

Rhino killings decrease by 11%

In the first six months of this year, 231 rhinos were killed in South Africa, representing an 11% decrease when compared to the same period last year.



Image source: Nicole Kruger from [Pexels](#)

This represents a decline of 28 animals killed for their horn.

Addressing a media briefing on Tuesday, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Barbara Creecy, said during this period poaching trends also continued to show a move away from the Kruger National Park to provincial and private reserves.

“Forty-two rhinos were poached in the Kruger National Park and 143 in KwaZulu-Natal province from January to June 2023. Forty-six of the rhinos killed were in privately-owned nature reserves and 143 in provincially-owned reserves,” the Minister said in Pretoria.

Due to the demand for rhino horn remaining a constant threat to rhino populations, collaboration between the law

enforcement agencies supported by private security remained key.

An important development in strengthening the collaboration between law enforcement to effectively address the organised nature of rhino poaching and wildlife trafficking is Cabinet's approval National Integrated Strategy to Combat Wildlife Trafficking (NISCWT) in May this year.

"This strategy aims to break the illicit value chain of wildlife trafficking in South Africa and beyond its borders. It represents a commitment by government to direct law enforcement ability and effort and mobilise society support to address the threat wildlife tracking poses to national security and the country's rich biodiversity.

"Although currently our main focus is rhino, the strategy also aims to address the illegal trade in, and poaching of, other species that are threatened by trafficking syndicates, like abalone," Creecy said.

Joint initiatives pay dividends

In the first six months of this year efforts by both the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) have led to the conviction of 31 offenders.

The majority of sentences were custodial. In Skukuza, one suspect found guilty of killing three rhino and possession of unlawful arms and ammunition was sentenced to an effective 32 year imprisonment.

In another matter, three accused, found driving in Kruger National Park with five rhino horns hidden in the vehicle, a hunting rifle with a silencer, ammunition and knives, were convicted for the killing of three rhinos in the park, possession of unlawful firearms and ammunition, possession of dangerous weapons and trespassing.

Accused one and two were sentenced to 34 years imprisonment, while accused 3 was sentenced to 39 years imprisonment.

In Limpopo, an accused individual was sentenced on a charge of murder, killing of two rhinos, unlicensed firearm and ammunition to an effective sentence of 24 years imprisonment.

In the Eastern Cape, six accused were convicted on charges of conspiracy to commit rhino poaching, notably no rhinos were killed, and the possession of unlicensed firearm and ammunition and effectively sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 16 to 20 years.

"The role of rangers in supporting the prosecution and sentencing of those arrested for wildlife crimes committed in the Kruger cannot be underestimated.

"There is strong collaboration between the SAPS forensic teams and South African National Parks (SANParks) Environmental and Corporate Investigations (ECI) when attending crime scenes to ensure the collection of vital evidence to link suspects to the crime scenes. It is also done to ensure minimum contamination of the crime scene.

"During the meeting held earlier this year with the Director of Public Prosecutions' Environmental Working Group we discussed the challenge relating to the opposing of bail due to the fact that rhino poaching is not listed as a scheduled offence.

"Research is being conducted to propose, if viable, legislative amendments to address this challenge," the Minister said.

Creecy said it was unfortunate that rhino poachers have continued to target the Hluhluwe/iMfolozi game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal where Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, supported by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and iSimangaliso Wetland Park, continue to implement a number of measures to combat rhino poaching.

Among these has been the establishment of a Tactical Operations Joint Control Centre which now facilitates the SAPS deployments to Hluhluwe/iMfolozi Park (HiP).

The department has made available R40 million for the repair and replacement of the boundary fence around the Hluhluwe/iMfolozi game reserve, which is regularly breached and through which wild animals can escape to nearby communities.

The National Prosecuting Authority has designated a prosecutor to facilitate rhino cases in KwaZulu-Natal and cases have been prioritised and identified to be expedited through the court processes.

Criminal syndicates

In response to a range of studies that point out collusion between ranger services and criminal syndicates, the Kruger National Park has developed a holistic Ranger Services – Integrity Management Plan.

“This plan aims to improve ranger morale and resilience to corruption by providing services that enhance ranger health and well-being, provide training and counselling, offer a range of financial management services and debt management.

“The Ranger Service has also enlisted the Association of Savings and Investment South Africa (ASISA) Foundation to provide specialised financial literacy training for all field rangers. This was attended by 334 employees,” the Minister said.

SANParks has also established an integrity testing system - a polygraph policy - for new recruits and to support anti-corruption investigations.

To ensure the safe passage of tourists, SANParks has joined a task team championed by the Deputy Minister of Tourism, Fish Mahlalela, in collaboration with the traditional leaders of adjoining communities, the SAPS and private security companies to ensure constant patrols along the identified hotspots en route to the Kruger National Park.

“South Africa’s national parks are situated in areas of extreme poverty and are surrounded by many vulnerable communities.

“In order to ensure that communities on the outskirts of parks benefit from tourism and thus help to keep tourists safe, SANParks has held a number of stakeholder engagements with entrepreneurs in the past four years with regard to the provision of goods and services to our national parks.

“In addition, through Working for Water, Ecosystems and Wetlands programmes, we have created 33,222 work opportunities for communities living on the outskirts of our national parks,” the Minister said.