ABALONE
UNDER SIEGE

On a Cape Town beach, four poachers disguised as picnickers carefully navigate granite boulders, carrying a cooler to conceal their intent. Taking a bold risk in a highly visible area, they aim to locate untouched abalone beds near the bustling shoreline. Three men don wetsuits while the fourth keeps watch. They wade into the icy waters, diving into kelp forests using metal levers to pry elusive abalone from openings between the rocks. Hidden from the beachgoers, the scene reflects a dire reality: abalone, a sought-after marine delicacy, is vanishing rapidly from South African shores, driven to the brink of extinction by relentless exploitation and greed.

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On the rugged southern and western coastlines of South Africa, a humble marine mollusc known as *Haliotis midae* flourishes. Locally referred to as *perlemoen*, meaning "mother-of-pearl" due to the iridescent sheen of its shell, this species of abalone has become the centre of one of South Africa's most serious poaching and smuggling crises. *Haliotis midae*, one of the most expensive abalone species globally, has sparked an illicit industry that thrives amid economic inequality and social unrest (De Greef, 2018a).

The story began decades ago. While illegal abalone fishing emerged in the 1970s, it was initially small-scale and relatively contained. However, the 1990s marked a pivotal shift as the end of apartheid opened South African borders to international trade, while China's growing middle class triggered an increase in demand for abalone, valued as a luxury food in many Asian cultures. These changes coincided with the devaluation of the South African rand, which caused local abalone prices to soar. For coastal fishing communities struggling with ongoing poverty and slow post-apartheid reforms, these conditions created an ideal environment for poaching. By the late 1990s, poaching evolved from an isolated, informal activity into a highly organised transnational operation, attracting criminal syndicates into the trade (GI-TOC, 2022 and De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

The scale of poaching grew rapidly from its initial concentration in the Overberg region of the Western Cape, home to both legal and illegal abalone fisheries, poaching spread along the West Coast, north of Cape Town, across the Cape Peninsula and eventually as far as Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) on the east coast. By the early 2000s, when **Servamus** visited Port Elizabeth, local police were already overwhelmed by the escalating crisis. According to Kimon de Greef and Simone Haysom from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC) the illicit activities extended into the remote coastal areas of the former Transkei (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

As the illegal trade continues to ensnare impoverished local fishers and connect them to a vast criminal network profiting from the abalone market, both marine ecosystems and the livelihoods and safety of South Africa's coastal communities are at risk (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2021). With poaching now spanning over half of South Africa's coastline, the task of monitoring and enforcing regulations has become an overwhelming challenge.

The demand

For decades, Hong Kong has been the heartbeat of Asia's abalone trade, serving as a bustling crossroads for globally trafficked wildlife. Along the narrow streets of Sheung Wan, particularly Des Voeux Road West and Wing Lok Street, stores are tightly packed with merchants offering an array of dried seafood. Every store in those streets sells dried seafood, abalone, sea cucumber and more (Muller, 2024).

South African abalone, highly sought after yet second only to its Japanese counterpart, holds a place of prestige in local culture. Hong Kong people consider abalone a very fancy ingredient, especially during special occasions such as the Lunar New Year, weddings or banquets. It is steamed with orange peels, garlic or in hotpot dishes. The Lunar New Year often sees a surge in demand, driving prices sky-high and people are not afraid to spend a lot of money because it is a way to treat friends and family, showing generosity and wealth. Abalone is more than a delicacy - it is a symbol of status. Eating abalone is like having an iPhone or a Louis Vuitton bag - it is expensive and everyone knows it (Muller, 2024). Unfortunately, if the abalone is dried and from South Africa, there is a chance that it may have been poached and trafficked, putting consumers at risk of unknowingly supporting organised crime (ADF, 2023).

This demand extends beyond Hong Kong. Kimon de Greef and Simone Haysom revealed in their report entitled, **Disrupting abalone harms - Illicit flows of *H midae* from South Africa to East Asia** that mainland China is a major market for abalone. Since the late 1980s, rising affluence in China has fuelled a boom in luxury goods, including abalone. Yet official trade records do not reflect significant flows from Hong Kong into mainland China. Instead, a thriving grey market smuggles the prized seafood to evade import duties (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

The extent of the problem

South Africa's rugged coastline is both a battlefield and a goldmine, as divers risk their lives to harvest abalone. Despite the inherent dangers and dwindling supplies, the lure of a lucrative payday keeps this shadowy industry thriving. The TRAFFIC Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network estimates that the illicit abalone trade generates an annual revenue of between $60 million and $120 million (Muller, 2024).

Once abundant, abalone populations have plummeted to critical levels as beds of abalone have been cleaned out, leaving poachers reporting increasingly sparse harvests. The Western Cape, particularly between Betty's Bay and Hawston which was dubbed "poachers' paradise" as it was once crowded with the species, leave divers with little choice but to venture into deeper waters with scuba gear to find what remains. Experts believe that less than 10% of the original stock remains, although no one knows for certain (Muller, 2024).

Ecologically, abalone is believed to play a crucial role in regulating the spread of kelp, but the full impact of their near extinction remains largely unknown. Their loss could have cascading effects on marine ecosystems, yet the damage has occurred so rapidly that researchers are still unsure of the long-term consequences. The decline has happened at such an alarming pace that the environmental impact is still unclear (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

Since 2000, more than 40 000 tonnes of abalone have been extracted by poaching syndicates, excluding the substantial harvests from earlier years (De Greef, 2018a). According to the Wildlife Justice Commission (2021), it was estimated that more than 96 million South African abalones have been poached between 2006 and 2016, of which 90% were exported to Hong Kong SAR. A 2023 report by the African Defence Forum (ADF) stated that every year, more than 2000 tonnes of abalone are poached along the South African coastline (ADF, 2023). Muller (2024) claims that over the past three decades, more than 100 million specimens have been illegally harvested.

The global picture is equally grim. In 2022, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reported that nearly half of the world's 54 abalone species face extinction. Pollution, climate change and

overexploitation have pushed 20 species onto the Red List of threatened species (IUCN, 2022).

Currently, abalone can only be commercially farmed and harvested. The South African Sustainable Seafood Initiative classifies farmed abalone as sustainable and includes it on their green list of seafood suitable for consumption. However, hand-caught abalone is discouraged. Local fishermen and recreational gatherers have historically taken their quotas, often exceeding legal limits, yet their small-scale catches have not posed significant issues. However, the relentless demand from East Asia threatens the sustainability of legal abalone stocks, risking depletion (Corruption Watch, 2021). A 2018 TRAFFIC report highlights that 80% of abalone traders acknowledge illegal activities in the sector, often orchestrated by criminal networks involved in poaching and illegal exports (TRAFFIC, 2018).

Once illegally harvested abalone reaches Hong Kong, it can be openly traded alongside legally sourced abalone (ADF, 2023), blurring the lines between lawful and unlawful markets. This is exacerbated outside South Africa where many transit and destination countries lack adequate legal frameworks to identify illegally sourced abalone. A big concern is the fact that the abalone species that are primarily targeted are not listed by CITES (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2021).

CITES removal

On 4 June 2010, the South African government made a significant decision regarding its endemic abalone species, *Haliotis midae*. This species had been placed under special protection just a few years earlier, when it was listed on Appendix III of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The move, which came into effect on 3 May 2007, required that all international shipments of *Haliotis midae* be accompanied by permits issued by South Africa. This measure was taken in response to increasing pressures from both legal and illegal harvesting that threatened the survival of the species. The decision to impose these restrictions was not taken lightly. The South African government, in terms of its National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEMBA) 10 of 2004, had already recognised the vulnerability of abalone and sought to safeguard it from exploitation. However, as time passed, the fishing industry began to voice its concerns. The pressures from commercial interests, alongside the complexities of managing both legal and illegal trade, eventually led to a change in policy. In 2010, after considerable lobbying from the fishing sector, the government removed *Haliotis midae* from both the CITES listing and the NEMBA regulations (Kgatla, 2018). This shift marked a turning point for the species, which now faced even greater risks, as the protections that had been put in place to safeguard it were no longer enforced. The government's decision, driven by industry pressures, raised questions about the balance between conservation efforts and the economic interests of those who depend on abalone for their livelihoods.

Markus Burgener, senior programme officer at TRAFFIC, shared a troubling observation on the organisation's website regarding the protection of South African abalone in international markets. "South African abalone is not protected under Hong Kong law, meaning there is no legal or enforcement action available to stop the sale of poached abalone once it hits the market," he explained. Burgener suggested that this issue could be easily addressed with a CITES listing. (CITES is an international agreement designed to regulate the trade of animals and plants, ensuring that it does not threaten their survival) (ADF, 2023).

A CITES listing would provide critical international cooperation by obligating all member countries to monitor and regulate the trade of endangered species. Without such measures, the responsibility to safeguard these species often falls only on the country of origin, leaving a gap in enforcement. This unequal distribution of concern makes it difficult to address wildlife trafficking effectively. Even if CITES permits are sometimes misused, these listings still play an essential role in protecting vulnerable species and fostering global cooperation (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

Smuggling methods

In South Africa, illegal processing facilities often dry the abalone before it is smuggled abroad. While poached abalone used to be smuggled directly from South Africa to Asian markets such as Hong Kong, tighter law enforcement at the source has forced new smuggling routes to emerge, using southern African countries such as Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique for these purposes (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2021).

Simone Haysom from GI-TOC highlighted the complexity of abalone smuggling, noting that it is transported via various routes, including land borders, using small airplanes and commercial cargo flights (Muller, 2004). Trucks, hiding abalone in false compartments or concealed among boxes of dried fruit, take the abalone across land borders to be exported to Hong Kong (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2021). Some smugglers use fraudulent permits or make misdeclarations to label the product as something else (Muller, 2024). This happened in May 2021 at the Beitbridge Port of Entry when abalone with an estimated value of more than R8.4 million was found hidden under noodles as declared by the importer and cleared into Zimbabwe as noodles by a Mutoko-based customs clearing company (The Herald, 2021). In the case of **S v Miller and Others (SS13/2012) [2017] ZAWCHC 124 (4 September 2017),** it was revealed that the abalone was frozen in a garage and transported to the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town for export by sea. The frozen abalone was placed on pallets along with boxes of pilchards. These pallets were loaded into a container, filling it partially, with the remaining space filled by more pallets containing various fish products, primarily 10 kg boxes of pilchards. The pilchard boxes were used to fill gaps, ensuring that if the container were opened by inspectors or law enforcement, only boxes of frozen pilchards would be visible. Once the container was fully loaded, it was transported by road to the Cape Town docks, where it was stored in a stack awaiting the completion and clearance of the required documentation. Afterwards, the container was loaded onto the designated vessel for transshipment to Hong Kong.

Countries that do not produce abalone are often used as intermediaries to launder the illegal product. Smugglers exploit this by misdeclaring abalone to avoid detection. Customs in such countries are typically unable to seize or investigate these shipments due to a lack of legal frameworks, making it easier for smugglers to exploit these gaps. Once in Hong Kong, abalone is distributed throughout southern China to food wholesalers, retailers and restaurants. In some cases,

smugglers bypass customs by using indirect routes, such as passing through Vietnam, to evade taxes (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

The spread of Chinese businesses in sub-Saharan Africa has further facilitated illicit trade networks linking South African syndicates to other regional countries. While using intermediary countries complicates the supply chain, it has led to the emergence of criminal groups, including those from Somalia and Congo, specialising in cross-border trafficking. These syndicates often mislabel the abalone as car parts or use false permits to evade authorities. Abalone has been discovered in some unexpected places during contraband busts, hidden alongside items such as surgical masks and second-hand iPhones (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

A lesser-known strategy involves the abuse of bonded warehouses in South Africa, which are designed to store goods in transit without requiring export levies. Smugglers take advantage of these warehouses to mislabel the origin and nature of the abalone, allowing it to be exported directly to Hong Kong. In this case, the laundering process occurs within South Africa, bypassing the need to pass the product through other southern African nations. Despite these tactics, it is estimated that 98% of the abalone smuggled from southern Africa ultimately reaches East Asia via air cargo (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

Transactional convergence

In South Africa, illegal abalone is often exchanged for drugs such as methamphetamine or its precursor chemicals, embedding the trade within the country's broader drug economy. This barter system is an example of "transactional convergence" where criminal groups in different markets exchange goods or services with each other. While this abalone-for-drugs trade has been widely reported in South Africa by various sources, the Wildlife Justice Commission stated in its 2021 report entitled **Convergence of wildlife crime with other forms of organised crime** that there is a notable lack of specific cases involving both commodities being seized or criminal groups being arrested, suggesting that law enforcement may not be effectively targeting this convergence.

In its report entitled **Strategic organised crime risk assessment: South Africa**, the GI-TOC elaborates on the barter economy that has developed between South African gangs and Chinese buyers which eliminates the need for large cash exchanges. Chinese syndicates began trading precursor chemicals needed to produce methaqualone, a powerful sedative commonly known as Mandrax in South Africa, in exchange for abalone from Cape gangs. Mandrax, which has a long history of use in South Africa, was soon followed by the introduction of crystal methamphetamine, commonly referred to as "tik" into the domestic drug market. These precursor chemicals, which were difficult and expensive to obtain in South Africa, were easily available and inexpensive in China, making the exchange mutually beneficial for both sides.

This arrangement played a significant role in expanding methaqualone use in South Africa and contributed to the rise of domestic methamphetamine production, first documented in the late 1990s. As the illicit trade in abalone and precursor chemicals grew, so did the production and consumption of methamphetamine. This barter system, where abalone is traded for drugs or their precursors, continues to this day. Several poachers and smugglers have confirmed the ongoing trade, with one abalone transporter explaining that the Chinese networks "have the gold that the gangsters want and that gold is drugs … in that type of exchange, it's one trading gold for another's gold. Abalone is gold to Chinese and drugs are gold to gangsters who have drying facilities" (GI-TOC, 2021).

Let's talk money

The attraction of the illegal abalone trade lies in its immense profits. Divers can earn up to R20 000 for a single 20 kg haul in just a few hours and ski-boat owners supervising crews of up to 28 can make more than R200 000 per month. Despite these eye-popping payouts, the flow of money within the trade remains largely hidden. Central to the operation is the *fei qian* system, a financial mechanism that allows smooth transactions between South African poachers and Hong Kong importers. Chinese criminal syndicates control the trade, dictating prices and ensuring that Hong Kong traders cannot bypass their operations (Muller, 2024).

Simone Haysom paints a grim picture of the trade's impact on both sides of the supply chain. "In the beginning at the source, there is a huge level of harm, and extremely corrosive corruption that has hollowed out government institutions," she explains. Violent criminal gangs involved in the trade use profits from abalone sales to fund arms purchases. On the other side, Hong Kong traders often turn a blind eye to the origin of the abalone, accepting trade documents at face value despite widespread knowledge of its black market origins. South African investigators struggle to trace the money, believing it does not even enter the country. The financial transactions occur between criminal entities outside South Africa, and the supply chain is tightly controlled, making it difficult for authorities to follow. "On the Hong Kong and Chinese side, it is quite a black box. South African investigators believe there is a small number of people who are

involved, but their relationships to the broader underworld or upper world in Hong Kong are unclear. It is extremely difficult to work with demand reduction when the country does not acknowledge that the products being sold are illegal. This makes the supply chains extremely invisible to consumers," she noted. She emphasises the importance of diplomatic engagement between South Africa, neighbouring countries and Hong Kong and China to tackle the issue (Muller, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic initially caused a sharp decline in abalone prices due to lockdowns, with prices dropping from R600 p/kg to R300 p/kg between March and May 2020. However, by November 2020, prices rebounded to R800 p/kg and rose further by May 2021, reaching R700 to R1000 p/kg in Cape Town. Dried abalone prices also surged, doubling pre-pandemic rates, with Cape Town prices hitting R4300 p/kg and Gauteng exceeding R6000 p/kg. These rising prices have incentivised smaller illegal drying operations, reducing poaching risks by spreading potential raids across multiple locations. For example, a small facility processing 350 kg of abalone weekly can earn more than R400 000 per week, exceeding R1.6 million monthly (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

A coastline plagued by corruption

South Africa's extensive coastline, dotted with hidden coves and remote stretches, seems idyllic at first glance. However, for the authorities tasked with its enforcement, it is a logistical nightmare. Systemic corruption compounds the problem with some officials either turning a blind eye or participating directly in the illegal abalone trade (Muller, 2024).

Evidence indicates that nearly every government agency involved in combating abalone poaching in South Africa has been compromised by corruption. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and SAPS are among the most seriously implicated, while some customs officials issue fake export permits. Even the employees of the South African Revenue Service (SARS) have been accused of colluding with poaching syndicates. The problem is exacerbated by coastal poverty, wealth disparities and a weak rule of law, making it nearly impossible to tackle poaching without addressing systemic corruption (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

The corruption runs deep, from petty bribes offered to low-level inspectors to serious allegations involving senior officials. These payments grant divers access to protected waters and allow middlemen to transport abalone safely to buyers. Some suspects walk free as evidence mysteriously disappears, while drying facilities remain safe from raids and confiscated abalone is resold at discounted rates to syndicates. Legal permits are laundered to export poached abalone, while customs inspectors are bribed to turn a blind eye at border posts (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

The **Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF)**, tasked with issuing permits and conducting anti-poaching patrols, has repeatedly been implicated. In 2018, two of the Department's most senior officials were accused of involvement in abalone scandals, one of which involved rigging auctions of confiscated abalone and another of sabotaging an investigation into an abalone syndicate (De Greef, 2018a).

In the same year, nine officials from DAFF were arrested in Gansbaai and in February 2021, a grim narrative of corruption and collusion emerged when Soloman Sauls entered into a plea and sentencing agreement with the State. He admitted to bribing the nine officials from the DAFF and buying abalone seized by the State. His plea agreement revealed that his illegal enterprise was primarily composed of DAFF members. Corrupt officials not only turned a blind eye to his operations but also stole abalone from the company Irvin & Johnson, enabling Saul's divers to poach illegally (Cruywagen, 2021).

Since the arrest of the nine DAFF officials, it took nearly five years for justice to be served when in August 2023, significant sentences were handed down to some of them in terms of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) 121 of 1998. Adam Baadjies, a central figure in managing the operations of the enterprise, was sentenced to 15 years' incarceration of which eight years were suspended for five years. He also received a ten-year sentence for POCA violations; ten years for money laundering; ten years for corruption; and five years for the illegal possession of abalone, of which all sentences were partially suspended. Similarly, Rudolf Andrew Louw, Allistair Hillmar Maans, Linda Nkeleni and John Stephanus Karelse received comparable sentences for their respective roles. Each was sentenced to ten years' incarceration for managing the enterprise and participating in illegal activities, as well as for money laundering and corruption. Their sentences also included time for the illegal possession of abalone. Suspensions ranged from five to six years, depending on the individual (Francke, 2023).

By September 2023, more convictions followed. Winston Busch was sentenced to five years' incarceration for managing and participating in illegal enterprise activities, money laundering, corruption and possession of abalone, with all sentences running concurrently. Nomvuyo Motloung, sentenced alongside Busch, received three years of correctional supervision and fully suspended sentences for her crimes (Charles, 2023). Two DAFF employees, Zihle Diko and Craven Siyabulela Mxaku, who were implicated in the case, passed away before they could stand trial (Nithart, 2024).

Corruption among **SAPS members** significantly facilitates the illegal abalone trade. Poachers claim that some police members tip them off about patrols or even help them to coordinate poaching activities. As an example, police may alert poachers to upcoming seizures or misdirect investigations. Robben Island, a marine protected area in Table Bay, northwest of Cape Town, remains a hotspot for poaching due to enforcement challenges, with reports suggesting that police members provide insider information on patrol schedules to poaching syndicates. Poachers pay up to R10 000 per boat to access the island, generating substantial bribes. In addition, some drying facilities are robbed by people posing as police, possibly involving actual police members, with stolen goods sold to poaching networks. These thefts often go unreported to law enforcement due to the illegal nature of the abalone involved. Even government storage facilities for seized abalone have been targeted by individuals dressed in police uniforms (De Greef and Haysom, 2022).

Impact on communities

In the underworld of South Africa's illicit abalone trade, the social harms run deep and are devastating. This black market industry has

claimed the lives of dozens of poachers, some meting a gruesome end in the jaws of great white sharks. Local gangs wage violent turf wars over control of the resource and the trade has converged with drug trafficking and other branches of organised crime. The corrosive influence of abalone syndicates has even seeped into government, particularly affecting DAFF, whose ability to manage poaching has been undermined. Many coastal fishing communities have been criminalised, overrun by gangs through violent takeovers and locked in worsening conflicts with law enforcement (GI-TOC, 2022).

In the Overberg region, fear grips farmers living along the rugged coastline. Poachers have warned that any interference will result in their homes being burned down. Isolated and vulnerable, many farmers, most of them elderly, turn a blind eye to the illegal activities, knowing the police offer little protection. This culture of fear has tightly woven organised crime into the fabric of these communities. Everyone, from lookouts to garage owners selling fuel, and even elderly women storing poached abalone in freezers, plays a role in sustaining the trade (Grobler, 2019a).

For fishermen who have harvested abalone for generations, the trade has become a curse. A diver from Hawston recalls his childhood, growing up surrounded by the sea. "We don't have blood in our veins, we have seawater," he said. For decades, he rose before dawn to dive for abalone, first as part of a regulated quota system. But as poaching syndicates gained power, his way of life was upended as he refused to join the poachers. He has been ostracised. "Normal people can't work in this anymore. You have to join a syndicate. The government is working with them," he remarked. He explained that syndicates now control the trade, exchanging abalone for hard drugs such as crystal meth and cocaine, bringing addiction and violence into the community. "We feel forced to give them the abalone because that's where the money is," he concluded (Muller, 2024).

Abalone seizures and sentences

Despite the possibility of fines and prison sentences, poachers are motivated by the significant financial rewards that abalone offers, leading to its smuggling becoming a major part of the underground economy in many fishing communities. Unfortunately, in South Africa's overburdened court system, most poachers face short jail sentences of only one or two years, and convictions are rare. An example of the type of sentences handed to poachers is that of two Chinese nationals, Feng Zhu and Zhou Wangfeng, who were each sentenced to two years' incarceration in December 2021 for being part of a global abalone poaching syndicate. They were arrested in May 2020 with illegally harvested abalone with an estimated value of more than $61 000. A third suspect, Richard Rayson, was sentenced to 12 months' incarceration for the same offence (Oirere, 2021).

Prof Hennie van As, a Professor of Public Law and Director of the Centre for Law in Action (CLA) at the Nelson Mandela Bay University argues that access to bail for fisheries crimes in South Africa is excessively lenient, enabling repeat offenders. He noted that many foreign nationals arrested for such crimes vanish after being granted bail. As an example, he cited Morne Blignaut Jr, who was released on bail on 28 February 2023, despite prior convictions and a five-year suspended sentence for abalone smuggling in the Eastern Cape. He is the son of Morne Blignaut Sr, a notorious abalone poaching kingpin in Gqeberha, who was sentenced to 20 years' incarceration in 2018 due to the contravention of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA). This case was one of the first successfully prosecuted in terms of POCA, demonstrating its potential for harsher sentences compared to the Marine Living Resources Act. Prof Van As emphasised the urgent need to investigate and prosecute organised fisheries crimes in terms of POCA, which can impose sentences exceeding 20 years. However, he highlighted that South Africa's law enforcement agencies lack the capacity for complex investigations, with cases often dragging on for years, diminishing their deterrent effect. While there are pockets of excellence, including prosecutors achieving convictions for attempted crimes through alternative charges, systemic challenges remain. He pointed out that the SAPS is generally not equipped for POCA-style investigations, despite initiatives by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) following the Act's implementation. Both the SAPS and the NPA lack sufficient understanding of organised fisheries crime, compounded by a shortage of trained police members and Fisheries Control Officers (FCOs) (Van As, 2023).

While poachers may receive minimal sentences, law enforcement agencies around the world take abalone poaching seriously, conducting numerous seizures each year. Some recent seizures include the following:

- On 12 September 2024, a joint operation by SAPS in Philippi led to the arrest of four suspects for the illegal possession of abalone. They seized 3281 units of dry abalone and 1359 units of wet abalone, with an estimated value of R1.4 million, along with drying equipment and three vehicles (SAPS, 2024a).
- On 1 December 2024, members of the Maitland Flying Squad arrested two suspects after receiving a tip-off about a vehicle transporting abalone on the N2 Highway. The vehicle was stopped near Khayelitsha and officials found 13 large bags containing abalone with an estimated value of R1.3 million. Two suspects were arrested (SAPS, 2024b).
- During the first week of January 2025 a multi-disciplinary task team, including the Gqeberha Serious Organised Crime Investigation Unit of the Hawks, arrested two foreign nationals for possessing abalone and operating an illegal abalone plant in Neave Township. The team seized 10 510 units of wet and dry abalone, with a weight of 1061 kg and an estimated street value of R4.4 million (Algoa FM, 2025).

The abalone trade is a complex issue with significant cultural and economic importance, but it also raises serious concerns about sustainability and illegal exploitation. The demand for abalone drives poaching, leading to the depletion of this valuable marine resource. Chinese syndicates, profiting from this trade, face minimal resistance due to corruption and a lack of political will, making it difficult to dismantle their control over South Africa's abalone resources. The decline in abalone populations threatens South Africa's environmental and cultural heritage, where abalone has been an integral part of local traditions for centuries.

Editor's note

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