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Namibian community protects its rhinos from poaching but could lose them to mining

by **Victoria Schneider** on 13 March 2023

- *After years of decline, rhino poaching figures increased in Namibia in 2022, with the biggest losses occurring in Etosha National Park*
- *No rhinos were killed on communal land, yet one such successful conservancy is seeing its rhinos driven away by blasting and other activity at a copper mine that the environment minister approved in the area.*
- *The conservancy says the displacement of the resident black rhinos threatens the conservation program and revenue from tourism, and is planning to sue the environment minister.*
- *The //Huab Conservancy's dispute highlights weaknesses in the ministry's exercise of environmental regulation.*

A community conservancy in Namibia says it plans to sue the country's environment minister if he fails to act against a copper mine operating in an area exclusively reserved for tourism.

In an open letter released in February, the //Huab Conservancy's Management Committee criticized Minister Pohamba Shifeta for granting an environmental clearance certificate (ECC) to the miner, a Namibian individual, stating that "rhinos, local jobs, and our conservancy have been imperiled by this groundless, uninformed, and reckless decision."

According to Emma Gomes, chairperson of the conservancy, the mine has prompted the local population of black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*) to migrate, hurting the community's income as well as the conservation program it runs.

Located in the Kunene region in the country's northwest, the //Huab Conservancy is one of 13 community conservancies in the area registered under Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resources Management program. The CBNRM initiative was initiated by the government in the late 1990s to give local communities legal rights over the management of their land and its natural resources.



The //Huab Conservancy is one of 13 community conservation areas in the Kunene region.
Image by Jeffrey Hanadaob and John Ellis Aibeb

“The rhino population in the western Kunene region is not huge, but is considered a key-1 population by IUCN, which means it’s over 100 individuals,” said Andrew Malherbe, chief operating officer of Save the Rhino Trust (SRT), an organization that monitors and collects data on black rhinos in support of conservancies in the country’s northwest.

The //Huab Conservancy’s letter was published shortly after Shifeta, the minister, released Namibia’s latest poaching statistics, which showed a surge in the number of illegally killed rhinos. While just four elephants were reported to have been poached in Namibia in 2022, 87 rhinos were killed, up from 45 in 2021. Of these, 61 were the critically endangered black rhinos.

The steep increase raises questions about the country’s conservation models. “We note with serious concern that our flagship park, Etosha National Park, is a poaching hotspot,” environment ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda said in the statement.

The environment ministry did not respond to Mongabay’s request for comment.

All rhinos killed were within fenced, protected areas, either on commercial farms or in Etosha National Park, which recorded the highest number with 61 cases. No incidents at all were documented on communal lands such as the //Huab Conservancy, which received a small population of black rhinos in 2009 through the government's Black Rhino Custodian Program.

Malherbe told Mongabay there are several possible reasons why poaching levels remain low in community conservancies in Kunene, even though there are no fences, technically allowing anyone to enter. Besides comprehensive coverage of the landscape by patrol teams, he said that years of initiatives run by SRT, as well as the CBNRM framework mean community members have been actively involved in long-term protection of rhinos. On top of that, the region has a very low population density.

"It is difficult for a poaching group from outside to come into the region because they are almost certainly going to be detected. We receive phone calls from farmers saying, 'There's a dodgy car in the area, we don't know these people, you need to send someone to investigate,'" said Malherbe, who stressed that SRT is a non-militarized field presence on the ground, not an anti-poaching unit. "This, by itself, is a deterrent to poachers."



Namibia has received global recognition for its CBNRM program. Despite being criticized for persistent weaknesses in governance structures and unequal power dynamics, mostly between communities and private sector partners operating within conservancies, it has been linked to recovering populations of threatened wildlife, including black rhinos, seemingly more effective against poaching than other measures.

Many community conservancies have set up joint-venture partnerships with private tourism companies to generate income. The //Huab Conservancy signed an agreement with tour operator Ultimate Safaris in 2016, allowing the company to run a tourist campsite specializing in black rhino tracking on foot, and receiving a share of the profits in return. According to Ultimate Safaris, the //Huab Conservancy generated around N\$900,000 (\$60,000) through this joint venture per year, including salaries and subsistence allowances.

However, because of the blasting and other disturbances caused by the mine, the rhinos have started to move away, Gomes, the conservancy chair, told Mongabay. “There is a lot of noise in the area now, which has caused our rhinos to move out. They are building houses, there is blasting — the rhinos can’t live there.”

Gomes runs her own private farm a few kilometers away and has observed the development firsthand: “Every day we used to see the rhinos around our fields. But since they started blasting last year, we don’t see them anymore.”

With the rhinos gone, there’s no use for a rhino-based tourism enterprise to be there.

Ultimate Safaris recently closed its campsite in the area, in which it had invested N\$7 million (\$470,000) over the past few years. “There was a small population of custodianship rhinos that were introduced into the area by [the environment ministry] and those rhinos will probably need to be relocated out of the area by [the ministry] because of the mining threat,” Tristan Cowley from Ultimate Safaris told Mongabay.

He added that while the company has camps in other locations and will most likely recover, the biggest concern is the future of the //Huab Conservancy and its wildlife. “We were their only sustainable revenue source in terms of job creation, monthly payments, and royalties,” he said. “They will be the big losers in this.”



Until mining activity caused resident rhinos to migrate elsewhere, Ultimate Safaris operated a successful rhino tracking adventure from a camp in the //Huab Conservancy, employing locals as guides. Image courtesy Ultimate Safaris.

The impact of the campsite's closure has been immediate: "The rhinos and the tourism company were the only source of income in our conservancy, and now we have to retrench all of our employees," Gomes said. Eleven people had lost their jobs as of the end of February.

In April 2021, multiple stakeholders, including the conservancy, Ultimate Safaris, and SRT, filed an administrative appeal against the government's decision to grant environmental clearance to the mine.

In their appeal, the parties pointed to a deficient public participation process, and the failure of the environmental assessment practitioner to include the black rhino population in the mining project's environmental impact assessment, among other flaws.

According to stakeholders, the consultation process as required by Namibia's Environmental Management Act was held during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when no more than 10 people were allowed to gather in one place.

“They should have come up to us as the conservancy and the traditional leaders and informed us about this, but they didn’t,” Gomes said.

Cowley confirmed that Ultimate Safaris was also left out of the consultation process, despite being a significant employer in the area.

The minister only heard the appeal more than a year later, in June 2022, but a promised ruling has not been delivered.

Taking legal action against the mine comes after concerted efforts to solve the issue with the minister directly.

“We sent emails to the minister’s office, but they kept saying the minister is not in the office,” said Gomes, who brought the matter to a community meeting last year to consult on how to proceed. “If they don’t react, we are going to take them to court.”