



CCS COMMENTARY:

Chinese syndicates and poaching in South Africa: the case of abalone

It was reported in May 2013 that 283 tons of abalone (*Haliotis Midiae*) were confiscated in the past few years in South Africa, with 58 tons in 2012 alone. However, it is acknowledged by the South African government that it is very difficult to provide exact data on the amount of abalone poached. It is accordingly believed that the statistic of confiscated abalone mentioned above, is significantly lower than that of abalone poached. As a result of the decline in abalone numbers, the harvesting of wild abalone was banned in 2008 and controversially re-opened in 2010. Today commercial exporters of abalone need a permit to do so.



Image: www.ofm.co.za

Abalone is a type of large sea snail with a flat shell, found in shallow coastal waters of South Africa between Cape Columbine on the west coast, and the Wild Coast region of the Eastern Cape province. Abalone is slow growing and it usually takes four to five years to grow to its commercial harvest size. As a result of the growing gap between maturity and procreation (as the abalone are harvested too early), wild abalone off the South African coast are on the brink of extinction. The bulk of illegally harvested abalone is distributed to Asia, especially China. Abalone can be traded in live, frozen, canned and dried form for meat consumption, but it is also sold as an

aphrodisiac and the shells have been used in the making of jewelry and decorative objects.

The growth of the illicit abalone market has had the direct result of increasing competition in the legal market. Currently, there are around 13 companies in South Africa that farm abalone, the majority located close to Gansbaai and Hermanus on the south eastern coast (Western Cape province). As with the illegally harvested abalone, the majority of the abalone produced on these farms is sold to China and it is estimated that the country consumes around 50 000 tons of abalone per year, but other consumers also include Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Japan.

A number of actors are involved in the local poaching industry, for example: divers, assistants, bag-carriers, look-outs, transporters and buyers. The Chinese criminal groups usually fall in the last category. It is estimated that a kilogram of abalone flesh can cost a minimum of US\$ 43. The majority of the communities where abalone are poached are impoverished and lack socio-economic development. Accordingly, the syndicates buying the abalone prey on this disadvantaged position to sustain the flow of abalone, as they provide a lucrative incentive to poach. Of increasing concern to local authorities is the strong connection between gangs from the local communities, participating in poaching and Chinese syndicates, operating on a trans-national level. It is reported that Chinese organised crime syndicates often pay for abalone with methamphetamine, fuelling the social problems in local communities.

Chinese syndicates are global 'businesses' and have been operational in South Africa for a number of decades. The syndicates are usually based in major cities, such as Cape Town and Johannesburg, with storage facilities across the country. They are predominantly involved in the trade in abalone and other environmental resources such as ivory, shark fins and endangered hides. Investigations by South Africa's

former specialised crime unit, the Scorpions, revealed that a number of Chinese cartels were operating in South Africa under the cover of a semi-legitimate business. On closer investigation of the businesses it was found that addresses, identification documents and business partners were false. Chinese nationals are often among those arrested in South Africa with illegally harvested abalone. After the harvesting of the abalone, it will be traded to a Chinese syndicate and then either be temporarily moved to a storage facility or transported across the South African border, then be shipped to China from a neighbouring country. For example, large quantities of abalone have been imported into Hong Kong, from Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

As a result of the use of these trade routes through southern-Africa, South African authorities realised the need for trade and market controls in order to curb abalone poaching. In one of the measures, South African abalone was listed on Appendix III of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 2007. CITES is an international agreement between governments, aimed at ensuring that specific species are not threatened by international trade. Since abalone was listed on Appendix III, all legal exports required a CITES permit issued by the South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT). The belief was that the international trade of South African abalone could be traced more easily. However, as a result of corruption at ports, the illegal re-use of permits during the period of validity (6 months) and inadequate awareness of the listing amongst neighboring states; data in the illegal trade of abalone for Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and China did not show any significant decline from 2000 – 2009.

There was an inability on South Africa's side to address serious shortcomings in its implementation of the CITES listing of abalone. Accordingly, the CITES listing was withdrawn in 2010. Despite numerous other efforts by the South African government and law enforcement agencies (for example Operation Neptune, a joint anti-poaching task force between the DEAT and the South African Police Service, and Operation Trident, which was launched in 2004 after the end of Operation Neptune); the illegal trade of abalone continues to thrive and Chinese organised criminal groups remain a key role-player.

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