



ETHEKWINI



A JOINT City of Tshwane, SAPS and metro police operation to remove illegal electricity connections in Nellmapius. | JACQUES NAUDE African News Agency (ANA)

Illegal power connections hurting city

SIBONISO MNGADI

THE rampant trend of illegal electricity connections is crippling the eThekweni Municipality's best efforts to provide uninterrupted supply to paying customers, and electricity thefts are costing the power utility millions.

With winter presently in full swing, the city and Eskom noted a marked increase in illegal connections.

Eskom has ranked KZN and Gauteng as the two provinces with the highest prevalence of illegal electricity connections and network overloading.

As a means to curb this trend, the power utility has embarked on a communications drive to educate the public about the impact of illegal connections on the national power grid.

Overburdened by the country's demand for electricity, Eskom has, over the years, used load shedding to manage to build up its reserves and do repair work. But since May, the power utility has implemented load reduction, which is different from load shedding.

Monde Bala, group executive for Eskom's distribution division, said load reduction was when Eskom switched off power to localised areas, where illegal connections caused overload and could damage infrastructure.

"The objective of load reduction is to protect Eskom's infrastructure by reducing electricity usage during peak times, which is when the most damage occurs, and managing the impact on the transformers and mini-substations in that area. Once a transformer or mini-substation is overloaded, it explodes and as a result, that entire area will be out of power.

"When a transformer explodes, it can't be fixed. It has to be replaced at a cost of anywhere between R80000 to R100000," said Bala.

He said the replacements were costing Eskom billions of rand.

"Eskom's main concern is that illegal connections are a danger to the community, and often result in serious injury or even death, and damage to property."

He said the non-payment was also an issue they planned to address during the communication drive.

According to Eskom's customer base figures, about 1.7 million customers out of a total of 6.6 million were not paying for electricity consumed.

Eskom was also owed over R30 billion by municipalities.

In recent weeks, Durban has experienced violent protests fuelled by the power outages as a result of illegal connections.

Msawakhe Mayisela, the municipality's spokesperson, said illegal connections were a major concern across municipalities, but eThekweni was most affected by virtue of being a metro.

He cited land invasions as a key driver of electricity theft which costs the municipality R7m annually.

"Our transformers are exploding due to excessive burden yet we have to respond promptly in fixing them. This has affected many paying residents who must wait for supply until the transformer is fixed. The municipality has electrified many informal settlements in recent past years to minimise electricity theft. However, the demand keeps growing because people are relocating to Durban daily."

In a recent published notice, the power utility said it would continue to implement load reduction in some areas to protect transformers and ensure continuous supply of electricity.

AWARDS



THE SANParks Airwing crew were among those who scooped top honours at Africa's 2020 Rhino Conservation Awards announced on Friday. | LLOYD HORGAN, Vertical Magazine

Conservation players recognised

As Covid-19 lockdown cripples game reserves, the work of those fighting tirelessly on the front line is cause for celebration, writes Fred Kockott

COUNTER-POACHING successes of the South African National Parks (SANParks) Airwing has significantly reduced wildlife crime in Kruger National Park.

In recognition of this, the dedicated team of pilots and support staff, were among four winners of Africa's 2020 Rhino Conservation Awards announced on World Rangers Day on Friday.

Organised by the Game Rangers Association of Africa (Graa), the annual awards pay tribute to leading players in endangered species conservation and bring their crucial work to the world's attention, said Graa chief executive, Andrew Campbell.

The event also paid tribute to rangers who have lost their lives – more than 1 000 over the past decade.

Amid this, the world was paying a heavy price for the exploitation of wild species and wild places, deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensification of farming, and infrastructure development, said Chris Galliers, president of the International Ranger Federation.

He said this modified the interface between people and wildlife, creating a "perfect storm" for spill-over of diseases.

"We hope that the world takes a greater appreciation of the value of conserved areas and realise having a minimum of 30% of the Earth protected by 2030 is a real necessity," said Galliers.

"To achieve this, Covid-19 or no Covid-19, we need empowered and well-supported rangers, operating in a more secure workplace that are more effective and are ambassadors for the profession to inspire the next generation," he added.

Campbell said the SANParks Airwing team, which won the best conservation practitioners award, provided dedicated support to rangers, veterinarians, and researchers in protecting, saving, preserving and monitoring wildlife within the national parks and neighbouring protected areas.

They operate both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft during the day and night often in extremely dangerous and risky conditions, sometimes coming under fire during counter-poaching operations.

The awards also shone light on the life Samuel Loware, who has become something of a legend amid encounters with heavily armed guerrillas in Uganda's Kidepo Valley National Park.

This year's winner of the best field ranger award featured in an in-depth article in The Guardian in 2018. The article provides insight into how countless desperate people in neighbouring Sudan take their AK47s on raids across the border, where they terrorise villagers, hunt antelopes, zebra, buffaloes and other animals for meat, or kill elephants and ostriches for Chinese ivory and bone-marrow smugglers.

It recounts how Loware was once



SAMUEL LOWARE

Legendary field ranger.



DON ENGLISH

Outstanding leadership in the Kruger National Park won regional manager, Don English, Africa's best game ranger title at this year's Rhino Conservation Awards.



LYNNE TAYLOR

Director of the Tashinga Initiative Trust in Zimbabwe, Taylor, reckons that a physically, mentally healthy ranger team that is motivated, well-equipped and adequately trained is a vital conservation need.

shot alongside a local villager while tracking a poacher trying to flee back over the border with contraband meat.

As the two pursuers approached a gully, the poacher opened fire from behind a tree. A shot passed through the chest of the villager, killing him instantly, and into the body of Loware. He had to be driven several hours to a hospital where a surgeon cut out the bullet, lodged four inches (10cm) down his back. On another mission, Loware saw his commander killed in a gun battle with Sudanese poachers.

While his family have begged him to quit his job, Loware reckons that this is not an option, and he was raised to believe in wildlife protection as a necessity and an opportunity.

He continues to play a key role

in human-wildlife conflict resolution, showing "even the most hostile communities the value of parks and the wildlife in them", said Campbell.

"And because of his effective monitoring and data collection skills, Samuel has made a significant impact on the increase of both giraffe and lion populations in the Kidepo Valley," added Campbell. "He is now conducting habitat assessments for the reintroduction of rhino into Kidepo, and other translocations of wildlife to ensure the conservation of these key species," added Campbell.

The 2020 best game ranger was scooped by Kruger National Park regional manager, Don English.

English manages Marula South, otherwise known as the Intensive

Protection Zone (IPZ) of the Kruger National Park.

"Against all odds, through sheer tenacity and persistence, and with the support of his ranger teams, Don has managed to lower rhino poaching activities year-on-year in the IPZ – an area covering more 426000 hectares.

"Don plans, co-ordinates, executes and participates in counter-poaching operations to stem the rhino poaching crisis, always leading from the front," said Campbell.

This year saw the introduction of the best conservation support award, which was won by Lynne Taylor, director of Tashinga Initiative Trust in Zimbabwe.

Working in the vast Zambezi Valley, Taylor provides essential support

LABOUR

Ranger Protect insurance cover

OPERATING in extreme environments, rangers across the world are subject to an increasing risk of life-threatening encounters.

In recognition of this, the Game Rangers Association of Africa (GRAA) has sponsored over 1 500 rangers with Ranger Protect insurance cover, and on Friday, announced plans to extend life and disability cover to a further 250 rangers.

According to the Ranger Protect, with the increasing threat of armed poachers and militia groups, over 1 000 rangers have lost their lives in the line of duty in the past 10 years.

"In Africa, 40% of those surveyed by WWF were not covered by health insurance, 50% had no life insurance and 60% had no long-term disability insurance," says its website.

"So this vital policy provides rangers with the necessary protection they need to comfortably and confidently perform their duties in the field and ensures the well-being of Africa's rangers and their families is improved through the provision of adequate insurance cover in the event of injury or death," said GRAA chief executive Andrew Campbell.

● Visit www.rangerprotect.com to find out how to help.

to rangers, often at great risk. This has included boosting the supplies of anti-poaching equipment, installing solar-powered water pumps, and radio and satellite links so rangers can respond quickly.

Taylor's winning formula is simple: a physically and mentally healthy ranger team that is motivated, well-equipped and adequately trained is vital to conservation.

Taylor has also introduced vegetable gardens and supported the education of ranger's children, "instilling a sense of pride and common purpose among the ranger community", reads her citation.

Honouring this year's winners, patron of the Rhino Conservation Awards, Prince Albert II of Monaco, said: "I'd like to say how deeply grateful I am... You are defending the rights of nature faced with humanities destructive and irresponsible greed." – Roving Reporters

● The annual Rhino Conservation Awards are sponsored by Zeiss and Chinese New Enterprise Investment and are endorsed by South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs.

Read more on the web page: www.rovingreporters.co.za