

The Rise of Rhinoceros Poaching in Botswana

Briefing Document for Delegates to CITES SC74 (Lyon, March 2022)

Overview

Significant and sustained rhino poaching in the Okavango Delta has decimated Botswana's wild white and black rhinos. The government has relied largely on reactionary approaches to address this poaching catastrophe that have failed to stop the killing of Botswana's rhinos.

Botswana lost only six rhinos to poaching from 2006 to 2017, but the situation changed abruptly in 2018 with the loss of an estimated 11 rhinos. This was followed by a sharp increase in poaching in 2019 that continued through 2020 with 30 and 62 rhinos killed, respectively, according to government figures. However, the actual number of rhinos poached may be significantly greater. Botswana has not released any information on the number of rhinos poached in 2021 or 2022.

Compounding the crisis, Botswana has been reluctant to work with other governments and civil society to address poaching. Allegations of corruption have further called into question Botswana's ability to protect its rhino population from poaching and illegal trade.

Despite the worrying increase in rhino poaching evident in late 2019, Botswana was simply encouraged to keep the poaching situation "under review" by the Secretariat and Standing Committee in their report on rhinos to CoP18. The slaughter of the Okavango Delta's rhinos in the years following CoP18 clearly demonstrates that more attention is required by CITES Parties and experts.

In light of the deeply concerning levels of rhino poaching in the Okavango Delta, EIA urges SC74 to direct Botswana to report on measures and activities it is implementing to address rhino poaching and illegal trade in accordance with Decision 18.110 in time for review by SC75.

Decision 18.110 Directed to Parties:

Parties should ensure the timely reporting of seizures and submission of DNA samples to range States, and continuously review trends associated with the illegal killing of rhinoceroses and illegal trade in rhinoceros specimens, and the measures and activities they are implementing to address these crimes, to ensure that these measures and activities remain effective and are quickly adapted to respond to any newly identified trends, and report to the Secretariat in time for consideration by the Standing Committee on any activities conducted in this regard.

Analysis

- An estimated 502 rhinos, 50 black and 452 white, could be found in Botswana at the end of 2017, the last time population estimates were shared publicly. About half were located in the Okavango Delta region.¹
- Botswana was spared the carnage of the rhino poaching onslaught that affected other southern African nations in the late 2000s. Due to its status as a "safe haven" from poaching, approximately 100 rhinos from other range states beset by severe poaching were translocated to Botswana between 2012-2018.² Only six rhinos were reportedly poached in Botswana between 2006 and 2017.³
- Poaching began to tick upwards in 2018 before spiraling out of control in subsequent years. At least 92 rhinos were killed between January 2019 and July 2020 according to the government,⁴ though the true poaching figures may be significantly greater.⁵ No poaching figures have been provided for 2021 or 2022.

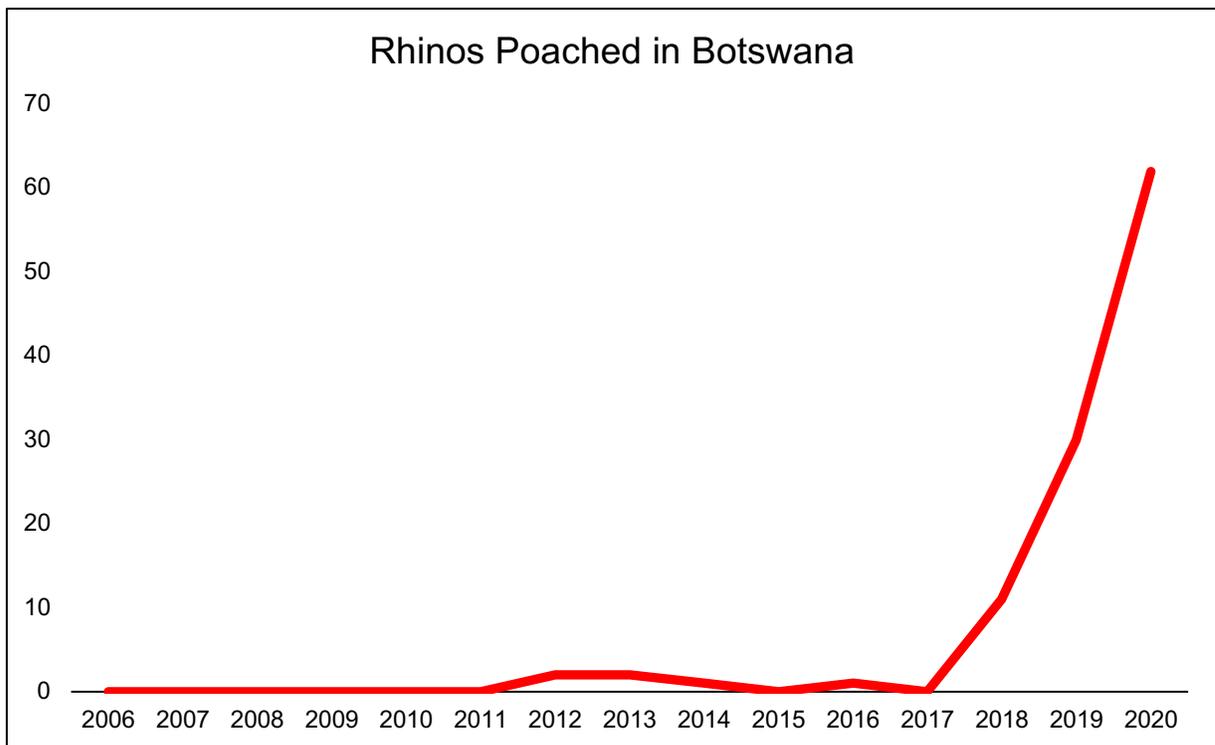
¹ CITES CoP18 Doc. 83.1 Annex 2

² <https://www.bbc.com/storyworks/itc-blazing-trails/botswana-blazing-trails-conservation>

³ CITES CoP18 Doc. 83.1 Annex 2

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/www.mewt199.co.bw/photos/pcb.4558700737540895/4558698134207822>

⁵ https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_botswana-denies-120-rhinos-poached-18-months/6202757.html



Data for 2006-2017: CoP18 Doc. 83.1 Annex 2; Data for 2018: EIA; Data for 2018-2019: Botswana Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Tourism

- The government's anti-poaching strategy initially focused on the application of increased military presence by the Botswana Defense Force (BDF), the lead agency conducting the anti-poaching operations in the Okavango Delta. The BDF employs a hardline anti-poaching policy that has resulted in the reported deaths of at least two dozen alleged poachers since 2019.⁶
- Many of the poachers targeting Botswana's rhinos are from neighboring countries such as Zambia,⁷ and the BDF's anti-poaching tactics have inflamed tensions with Botswana's neighbors.⁸ There is little evidence of effective co-operation with Zambia to disrupt the cross-border poaching and trafficking of wildlife.
- After the poaching continued largely unabated, the government took the drastic steps of evacuating all remaining black rhinos in the Delta (the exact number is unknown) and dehorning the white rhinos.⁹
- The dehorning operation appears to have been no deterrent at preventing additional poaching. Reports emerged about dehorned rhinos killed by poachers,¹⁰ and in October 2021, Botswana announced a decision to capture any remaining wild rhinos and relocate them to "sanctuaries" until the security situation in the Okavango could be brought under control.¹¹ It is unclear how many rhinos Botswana managed to relocate from the Okavango Delta and whether any wild, free-roaming rhinos remain in Botswana.

⁶ Compilation of reports available upon request.

⁷ <https://allafrica.com/stories/202105160101.html>

⁸ <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/namibia-citizens-up-in-arms-over-botswanas-shoot-to-kill-approach-20201112>

⁹ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/16/c_139141258.htm

¹⁰ <https://botswanasafarinews.blogspot.com/2020/06/okavango-delta-poachers-now-target.html> ;

<https://www.sundaystandard.info/its-better-to-show-tourists-a-dehorned-rhino-than-nothing-at-all-magosi/>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/www.mewt199.co.bw/photos/pcb.4558700737540895/4558698134207822>

- None of the actions taken by Botswana have effectively addressed the root causes of the rhino poaching problem: organized crime and corruption. It is unclear what, if any, joint intelligence-led investigations Botswana has undertaken to dismantle the poaching and rhino horn trafficking syndicates responsible for the destruction of the Okavango Delta's rhino population. Botswana has also not indicated whether it is collecting forensic DNA samples from poached rhinos and sharing them with RhODIS for analysis and application in law enforcement investigations.
- Botswana has repeatedly denied the severity of the rhino poaching situation and has failed to exhaust all opportunities to obtain assistance or information from other governments and NGOs which would augment Botswana's intelligence capacity and improve its law enforcement strategy and effectiveness.¹² In addition, NGOs and scientists who have shared information on the increase in poaching of Botswana's wildlife, or who have offered technical assistance, have been vilified by the Government.¹³
- Corruption allegations within the agencies tasked with addressing the poaching of Botswana's wildlife are especially concerning. According to the Director of the Directorate of Intelligence and Security, poaching syndicates have infiltrated the security forces,¹⁴ and local media outlets have reported on allegations of corruption within the BDF related to rhino poaching.¹⁵

Conclusion

At CoP18 the Report of the Standing Committee and Secretariat on Rhinoceroses encouraged Botswana "to keep this matter [rhino poaching] under review to ensure that measures implemented to prevent and combat rhinoceros poaching remain effective and are quickly adapted to respond to any new trends."¹⁶ Botswana was not included among the Parties most affected by rhino poaching and illegal trade named in Decision 18.111. Botswana also did not provide information to the Secretariat on measures and activities it is implementing to address poaching and illegal rhino horn trade in accordance with Decision 18.110.

In light of the emergency situation facing Botswana's rhino population, Botswana needs to be working toward dismantling the organized criminal networks responsible for decimating its white and black rhino populations in Okavango Delta by conducting joint, intelligence-led investigations with other affected countries and civil society organizations. If the Botswana does not pursue this course of action, it risks witnessing the extinction of its rhinos once again.

EIA calls on SC74 to:

Direct Botswana to report on any measures and activities it is implementing to address rhino poaching and illegal trade in accordance with Decision 18.110, including information on any intelligence-led joint investigations into organized criminal networks, to the Secretariat in time for review by SC75.

¹² https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_botswana-denies-120-rhinos-poached-18-months/6202757.html

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47321241> ; <https://africageographic.com/stories/rhino-poaching-botswana-is-pride-hampering-prevention/>

¹⁴ <https://www.sundaystandard.info/its-better-to-show-tourists-a-dehorned-rhino-than-nothing-at-all-magosi>

¹⁵ <http://www.weekendpost.co.bw/24914/news/bdf-refutes-rhino-poaching-special-forces-unit-sabotage/>

¹⁶ CoP19 Doc. 83.1