

South Africa weighs legal rhino horn trade

February 10 2015



S.Africa is considering whether to legalise the trade of rhino horn

South Africa has appointed a panel of experts to examine the viability of a legal rhino horn trade, the environmental affairs ministry said Tuesday as poaching of the species spiked to record levels.

The 21-member task team will look into technical and strategic aspects of the trade.

"It is important to emphasise that South Africa has not taken a position on the issue and will not do so until the committee has completed its work and presented its findings," said the ministry in a statement.

The committee which includes conservationists, scientists and immigration authorities, is tasked with identifying additional measures to curb the illegal killings, including enhanced intelligence to break up syndicates.

It has to submit its report to government before year end.

South Africa, which is home to the world's largest rhino population is facing a poaching crisis, with 1,125 animals killed in 2014, a 21 percent increase from the previous year.

The slaughter of one of Africa's most iconic wildlife species is driven by a demand for its horn in Asian countries.

The powdered horn, made of the substance similar to human fingernails is popularly believed to have medicinal properties, although there is no scientific proof for the claim.

Internationally, the rhino horn trade was banned by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1977.

But a domestic trade continued within South Africa's borders for decades. Government later placed a moratorium on the local trade in 2009.

If South Africa decides to pursue a legal rhino horn trade, it will have to win over two-thirds of member states at the next CITES conference which the country will host in 2016 .

Poaching in South Africa has been on the rise despite multifaceted efforts to stop the problem.

Last year, authorities relocated a number of rhinos from the famed Kruger National Park, in an attempt to save them from illegal hunters.

The large park, approximately the size of Wales, has experienced the highest number of killings.

It is said that a kilogramme of rhino horn sells for up to \$100,000 in Vietnam, double the price of gold.

South Africa is said to be home to around 20,000 rhinos, some 80 percent of the worldwide population.

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Citation: South Africa weighs legal rhino horn trade (2015, February 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-02-south-africa-legal-rhino-horn.html>

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