

Serial offenders fuel rhino poaching crisis

Just around 7% of all suspects arrested for rhino-related crimes in Namibia over the past decade had been convicted by the end of 2024.

Since 2015, when the current rhino poaching crisis first peaked, 726 rhinos have been recorded as poached in Namibia by last year.

According to the Namibia National Report on Wildlife Protection for 2024, proactive law enforcement has led to the arrest of 855 suspects accused of rhino-related crimes.

However, the report notes that the lack of serious consequences for such offences remains a major challenge for rhino conservation and protection in Namibia.

“A high number of arrested suspects are known repeat offenders, seasoned criminals with previous arrests related to rhino crimes, out on bail in ongoing court cases, or discharged after being tried,” the report states.

Slipping through the cracks

Statistics show repeat arrestees in rhino crimes at times account for more than 50% of total arrests.

“Some suspects have been arrested up to eight times for the past ten years, yet in most scenarios, none of their cases have been finalised.”

The authors warn that many of the arrestees continue to be involved in suspected criminal activities.

“Absconding while on bail is not uncommon, with many suspects turning fugitive, and some leaving the country to evade the law.”

The report recommends that “bail applications should be denied as a preventative measure whenever there is a risk of suspects reoffending, and all means to expedite case finalisation should be employed.”

It further highlights recidivism – the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend – as a global challenge in efforts to combat crime.

“Recidivism is particularly high amongst Namibian rhino syndicates but is also prevalent in other sectors such as meat poaching,” the report notes.

“While court cases are ongoing, the suspects are released on bail and are rearrested and charged for similar offences committed while on bail.”

New poachers flood crime scenes

The report also warns that new individuals continue to be drawn into rhino-related crimes, with 61% of suspects arrested in 2024 identified as first-time offenders.

“It is vital to demonstrate to such first offenders through swift prosecutions and appropriate sentencing that wildlife crime does not pay.”

According to the report, the rhino poaching crisis in Namibia is being compounded by the reality that there are seldom serious consequences for rhino crimes.

Potential illicit gains from rhino poaching and horn trafficking thus outweigh potential consequences, while the far-reaching impacts of rhino poaching are not receiving due attention.