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Corruption fuels wildlife crime

Start

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), champion of conservation in Africa, is deeply disturbed at the recent allegations of political involvement in the illegal trade in wildlife, at the highest possible levels in southern Africa.

It is not new to hear about government authorities being involved in crime. In recent years, we have witnessed people employed to be the guardians of our wildlife through their positions as wildlife rangers, permit officials and policemen, arrested, and in some cases convicted, for poaching and wildlife trafficking. In 2016, none other than our State Security Minister, David Mahlobo, was reported to have close ties to a rhino horn trafficker in the country. It is however, gravely concerning when the allegations of government participation in wildlife crime extend to the highest offices in the land.

On Sunday, 25 March 2018, it was reported that former South African President Jacob Zuma is being investigated by the Hawks for allegedly accepting a R1 million cash bribe from a Western Cape abalone dealer in exchange for keeping Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister, Senzeni Zokwana in his Cabinet during the reshuffle after the 2016 local elections. Earlier this month, nine fisheries department officials were arrested on suspicion of being part of a syndicate involved in the illegal poaching and trade of abalone. Investigations in both instances are ongoing, but point to alleged political involvement at the highest level in this illicit trade. Abalone is the world's most valuable shellfish, and poaching of wild abalone is rampant. This activity threatens to drive the species to extinction.

These allegations against former President Jacob Zuma come hot on the heels of claims against Zimbabwe's former First Lady, Grace Mugabe, who is under investigation by police in that country, where she is said to have headed up a smuggling network which illegally exported tonnes of elephant ivory. She was named as the alleged mastermind of the operation by two suspected poachers who were arrested attempting to sell tusks. It has also been suggested that she utilised the country's stockpiles of ivory as 'gifts' for unnamed officials in the Far East. These allegations are also still under investigation, and no charges have yet been laid.

The illegal trade in wildlife is a lucrative business, estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually. It is also one of the gravest threats to many wildlife species, and one that conservation NGOs such as the EWT are tirelessly fighting to address. This can, however, become a losing battle if

corruption and involvement by government officials continue to play a role. The EWT calls for stringent investigations into these cases and, should the allegations against former President Zuma and former First Lady Mugabe be found to be true, the sternest judgement should be meted out. The leadership in any country is beholden to uphold all the laws of the land, starting with the Constitution; and their responsibility extends to those that have no voice and who need our greatest protection. When government authorities breach this compact, the impact is severe and consequences should be dire.

End

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