conservancy in Masvingo in February 2020 while two other poachers were also gunned down in May of that year, again at Buby Valley Conservancy.

New developments this year call for Zimbabwean authorities to have their eye in, to protect the endangered animals. A September 2021 report, released by World Animal Foundation, reveals that rhino poaching is growing due to rising demand for the horns in Asian countries, especially China and Vietnam.

“Rhino horn is used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, but increasingly common is its use as a status symbol to display success and wealth.

“Rhinos are in serious danger of extinction from poaching. Rhino poaching has risen to levels not seen in almost two decades.

“Although there is no scientific proof of its medical value, rhino horn remains highly prized in traditional Asian medicine, where it is ground into fine powder as treatment for a variety of illnesses such as nosebleeds and fevers,” the report says.

In May this year, Zimbabwe announced that it would re-introduce rhinos to its second biggest wildlife park, Gonarezhou, the first time that the sanctuary will be home to the species in 30 years.

With this news, the poachers' eyes have surely lit up and Zimbabwe needs to have all hands on deck to prevent a rise in cases of rhino poaching. Are the courts doing enough? Possession of rhino horns or ivory is a violation of the country's laws as stipulated in the Wildlife and Parks Act and attracts a mandatory nine-year sentence.

ZimParks has, since 2017, introduced the shoot-to-kill policy on poachers but there are worries that the courts are not expediting poaching and wildlife cases.

One case, involving a South African illegal immigrant, Brent Johan Lunt and a Zimbabwean, Nyasha Mutendawafa, has been dragging in the courts since July 2019.



The duo was arrested on June 29, 2019 for illegal possession of about 5kg of rhino horns worth US\$240 000 and appeared before Harare Magistrate Babra Bako on July 4 when they were remanded in custody.

They applied for bail, which the High Court granted.

At the close of the State case, they applied for a discharge which was turned down by the Harare Magistrate, prompting the duo to approach the High Court for a review of the lower court's decision to have them stand a full trial in their case.

The State promptly responded to the review application, but the accused persons delayed in filing their heads of argument which prompted the State to file a chamber application for dismissal for want of prosecution. The application could not be heard on a technicality.

Lunt is also expected to appear before the South African High Court on charges of illegally dealing in diamonds and corruption, but due to the bail restrictions imposed by the Zimbabwean courts, the South African has failed to attend court while his court case in Zimbabwe continues to drag.

In another case, seven Chinese nationals were arrested in Victoria Falls, in December 2018, after being found in possession of cash and 20,98kg of rhino horns, worth close to US\$1 million.

They were granted bail in April 2019 after serving four months in custody for money laundering and possession of rhino horns.

The matter is yet to be closed amid indications that the suspects have skipped the country.

While hailing the judiciary for helping ZimParks in the fight against poaching, the authority's spokesman, Mr Tinashe Farawo, said there was a need for more engagement.

“The issue against poaching includes all other state agencies and the judiciary is no exception.

“We will need to continue engaging our judiciary officers to ensure that they fully understand the challenges we are facing and the importance of wildlife.

“So, we are also doing a lot of awareness. That’s why you see some people getting as much as 35 years in jail when it comes to poaching of our rhinos,” added Mr Farawo.

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