



A poacher shucks abalone in the waters off Cape Town's southern peninsula

SHAUN SWINGLER

The Abalone Underworld

The illegal trade of a highly valuable sea snail has criminalised fishing villages across South Africa

by Harriet Constable

Abalone are marine molluscs that live within a single shiny grey shell



\$57m

was the annual average value of poached abalone in 2016

90%

of exports of South African abalone are destined for Hong Kong

96m

abalone are estimated to have been poached since 2000

In China abalone is prized as a symbol of wealth and served in expensive restaurants to buyers for up to £420 a plate



Two suspects are detained during a raid on an abalone processing facility in Soshanguve, north of Pretoria

A few kilometres off the coast of Cape Town intermittent flashes of light cut through the darkness. Their source is an old lighthouse on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent 18 years of his imprisonment during apartheid. The beams ripple over the icy black water toward the twinkling lights of Cape Town's city and the silhouette of mountains beyond.

Two decades ago, had you the nerve to descend beneath the surface of the shark-filled ocean here, you would have noticed the seabed carpeted about 20 foot deep with abalone, a shellfish species with a tiny face, tentacles and a hard greyish shell. But, for the past

18 years, poachers armed with levers and waterproof torches have been diving in these Cape Peninsular waters, prying the creatures up and stuffing them into sacks to sell on the black market. For thousands, it's their way of earning a living.

The remarkable stories of these individuals and the reasons for their terrifying commute are set out in a new book called *Poacher: Confessions From The Abalone Underworld* by journalist Kimon de Greef and poacher Shuhood Abader (not his real name).

Stories of the abalone trade, both in the book and in recent news reports, are so bizarre and surprising they're almost hard to believe. Divers without any training swimming for hours in pitch darkness; people drowning and being attacked by the region's high population of Great White sharks; shootouts between rival gangs; armed robbers targeting abalone in highly organised hits; batches of shellfish hijacked in the middle of the night and masked gunmen

overpowering government guards, all to get their hands on these mollusks.

'It's an incredibly wild and lawless economy to operate in. I put myself in [the poacher's] shoes and ask myself, "would I have what it takes to swim two kilometres offshore in some of the sharkiest waters in the world, knowing at least five divers before me have been killed?" That's not something that people in a functioning society are willing to do,' says de Greef.

A new report released by conservation organisation TRAFFIC reveals that since 2000, poachers have stripped South African coastal waters of at least 96 million abalone. On average more than 2,000 tonnes of the sea snail are bagged annually by poachers – that's 20 times the legal take – in an illicit industry that was estimated to be worth \$57m (£45m) in the year 2016.

The main buyers are in Hong Kong, where abalone is prized as a symbol of wealth and served in expensive restaurants for up to £420 a plate. 'Similar to how

champagne would be used in the West, [abalone is served] to celebrate a special event or to culminate a business deal,' explains de Greef.

South Africa's abalone, *haliotis midae*, is particularly revered, and with demand vastly outstripping the legal global supply, black markets for the creature have popped up. Poor fisheries in South Africa have become the hotbeds of the illegal industry.

'The abalone trade is a product of massive inequality. Instead of taking the opportunity to use the money from the abalone to uplift fishing communities after apartheid, that economic opportunity almost completely slipped onto the black market. It has resulted in quite a profound criminalisation of many fishing communities,' says de Greef. Although illegal abalone industries exist elsewhere in the world, South Africa is the only country where the black market has become systemic. 'Thousands of people base their livelihoods on this industry,' adds de Greef.

With poaching happening so quickly, scientific research has struggled to keep up with the impact



Make-shift drying equipment seized by police during a raid



Three suspects are arrested during a police raid on an abalone processing facility in Walkerville



Bags of abalone are stored at a confiscation facility in Cape Town

The journey from seabed to restaurant changes year by year. The supply chain extends from the poachers who gather the abalone to the cookhouses where it is dried and the homes of villagers in South Africa who stash the produce. From there it's on to local gangs and eventually Chinese criminals who frequently pay with chemicals for drugs such as methamphetamine rather than cash. 'Generally abalone is smuggled over the [South African] border in light aircraft or trucks. One month you'll have masses coming into Zambia, next Mozambique,' says de Greef. African countries like these don't have abalone naturally, so they also don't have any legislation to stop it being transported onwards. In a stunning display of bureaucracy, once the abalone reaches Hong Kong it's then 'dutifully declared as "abalone from Zambia"', says de Greef.

Measuring the environmental impact of such a rapid decimation of a species is complicated according to de Greef. With poaching happening so quickly, scientific research has struggled to keep up with the impact. 'What we do know is that, as grazing herbivores, abalone put substantial pressure on algae and kelp,' he says. Without them, these organisms may get out of hand with effects felt further up the food chain.

On the other hand, the social and economic impact of the massive decrease in abalone numbers is blatant. Markus Bürgener, programme coordinator for TRAFFIC, South Africa and co-author of the report, says that as the abalone industry dwindles due to overfishing, individuals from these poor fishing communities with no skills or experience in the legal economy will have nowhere to turn. 'Ultimately there will come a point where the resource will be so heavily depleted that most of the people employed will lose their jobs. It's a really unhealthy situation for all of those coastal communities,' he says. Further, even though much of the money in these communities comes from the illegal abalone industry, it is used in the legal economy – to buy food, clothes, vehicles. Once the abalone is finished the economies in those communities will also suffer. 'I think we're sitting on a socioeconomic time bomb,' says Bürgener.

Although the outlook is fairly bleak, de Greef believes the situation in South Africa can serve as a cautionary tale for how wildlife management can go wrong, and show the importance of governments intervening early. 'I think there are important lessons for other illegal wildlife trades here, including spotting opportunities to bring people into the legal sector before the smuggling economies become so deeply ingrained,' he says.

De Greef and the team at TRAFFIC are now calling for more effective policing of South Africa's illegal abalone trade. 'The police work has been to criminalise the working poor rather than dismantling the supply chains. This is an intense logistical operation to move high volumes of contraband – shipping containers full of abalone – every month. Without cutting that supply chain, which is ultimately funded by wealthy Asian buyers of abalone, the trade will continue,' says de Greef. ●