

# POACHING DECIMATES RIVER'S HIPPO POPULATION, LODGE OWNER WARNS

Numbers reportedly plunge from 187 to 22

**Conservationists warn that hippo numbers are plummeting amid a surge in poaching.**

**Eliot Ipinge**

1 DAY AGO - 2026-02-25 00:05:00

The hippo population along the Kavango River near Shamvura Camp has reportedly collapsed from 187 animals to just 22 in two years, raising alarm over what lodge owner and conservationist Mark Paxton describes as a relentless surge in poaching.

Paxton, who has conducted formal wildlife counts along the river for decades, submits his results to Wetlands International, a global non-profit organisation dedicated to the conservation and restoration of wetlands.

His records show a sharp decline of the local hippo population.

“In one year we dropped from 187 to 47. This January we counted 22,” Paxton said. “That is not a natural decline. That is poaching.”

According to Paxton, the crisis began to intensify around October last year, when gunshots became a near-daily occurrence along the river.

While small-scale poaching has occurred over the years, he says the recent wave is far more organised and aggressive.

“Every day or every second day, we would hear shots on the river,” he said. “By the time we investigated, the carcasses were gone. Poachers can strip a hippo in under an hour.”

Population decimation

Repeated reports to the environment ministry and local police, he claims, initially went unheeded. “Nothing happened for months,” he said. “That creates a culture where people think they can do what they want.”

Paxton also highlighted cross-border complications, with some hippo meat reportedly being transported from Angola into Namibia.

The situation escalated when neighbouring lodges reported individuals openly shooting hippos along the river.

This prompted a coordinated response involving Namibian police, border officials and Angolan authorities.

Paxton said he was informed of three arrests in Namibia and 12 in Angola, involving both Namibian and Angolan nationals. However, some suspects were released on bail and, according to Paxton, promptly returned to poaching.

“The numbers are shocking, but what is even more alarming is how quickly this population has been decimated,” he said. “If enforcement does not remain consistent, there will be nothing left.”

The decline has profound ecological implications.

Hippos are a keystone species, maintaining river channels and nutrient cycles that support fish, birds and other wildlife. A collapse in their numbers can destabilise the river ecosystem.

For tourism operators along the Kavango River, the loss of hippos also threatens revenue, as visitors come specifically to observe these iconic animals.

Paxton noted that the sharp decline in hippo sightings at his lodge has severely affected his business, with fewer tourists drawn to the area.

## Police response

Ndiyona Police Station commander Josef Albin acknowledged that while there is a perception of increasing hippo poaching along the Kavango River, such incidents must be formally reported to the police for full investigation.

He claimed that over the past months, only one report had been officially lodged with his station, which led to suspects being apprehended.

Albin also questioned the accuracy of the hippo counts provided by lodge operators, arguing that it would be almost impossible to obtain an exact number of hippos, given their tendency to move along the river.

He clarified that the three suspects arrested on the Namibian side were detained for transporting hippo meat, not for killing the animals.

“The individuals believed to have shot the hippos were arrested in Angola, including three Angolan nationals and four Namibians who crossed the border to collect meat,” Albin explained. “The ones arrested here were found transporting meat.”

The police officer emphasised that the gap between local reports and official records underlines the need to formally report poaching incidents, allowing for proper investigation and enforcement.

Yet the rapid decline of the hippo population, as shown in Paxton’s data, paints a grim picture.

Once home to nearly 200 animals, the river now holds only a fraction of that number, according to data collected by conservationists.

They warn that without consistent enforcement and coordinated cross-border action, the Kavango River could lose its hippos entirely, with serious consequences for both the ecosystem and tourism in the region.