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Poachers turn Okavango Delta into Elephants graveyard

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The Okavango Delta has been turned in to an elephants' graveyard as poachers open their vengeance on the large mammals along the wetlands. It is not only elephants that are under threat, it is also becoming increasingly clear that poachers are eyeing the recovering population of rhinos in the Okavango Delta.

However there are allegations that government maybe deliberately under reporting the extent of poaching in Botswana for the fear of affecting the local tourism sector. Heralded as a conservation success story, Botswana has in recent years received rhino donations from the Republic of South Africa where rhinos killed in large numbers by poachers. But of late there is an apparent fear that given the lax in anti poaching operations in Botswana, the country is following in to the footsteps of South Africa.

This week WeekendPost was invited by the local conservation group, Elephants Without Borders (EWB) to aerially witness the ongoing elephants poaching horror. From chartered Helicopter Horizons Chopper, scores of dead elephants littered the Mophane woodlands of Khwai concession. About seven elephants carcass, all with removed fronts of their heads and missing tusks were seen. Coincidentally, all the carcasses of the seven elephants counted were all located along water ponds something that proves poachers ambush the animals when they come for drinking.

EWB Director, Dr Mike Chase revealed that they have so far counted about 90 elephants' carcasses in the area from Khwai to Linyanti concessions. EWB is currently undertaking the 2018 Botswana Elephants Census in collaboration with the Botswana Government. The aerial survey which is undertaken using latest technology strives to clear the confusion on how many elephants exist in Botswana for better management and policy formulation.

The survey concludes in October this year. However one of the discoveries made by Dr Chase and his team has been the big numbers of poached elephants in the Khwai area. "Elephant poaching has been ongoing for more than two years. From the carcasses we have seen today it is clear that poachers take out elephants of all ages. It's serious but no one is doing anything about this growing problem which will affect the local tourism sector."

Speaking on condition of anonymity during the recent Elephants Management Plan meeting at Maun Lodge, an anti poaching officer explained that poaching has escalated in Botswana since the introduction of the

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Tuelo Montshonyane of Machaba Safaris in an interview also attested that poaching is on the rise. However he opined that most people committing poaching are wellknown community members known to law enforcement. He said: "Majority of poachers are wellknown. I wonder why anti poaching officers allow them to escape with impunity." Meanwhile a white rhino was recently gunned down in NG 32 Concession in what is suspected to be a poaching incident. The animal was shot with a heavy calibre rifle probably on August 18.

According to Botswana Police Services (BPS), the horns of the animals have been crudely removed and taken away by the unknown perpetrators but indications are that this was an opportunistic crime rather than one by organised criminals. According to sources at BPS, three well known poaching suspects from Maun were rounded up by the law enforcement but were later released due to lack of evidence.

Ngamiland District Wildlife coordinator, Timmy Blackbeared has raised alarm that if no arrests are made this may encourage the poachers to kill more of the rhinos in the Okavango Delta. Blackbeared revealed that a P 25,000-reward has been put out for any person who helps the law enforcement with information that could lead to the arrest of culprits who killed the white rhino.

WeekendPost understands that currently the bulk of anti-poaching operations are undertaken by Botswana Defence Force in Ngamiland. However the BDF is also said to be thin on the ground due to limited resources. Information reaching this publication is that when the NG 32 rhino was killed some of the BDF anti-poaching officers based in Ngamiland were still engaged in Gantsi area where three other rhinos were killed in private properties this year for their horns.

Blackbeared however revealed that the anti poaching officers have been left in the lurch with no arms to fight the rising poaching since Botswana Defence Force and Directorate of Intelligence Services disarmed the environment ministry in May. "Our Anti poaching unit in Ngamiland does not have even a single rifle for its operations as all our rifles have been taken by BDF. It's very difficult to fight poaching without assault because poachers these days are using suppressed weapons."

Meanwhile it is not clear when government will warm-up to installing non-intrusive inspection technology like cargo scanners at veterinary gates acrosss Botswana. The veterinary gates along main highways dualy serve as seach points aganst illegal products trafficking. Lots of wildlife products derived from Ngamiland are transported through Makalamabedi gate to neghbouring countries particularly Zambia and Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, District No. 5 Commander Peter Gochela has said that police operations at Makalamabedi Veterinary gate are effective. He said: "For intelligence reasons, I cannot detail what measures we use at Makalamabedi Gate to arrest perpetrators. But we are very effective as we have made many arrests there."

Gochela however could not rule out that government may in future instal modern seach technologies at strategic areas saying: 'as crime evolves the law enforment strategy also has to adapt.' Gochela further confirmed that poaching especially for elephants is on the rise in Ngamiland.

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