

OPERATION BLUE RHINO: a game changer

Operation Blue Rhino has proven to be a game changer. That's the consensus amongst those at the frontline of rhino poaching in Namibia. Blue Rhino has been the catalyst enabling new, innovative and proactive approaches to counter wildlife crime. The breakthrough was achieved through strong partnerships.

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Above: A white rhino, most likely mid-mouthfull

Below: Black rhinos across the Namibian landscape, there is a lot of room for them to roam, and so a lot of area to protect.

Namibia has been very successful at rebuilding its rhino populations from historic lows seen prior to the country's independence in 1990. When rhino poaching first began to escalate again, around eight years ago, the Government implemented a variety of counter measures, with active support from NGOs, the private sector, rural communities and international funding partners.

New departments were created to deal exclusively with wildlife protection, intelligence and investigations. National security forces were deployed to the country's largest national park, Etosha, to counter poaching there.

While poaching was reduced, two aspects became clear: firstly, fast and flexible funding was essential to support dedicated wildlife-crime investigations; and, secondly, law enforcement and conservation staff had to work together. The answer was Operation Blue Rhino, a formal collaboration between the Protected Resources Division of the Namibian Police Force and the Intelligence and Investigation Unit of the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism.

What the Blue Rhino Task Team has managed is a huge shift from reactive to proactive law enforcement. Instead of the discovery of a dead rhino initiating an investigation, would-be poachers are now regularly arrested while they are still conspiring to kill a rhino. During the first half of 2020, 30% of the 88 arrests related to rhinos were pre-emptive arrests of suspects conspiring to poach – before they had managed a kill. The figures of 2019 are even more impressive: 68 pre-emptive arrests out of a total of 131. That's more than half of all suspects caught before they managed to kill a rhino.



Close collaboration with prosecutors is also leading to convictions with appropriate sentences. Six perpetrators were convicted in May 2020 in two cases of conspiring to poach rhinos. All received sentences that send a stern warning to would-be criminals: "you are likely to get caught even before you find a rhino, and you will not get off lightly".

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Blue Rhino Task Team are the arrests of a long list of dealers, middlemen, aiders and abettors, including international kingpins. This unravelling of crime syndicates forces dealers to expose themselves in their search for new buyers, creating a domino effect of further arrests.

Unfortunately, these successes don't mean that 'the war is won'. As long as there is a lucrative market for rhino horn and there are rhinos left to kill, poachers will attempt to get to them. But Namibian partnerships against environmental crime are making life increasingly difficult for the criminals, and steadily better for the rhinos.

