



Top cop fingered in poaching saga

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*The Sunday Mail
1 November 2015*

A syndicate comprising police officers, Parks and Wildlife Management Authority rangers and Asians is behind the latest spate of elephant killings in Hwange National Park, it has emerged. One of the suspects under active investigation is an assistant commissioner of police.

Several others have been arrested in connection with the killing of 22 jumbos last Sunday, including a junior cop and a Parks camp manager.

The syndicate has allegedly killed around 55 elephants for their ivory tusks since early 2015. Information gathered by The Sunday Mail over the last two weeks indicates the Asians (names withheld) are the kingpins behind the indiscriminate poaching, whose funds sometimes end up oiling other international criminal networks.

Globally, poaching and wildlife trafficking are highly lucrative businesses estimated to earn between US\$23 billion and US\$47 billion yearly.

They are jointly ranked fourth on the list of large-scale illegal trade worldwide after drug trafficking, counterfeiting and human trafficking.

Police spokesperson Senior Assistant Commissioner Charity Charamba confirmed arrests were made last week and said investigations were continuing.

Parks and Wildlife Management Authority acting spokesperson Mr Tawanda Gotosa added: "I can confirm that some arrests were made and one of our camp managers was suspended."

Mr Gotosa would not discuss the matter further saying doing so would jeopardise investigations. Senior Government officials close to the probe said names of those under investigation could not be published as yet.

Sources told this newspaper that the masterminds engaged game rangers and rogue cops, arranging details of hits, including killing methods and transportation.

In last Sunday's case, three rangers and a police officer were deployed to man watering holes that had previously been poisoned with cyanide to kill and de-tusk elephants.

The holes had been detoxified and were now considered safe.

However, 22 elephants were poisoned using the same method, despite the security team being on patrol.

It turns out that part of the patrol team was about 500m away when at least one elephant went into death throes after drinking the poisoned water.

And a ranger is said to have heard the noise made as tusks were cut off.

Authorities said the rangers and police officers were working with a powerful syndicate including Asian businessmen responsible for sourcing cyanide from gold mines.

Cyanide is a classified and relatively expensive chemical and ordinary villagers around the Hwange National Park may not necessarily access or buy it.

About 10kg of cyanide were taken from a gold mine in Esigodini, some 40km from Bulawayo.

An official said, "The problem is that some of the rangers who have been assisting security forces investigate the matter are also involved in the poaching. This close-knit syndicate must be busted to bring sanity to wildlife conservation.

"The question is if rangers and cops were deployed to watering holes which were detoxed barely a week ago, how did the poachers poison the elephants? This shows that the rangers are involved, these include those who were fired from the parastatal. It's a huge and powerful syndicate."

Investigators also discovered that during a recent inventory of elephant tusks at Hwange National Park stores, a tusk was missing.

However, a few days later, it had been replaced by a smaller one.

Only Parks officials had access to the stores.

Rampant poaching has gone on for years now after 32 elephants were killed a fortnight ago by cyanide poisoning in Hwange, while three were found dead in Matusadona National Park, Kariba.

Two years ago, about 300 elephants were killed via cyanide poisoning in Hwange National Park.

Elephant tusks have a huge market in Asia, especially in China.

In September, officials in Hong Kong intercepted 51kg of ivory worth over US\$100 000 in two inbound airmail parcels from Zimbabwe via Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

The airmail was declared at Hong Kong International Airport as "decorative tiles". This was a second case in two weeks after another consignment was seized which had been smuggled from Zimbabwe into Hong Kong with the same modus operandi.