

PARLIAMENT BRIEFING

08 February 2022

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE
ON ENVIRONMENT,
FORESTRY AND
FISHERIES

Report on iSimangaliso
Poaching Incident which
led to a Suspected
Poacher going Missing in
the Park



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Presentation on the Nibela show
suspected poachers alleged
Ezemvelo field rangers a
surrender, at which one alleg
and could not, to this day be
search and rescue attempts o
Case currently under police
SAPS(035 550 6120) as per C
Ezemvelo park.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

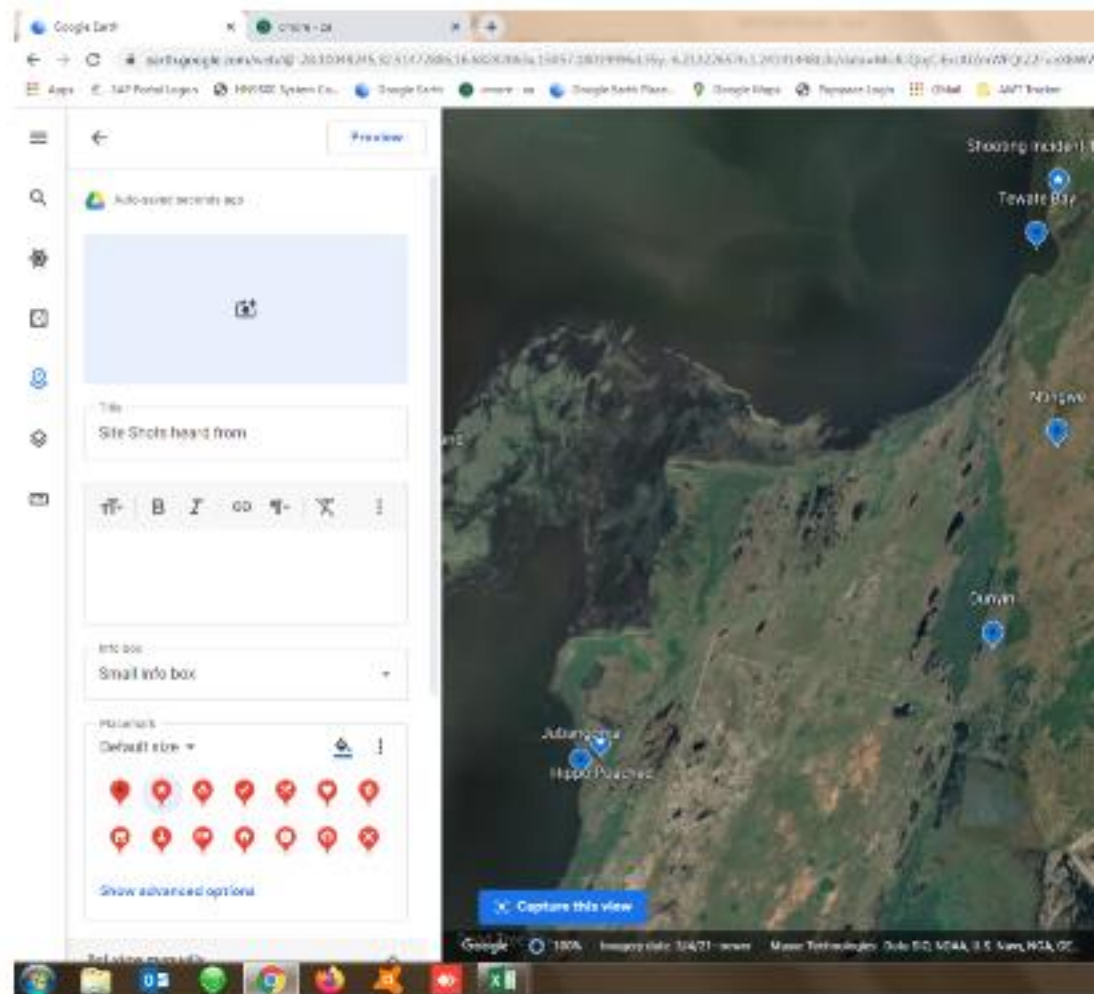
- iSimangaliso was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1999 following its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) associated with its unique biodiversity, ecological processes, and superlative natural beauty. Following its international listing, iSimangaliso was then appointed by the Minister to be the Manager of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, responsible for among other things ensuring that the OUVs are safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations.
- Regulation 19(3)(a)(i) conservation management and (ii) regulatory enforcement of the park is assigned to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife
- Regulation 19(3)(b) assigned responsibility to the MEC over regulatory policy related to the park and oversight
- The regulation give live to a Management Agreement to be signed between iSimangaliso Wetland Park and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (Ezemvelo) with the latter responsible for the provision of conservation management and law enforcement in the park, as envisaged by Regulations 19 (as above)

CONTEXT

- The protected areas continues to suffer severely from incidents of poaching by criminal syndicates & local communities mainly for livelihoods.
- As such, protected areas with species of high poaching value are vulnerable from incidents of poachers' incursions, and iSimangalizi National Park species isn't an exception (with rhinos, elephants, hippos, etc).
- Furthermore, given the presence of considerably large waterbodies (lakes, rivers, estuaries, etc, illegal aquatic activities are also quite prevalent in the park). Illegal because although there are demarcated fishing areas and zoning with clear markers and continuous awareness, illegal fishing still happen

INCIDENT DESCRIPTION

- Eastern Shores of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, about 21 Kilometers south east of the Nibela community area in the wilderness area, just north of Tewate Bay
- To the right of the area towards the direction of the coast, is an area where field rangers were stationed, to which Field rangers refers to (on their statement as Nsengwane.
- .It is an extremely lively poaching den with historically a number of rhino, hippo, buffalo and crocodile poaching
- (see **ATTACHED DATABASE OF INCIDENTS DATING BACK TO 2009**)



SETTING THE SCENE

- As per the report also sent to the Minister, two years ago in September 2020 a person was fatally wounded by field rangers in the same area for allegedly poaching and shooting. The person was confronted on the scene.
- The person involved was the son of iNduna Mdluli from the same area and community. The person involved in the current incident is from the same family again. This happened immediately after the initial incident. Executives visited iNduna Mdluli about the initial incident and were warmly welcomed. The relationship is going forward.
- Acknowledging and comprehending the sensitivity and possible complexity of the matter, the potential reversal of the hard-earned trust and relationship gains through vigorous Stakeholders Engagement and Management Strategy of the entity.
- Equally it is necessary to highlight that the Tewate Area in the Eastern shores of iSiSi, the site of the incidence, has seen numerous poaching incidences (See attached report on poaching incidents)

DETAILS OF INCIDENT

- On Friday, 12 November 2021 at about 09h30, field rangers who were holding an Observation/Listening post reported hearing a shot being fired to the north of Tewater on the Eastern Shores of Lake St Lucia. On the previous 2-months, a white rhino was poached, and its horns stolen in the same area and as such, management decided to deploy a helicopter to the area as a precautionary measure and attempt to respond quickly if the incident also involved poaching of rhinos. After the flight, management decided to place two waylay observation points
- The first point being at a nearby area where a carcass (approximately **TWO** days old) was found. Following this incident, field rangers discovered that a hippo was poached).
- The second point being at a nearby area where few homemade traps were found from the air during the helicopter flight on the day.
- Field rangers were deployed to these waylays to arrest any poachers should they present at these sites later in the day.

DETAILS OF INCIDENT

- These “points of Interest” were observed and monitored until about 15h30 on 12 November 2021. The field rangers positioned to observe the boats encountered 4 suspected poachers approaching the boat site. The suspected poachers were allowed to make their way to the boats before the field rangers approached them and ordered them to stop and not fight.
- Of the four suspected poachers, one allegedly fired a shot. Fearing for their lives the field rangers returned fire at the suspected poachers and one suspected to have been wounded and fell into the water.
- The other three suspected poachers fled because the field rangers were firing. The one suspected to have been wounded. There was blood on the site and it was reported that there was a wounded poacher who had sustained the injury during the incident. The incident was immediately reported to the field rangers to their supervisor.
- The supervisor in turn reported the incident to SAPS in St Lucia and subsequently to Mtubatuba (CAS 94/11/2021).

DETAILS OF INCIDENT – SCENE –According

- After the incidence, and due to the time of the day, it was not possible to call a helicopter. The rangers were instructed by their supervisor to remain on site and protect the crime scene until the police arrived the following day. (SOP)



Makeshift boat & panga
found on site

PROGRESS ON SEARCH FOR MISSING PE

- The following day, Saturday, 13 November 2021, a helicopter was commissioned to transport investigating staff to the scene during the morning. The helicopter was made available at 17h59. Unfortunately, the missing suspected poacher was not located, and no body was recovered. The SAPS deployed their Search & Rescue Unit to the area, but nothing was found. The search continued throughout the day.
- During the day, several community members informed management that the 3 suspected poachers were on an island near the Makhakhathana (within the Park). Numerous attempts by staff to contact them were made but no success or contact was made (presumably because they evaded official attempts).
- On the other hand, back at the landing zone near St Lucia on Saturday afternoon, a group of people near Nibela began to congregate, with rumours swilling about foul play from staff/field rangers.
- Staff informed community that the SAPS and Ezemvelo were doing their best to find the poachers and that the matter will also be investigated.

PROGRESS ON SEARCH FOR MISSING P

- The search continued on to Sunday, 14 November 2021, by both Ezemvelo and Rescue Unit for the entire day, without any success.
- There was a request made by the community for 2 community members to be trained to observe the search and rescue attempts of the SAPS and Ezemvelo. This was granted the following morning and an official boat was made available to take the community members to the search area.
- Furthermore, another group of 4 community leadership were allowed to use Sobhengu Lodge (Sobhengu Lodge) to also go and observe the search as SAPS did not allow community members to be on the search for security reasons particularly because its in the water, only police were allowed.

SCENES from Search & rescue Te

- The search went onto Monday, 15 November and 16 Tuesday 2021, by the Search and Rescue unit of the SAPS, making sure they comb the area for the missing person.
- .



Search team, waist deep, combing the lake in sea

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS & ACTIONS AFTER

- The person might have been taken down by a crocodile, if we are assumed that they were in the water, which made them an easy prey
- The person may have swum away and across the lake successfully and be in hiding, fearing prosecution
- There were allegations from the community that there may have been foul play from the rangers. Though indications at this stage do not suggest that we however remain open to investigating and trusting the law to take its course. In all possible permutation, we have allowed law enforcement (SAPS) unfettered access to the scene and involved rangers for ease of investigation (all rangers taken from all rangers involved)
- After the scene, Ezemvelo immediately debriefed officials, and sworn statements taken. Officials go home. Involved officials were never allowed to go back to the scene/same station. Officials transferred to other stations (HIP) while investigations is underway and while trying to protect their legal rights – the final processing of their placement will be based on legal advice

ENGAGEMENT WITH AFFECTED COMMUNITIES (LEADERSHIP AND INKOSI)

- It is with sadness that the park management discovered during engagement with the affected communities that the suspected missing person is reported to be coming from the same area as the suspected poacher who was fatally shot last year in September in the crossfire with the same area in the park. This has intensified animosity between the Park and the affected communities.
- Deep engagements reveal that this section of the park is one of the most impoverished with limited opportunities to supporting their livelihoods. The Park then remains the only option they can go to for illegal activities to earn the living.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE...

- As part of circumventing the dire poverty situation from Nibela communities, the Park management has prioritized and redirected 4 alien plant clearing contracts to be distributed to the communities that are involved in poaching activities. Each contract will employ a minimum of 12 other community members to almost 50 individuals.
- Earlier engagements with the community has also revealed that they have relatively less land to the park which can be dedicated to community conservation area providing a primary livelihood. Initiative implementation. Through this, Park Management believe much benefit can be realized by shifting the focus of poaching and illegal fishing to wildlife-oriented business which is compatible with conservation.
- We understand that the CEO of iSimangaliso immediately dispatched Executive management to meet with the communities with the intention of fact finding and also initiating discussions.
- On the 14th of November, iSimangaliso team once again met with iNkosi Mdluli and his family along with other prominent members of the communities. This has further calmed the situation down and prevented it from erupting.

CONCLUSION

- Ezemvelo & Isimangaliso regrets the sad incident which culminated into a missing person. The park is committed to working with law enforcement officials to getting to the bottom of the matter.
- The Park management is also aware and managing attempts forever employed of the park to give a clear picture that the affected individuals were in the park for sole legal fishing purposes. The incident is a result of inhumane, insensitive and militant park management.
- There remain a risk to operational staff conduct on the ground in relation to poaching. The park is strongly to the fore, with law enforcement staff having raised concerns about the performance of some of their colleagues for undertaking what is their duty.
- Both aCEO & Head of Operations, had to call the entire law enforcement team at iSimangaliso to give context to staff about the incident. At issue was a pointed question about how the park, as a wildlife and at war against poaching should act while on combat.
- We have assured them that our action is not meant to discourage them from carrying out their duties.

Thank you!



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