

MUT alumni take a stand against wildlife trafficking

Trafficking in wildlife threatens to obliterate some animal species if it is left to continue. According to a 2019 report by the non-profit organisation, Environmental Investigation Agency, the global population of elephants is at the lowest it has ever been in 25 years owing to the illegal ivory trade. The rise in rhino poaching since 2006 threatens to wipe out the rhino population in South Africa, which is home to three quarters of the African population of rhinos. The situation is worse for pangolin species which are being trafficked at an alarming rate, according to the report.

As part of World Wildlife Day (3 March), MUT Nature Conservation alumni returned to their alma mater to talk about their work in combating wildlife poaching and trafficking in various sectors. In a session organised by the Department of Nature Conservation, MUT alumni delivered presentations on various threats to wildlife and how some of those threats could be managed or neutralised.

Joe Phadima, Executive Manager of Conservation Services at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, was the first keynote speaker and focused on the role that biodiversity policy could play in safeguarding both animal and plant species. He explained that as a developmental state, South Africa's biggest challenge was to develop its economy and people. Phadima further explained that the challenge was to develop in a manner that would not damage the environment. "Our action will determine the future of our biodiversity," he said. He credited the success of his organisation to biodiversity policy taking a central role in their work.

MUT alumnus, Jabulani Ngubane, followed with a detailed presentation on his organisation's work in guarding South Africa's most famous endangered animal, the rhino. Ngubane is an Executive at the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, where his organisation is tasked with protecting the wellbeing of rhinos against poachers. Ngubane informed the audience that the threat of poaching was always imminent and very real. Last year, he explained, 133 rhinos were killed by poachers.



Masiko Buthelezi, Jabulani Ngubane, and Joe Phadima

In an environment where poaching is becoming a sophisticated and lucrative crime fuelled by growing consumer demand and increasing consumer purchasing power in Vietnam, protecting rhinos might be high on the list of challenging jobs. The challenges, according to Ngubane, include dealing with a high profile syndicate of poachers; high financial incentives for poachers, who are constantly changing strategies; a lack of information on syndicates from security agencies; low conviction rates for poachers; and inadequate funding for the required equipment to be used against poachers.

To solve some of these challenges, Isimangaliso Wetland Park has resorted to establishing intensive Protection Zones, aerial surveillance with night vision goggle capabilities, establishment of a nerve centre, polygraph tests for staff, and temporary measures such as dehorning smaller populations of rhinos, among others.

Another MUT alumnus, Masiko Buthelezi, occupies an important position in fighting wildlife trafficking. He is in charge of wildlife export and import at OR Tambo International Airport, where traffickers try their luck in smuggling wildlife in and out of South Africa. Buthelezi showed the audience various ways in which traffickers attempt to smuggle wildlife at the airport. Buthelezi highlighted the value of understanding the laws that regulate the transportation of wildlife and conservation law.

The session ended with a response from Nature Conservation students before a lively debate on trafficking.