

ENVIRONMENT

DECREASE IN WILDLIFE CRIME

Fewer arrests, fewer incidents registered – high number of unreported cases?

The fact that the number of registered wildlife crimes and the associated arrests decreased in 2024 could also be due to a lower clearance rate. A key challenge continues to be the closure of cases and court proceedings against poachers.

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Ten years have passed since the massive increase in rhino and elephant poaching drastically changed wildlife conservation and law enforcement in Namibia. The number of registered cases of wildlife crime and the associated arrests decreased again in most categories in 2024 compared to the previous year. "This could indicate a decrease in crime or be due to a lower clearance rate," according to the "Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement" report by the Ministry of Environment and the Namibian Police for 2024.

The total number of registered cases fell by 14%, the number of arrests by 21%. The number of registered cases related to valuable species decreased by 8%, with only cases related to rhinos recording an increase (up 17%).

Incidents involving valuable species accounted for 30% of all reported cases. The number of rhinos poached in Namibia in 2024 increased by 6% compared to 2023.

The number of nose horns seized by law enforcement remained relatively low. While 83 rhinos were poached, 14 horns were seized.

Rhinos continue to be saved by preventive measures that intercept potential poachers before they successfully prey on an animal. In 2024, preventive measures led to 44 arrests in 13 incidents (out of a total of 78 rhino-related arrests in 104 incidents).

The number of poached elephants remains low at nine compared to eight in 2023.

Elephant tusk seizures fell by 70% in 2024 to the lowest level since 2016, while the number of registered elephant-related incidents fell by 21%.

Pangolin seizures also decreased from 70 to 50 animals (29% less), which was also reflected in the lower number of registered pangolin-related cases (38 in 2024 compared to 60 in 2023).

Recorded incidents related to meat poaching continued to decline slowly by 11% last year, and the number of arrests fell by 6%. Nevertheless, meat poaching

continues to dominate law enforcement in the area of wildlife crime and accounted for 40% of all cases registered in 2024.

Closed cases

"When comparing the number of completed court cases with the number of registered crimes, it should be noted that not every registered crime leads to a court case," the report says. If, for example, a poached rhinoceros is discovered, criminal proceedings are opened, but court proceedings can only be initiated once charges have been brought against a suspect. "Such aspects tend to distort the statistics on the closure of cases – which remains a key obstacle to species conservation and law enforcement in Namibia," the report says.

In 2024, a total of 344 cases of wildlife crime were registered, of which 243 were initiated as court proceedings with defendants. A total of 144 court proceedings were completed in the course of the year, many of which are older cases from previous years.

Most cases involve more than one suspect, so a total of 244 people were acquitted. The ratio between registered and completed court cases continues to be a concern, as significantly more court cases are filed each year than are completed. Since the beginning of the current wildlife crime crisis, no year has resulted in more court cases being completed than registered, resulting in a steadily growing backlog of court cases.

Special courts for wildlife cases, which have been meeting at priority locations since 2022, have been instrumental in significantly reducing the gap between registered and closed cases. In 2022, 121 of the 248 closed cases were closed during special court sessions, reducing the ratio of registered to closed cases to 1.5 to 1 annually (372 cases registered, 248 closed).

The report states that by including these incidents, the ratio of registered to closed cases changed to 2.4 to 1 in 2024: "Of the 244 people whose cases were closed in 2024, 231 were convicted, a commendable conviction rate of 95%."

Repeat offenders

Statistics show that in the five years from 2019 to 2024, repeated arrests related to rhino crime sometimes accounted for more than half of all suspects arrested. Some suspects have been arrested up to eight times in the past decade, but in most cases, none of their cases have been closed, according to the report.

The rhino poaching crisis in Namibia is exacerbated by the fact that there are rarely serious consequences for this crime: "By the end of 2024, only about 7% of all arrested suspects had been convicted. A worrying percentage of suspects have been released, and only a few convicted offenders have received prison sentences." The low proportion of horn seizures (about 9% of all horns stolen from rhinos in the last decade) indicates that financial flows arise from successfully smuggled horns.

The report concludes that the potential illicit profits from rhino poaching and horn smuggling outweigh the potential consequences of prison sentences as a deterrent effect, while the far-reaching effects of rhino poaching are not given the necessary attention.