

Conservationists fear for Zimbabwe rhino

April 16 2009, By ANGUS SHAW , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Conservationists raised the alarm Thursday for Zimbabwe's rare rhinos after a sharp increase in poaching because of a breakdown of law enforcement in this troubled southern African country.

Organized criminal gangs kill rhinos to sell the valuable horn that is used as a traditional medicine in Asia and carved for ceremonial dagger handles in the Middle East, Raoul du Toit, head of southern Zimbabwe's Lowveld Rhino Trust, said in a telephone conference call with reporters.

Zimbabwe's rhino population declined from about 830 in 2007 to 740 at the end of 2008 despite an excellent [birth rate](#) in monitored herds, London-based Save the Rhino executive director Cathy Dean said during the conference call.

Save the Rhino said at least 90 rhino were poached in 2008, twice the toll of the previous year, and conservation groups had counted 18 killed so far in 2009. It called for concerted action by the Zimbabwean government and international agencies.

Conservationists also reported a surge in poaching of zebra for their hides. These, alongside illegal diamonds, gold and other contraband, were smuggled through Zimbabwe's porous borders.

Some zebra hides ended up as upholstery in Europe and the zebra poachers were likely to encounter rhino in the same habitat and know their value, du Toit said.

Du Toit said the rhino poachers were people with "cars, cell phones and expensive lawyers" and not villagers desperate for food.

Poaching "increased because of our lack of ability to investigate, higher market prices and the growing Asian footprint in southern Africa," he said.

Du Toit spoke of investigators lacking gasoline to drive suspects to court. He said authorities were short of money but paid too little attention to the crimes.

"The repercussions for the country's international image and the economic implications are a lot more serious than the politicians and the ministers realize," he said.

He said conservation groups in southern [Zimbabwe](#) planned to relocate about 60 rhino from areas vulnerable to poachers.

Tourism and photographic safaris have dropped sharply in several years of political and economic turmoil since the often violent seizures of thousands of white-owned farms began in 2000, disrupting the agriculture-based economy in the former regional breadbasket.

Longtime ruler President Robert Mugabe blames Western sanctions for the economic crisis that has led to acute shortages of food, gasoline and the most basic goods.

Poaching of small animals has intensified, with villagers torching the bush to drive even rodents and rock rabbits into traps for food, conservationists say.

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