

## **A CASE STUDY AND PRACTICAL ISSUES FROM NAMIBIA**

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Just before Namibia's independence from South Africa, rhino poaching escalated to unprecedented heights due to political disarray, uncertainty of what the future held and general lawlessness. Two areas were targeted: western Etosha National Park and the free living population in the Kunene region. Capacity to deal with the 1989 onslaught was totally inadequate, for example:

Kunene (Damaraland): Ministry of Environmental and Tourism (MET) had rangers on motorbikes from 1986 onwards in the former Damaraland and a small fleet of vehicles for senior staff. There were no dedicated anti-poaching units, no communal conservancies and a great deal of MET's time was spent on elephant problems in the communal farms of Damaraland and the adjoining commercial farms.

Etosha National Park: Due to the vast areas and lack of infrastructure, rangers were patrolling on horseback and for 2.1 million ha there were only three Conservation Officers in charge of the different areas with four Chief Rangers and 10 Rangers. Furthermore Etosha National Park had no dedicated anti-poaching units.

MET was therefore in no position to combat the sudden surge in poaching and as a result it was decided on dehorning and immediate translocation of animals in high risk areas as an interim measure to give the MET a window of time to better equip, train and mobilise more security staff in the field. At the time the following was the reasoning for the dehorning and translocations:

- Rendering the individual less attractive to the would-be poacher;
- Forcing the possible poacher to look for alternatives;
- Poacher has to spend more time in the "hunting area" (increasing chance of being caught);
- Decreasing the density of rhino in high risk areas significantly;
- Removing target animals to more secure areas; and
- More effective security, unknown area to poachers.

Rhino were then both dehorned and removed from Kunene and Etosha National Park, which reduced the density of rhino in both areas. The following actions were then taken simultaneously to safeguard the remaining animals<sup>1</sup>:

- Strategy / standard operating procedures were developed;
- Contingency plans were put in place;
- Staffing levels were significantly increased;
- Anti-poaching Units were established in Kunene and Etosha National Park;
- Intelligence networks were developed;
- Investigations were done with close cooperation from the Protected Resources Unit of Namibian Police (NamPol);

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<sup>1</sup> Shortly after these actions were put in place the main syndicates were apprehended and successfully prosecuted. Since that upsurge in poaching (1989 - 1991) Namibia lost less than 10 animals in the following two decades. It is important to note that the actions were not one off's e.g. dehorning took place in 1995 for the last time. Since then 67 communal conservancies were gazetted with full wildlife utilization benefits to communities. Training and funding support increased significantly from different donor agencies. Namibia has a hotline in place as a precautionary measure against poaching. National and regional security workshops take place with action plans. New technology e.g. tags are put in place as early warning systems and Namibia has contributed significantly to the RhODIS database.

- Budgets / Allowances were significantly increased;
- Equipment was bought;
- Training commenced;
- Community support through Community-Based Natural Resource Management programmes was initiated;
- Save the Rhino Trust and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) (NGO support and much needed funding were secured);
- Press (information was provided to indicate that a serious effort was being made to combat poaching; and
- Stiffer penalties were gazetted for rhino and elephant related crime.

However, it is important to note that dehorning is not without disadvantages, for example:

- Ethical and / or moral reasons;
- Unethical to disfigure an animal albeit temporarily;
- Permanent damage to horn (disfigurement of animal permanently);
- Possible biological consequences for the individual;
- Can't defend itself during interspecies conflict;
- Can't defend itself against predators;
- Can't defend its calves against predators; and
- Chronic infection.

In conclusion, it is important that if you don't understand your threat and you dehorn, you will dehorn in the false hope of stopping poaching whereas if you do it to put off poachers in the immediate future then it is a management tool which might buy you time and resources to effectively protect rhino.