



INDEPENDENT

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Poachers kill endangered painted dogs in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park

Also called wild dogs, the endangered canines trip snares meant for other animals or drink from poisoned water, threatening their local extinction in key wildlife area

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(Duncan McNab)

By Calvin Manika for The Citizen Bulletin

Endangered African painted dogs are at the risk of local extinction due to poachers hunting other wildlife at Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park.

The painted dogs are victims of rampant poaching by local and international syndicates hunting for wildlife such as buffaloes and elephants. Although poachers have no interest in painted dogs themselves, they become victims of snares or poisoned water sources meant for other game.

The destruction of their habitats is also cited as one of the reasons why the painted dogs face extinction.

“It's not about the painted dogs only. Local people don't hunt wild dogs, no one eats them here. The killing of one animal by poachers means a lot to us. As a community even without donor support, we have the responsibility to guard these precious animals,” says Lawrence Ncube, a resident of Hwange.

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Hwange National Park is home to the Big Five — elephants, lions, buffalos, rhinoceros and leopards which are a target of poachers. For elephants, the poachers will be targeting their skins and tusks.

Both local and syndicates of international poachers make their way in the biggest wildlife sanctuary in Zimbabwe to poach the animals.

The Painted Dogs' Conservation Centre (PDCC) situated in the park has been trying to protect wild dogs from extinction through the deployment of patrol teams, surveillance technologies, anti- poaching units as well as awareness campaigns in nearby villages.

PDCC estimates that there are between 3 000 and 5 000 wild dogs alive on the African continent with Zimbabwe being home to 700 of them.

Painted dogs at one time were found all over Africa, and today they are mainly found in Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

They were classified as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2016, due to its fast dwindling numbers.

A 2021 annual report by the PDCC says poaching remains one of the main threats to their survival, especially outside Hwange National Park.

“Since its formation in 2001, our anti-poaching team has provided direct protection to painted dogs, their prey, and the rest of the wildlife, deterring poachers through a boots on the ground policy and removing any snares set,” the report says.

In 2020, there was an unprecedented rise in poaching activities outside Hwange National Park as seen by the high number of snares which were removed. The rise was attributed to COVID-19 induced lockdowns, retrenchments, and pay cuts that pushed people into poaching for survival.

“The continued presence in the field is an effective deterrent factor, limiting poaching activities as culprits fear crossing paths with our scouts. This is why in 2022 we will seek more support to have the Community Volunteers back in the field again,” the report adds.

The Hwange National Park main camp falls under Chief Nelukoba’s jurisdiction. The chief expresses the need to conserve wildlife.

“Wildlife contributes to the growth of the economy. The more we protect our wildlife, the more we benefit as a community. I have always urged my subjects to protect our forests and animals first.

So, we want to reach a level that when we talk of poachers, it will be someone not from our community.”

Wildlife has the potential to contribute immensely to the target of achieving a US\$5 billion tourism and hospitality sector by the year 2025.

The African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and the Ministry of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MECTHI) last year met to undertake a study on the status of the biodiversity economy in Zimbabwe.

The study will birth the first-ever State of the Biodiversity Economy in Zimbabwe, including an outline for natural capital accounting and a blueprint for leveraging key investment opportunities in the biodiversity economy.

AWF Country Director for Zimbabwe Olivia Mufute says there is a need to obtain maximum value from the biodiversity economy.

“AWF was approached by the Ministry of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality Industry to develop the report as a tool to inform policies around maximising the country’s inclusive wealth and maintaining the long-term sustainability of its biological resource base,” says Mufute.

African countries are increasingly turning to biodiversity as a key contributor to their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as sustainability, climate change, and biodiversity loss take centre stage in the developmental agendas of many economies.

A recent report by the World Economic Forum found that over half of the global GDP (USD \$44 trillion) relies on nature.

Healthy biodiversity has numerous economic benefits including food security, development of pharmaceutical products, tourism, climate regulation, soil nutrient recycling, diseases, and pest control.

Hwange villagers acknowledge that protecting wildlife will boost the biodiversity economy and sustain the next generations.

“Hwange District economy, especially Dete, is hinged on wildlife activities. Most of the people in the villages are employed as guides, chefs, cooks, rangers and volunteers in anti-poaching patrols. So, in order to protect our heritage we have activated our villages to flush out poachers or their moles,” says Trymore Siziba, another Hwange resident.

PDCC Anti-Poaching Manager Enock Zulu says PDC has an anti-poaching unit which patrols the Hwange National Park which is a buffer into the protected area.

“And we patrol on a daily basis collecting wire snares and arresting offenders. We act as the first line of defence,” Zulu says.

He says since 2019, they have arrested 46 poachers, all of them locals. “We do carry out joint patrols with other stakeholders who include Zim Parks, Forestry Commission and other private players. The challenge is winning the mind-set of

the community and convincing them to report offenders as the offenders are people known by the community,” he says.

“All poachers we arrested were convicted and sentenced, one was sentenced to nine years in prison for possession of ivory and two were sentenced to 36 months for setting wire snares just to mention a few.”