



WILL A 77 YEARS IMPRISONMENT SENTENCE DETER OTHER RHINO POACHERS?

24th July 2014

Start

On Tuesday 22 July 2014 the Nelspruit Regional Court sentenced Mandla Chauke to 77 years in prison for the charges of murder, the illegal hunting of three rhinos, the illegal possession of firearms and ammunition and trespassing in the Kruger National Park. He will serve an effective 47 years in prison. This is only the second time in South Africa that a rhino poacher has been successfully convicted of murder as well. In June 2013 Waiwito Mawala was found guilty of murder in the Ingwavuma Regional Court. He and three others conspired to hunt rhinos in Ndumo Game Reserve in 2011. He was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment, 15 of which were for murder.

Both of these accused are what is known as Level One criminals on the organised crime pyramid. Level One criminals are, for example, the poachers, vehicle drivers and rhino horn thieves. Level Two criminals include buyers, couriers and traders in information. Level Three criminals are, for example, international couriers, rhino owners, wildlife veterinarians, gang leaders. Level Four criminals are usually not based in South Africa, but are the international dealers who broker the rhino horn sales. Level Five criminals are the end-users and the organised crime bosses who stock-pile rhino horn and are also not based in South Africa.

In 2012 Chumlong Lemtong Thai, a Level Four criminal, was sentenced to 40 years imprisonment by the Kempton Park Regional Court. The sentence was later reduced to 30 years by the South Gauteng High Court. South Africa has yet to sentence Level Two and Three South African criminals accused of rhino related crimes. Big Joe Nyalunga (South African) may be the first Level Three operator to be convicted if he is found guilty by the Middelburg Regional Court later this month. Big Joe was arrested in February 2012 after a successful undercover SAPS operation. He has been identified as the syndicate leader of a crime syndicate involved in the poaching, smuggling and illegal trading of rhino horns. He has been charged with the illegal hunting of rhinos in the Kruger National Park, illegal trading in White Rhino horns, illegal possession of horns, racketeering, theft and money laundering. Since his arrest 11 additional suspects have been arrested including two Vietnamese and several Mozambican Nationals. The case will be heard in the Middelburg Regional Court from 28 – 30 July 2014.

State Prosecutor Isabet Erwee, Magistrate Sheila Msibi, and the anti-poaching team in the Kruger National Park who affected Chauke's arrest, are to be congratulated on a job well done. Arresting suspects is one of the most difficult aspects in the war against rhino poachers. So far this year 558 rhinos have been poached – of which 351 were in the Kruger National Park – but only 157 arrests have been made, 60 of which were in the Kruger National Park.

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

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Despite the very real danger of being shot and killed or an imprisonment sentence, rhino poaching has not yet begun to abate. It has been estimated that if we are unable to reduce the rate at which we are losing rhino there will be none left in South Africa by the year 2025. As we see the sentences for involvement in rhino poaching increasing, we hope that the threat of effectively being sent to prison for life deters poachers and wildlife crime syndicates.

End

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