

# Crime scenes: dos and don'ts

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Many stock-theft court cases are lost due to insufficient evidence, incomplete statements or disputes regarding the positive identification of stolen livestock and the ability to prove ownership.

**L**ivestock owners could play an active role in stock-theft prevention by assisting the South African Police and its stock-theft units in their investigations. The scene of the crime is a very valuable source of evidence and livestock owners should know how to handle any evidence at the scene of the crime.

The scene of the crime should be secured immediately. Do not disturb or remove anything from the crime scene and do not try to investigate the crime yourself. Important evidence could be destroyed should you do this.

When livestock have been stolen out of a kraal, the remaining livestock may remain in the kraal until the officers of the stock-theft unit arrive and start their investigation. Important clues, such as tracks and marks, are destroyed as soon as the animals leave the kraal.

Tracks found at the crime scene, which could be relevant to the case at hand, have to be protected from rain, wind, animals and people. It can be protected with, for example, a drum that has been cut open. Care should be taken not to disturb or destroy the tracks. Tracks should not be followed by livestock owners, but rather be left to a police dog. Employees should also not be sent to look for tracks.

Cut fences should not be repaired before wire samples have been taken by the SAPS. Chains and locks that were cut should also remain in safe-keeping and handed to the member of the SAPS who attends the scene.

Slaughtered carcasses should not be removed before meat samples have been taken and the scene photographed by the SAPS.

If you do find samples of clothing that could have been left by the thief, it should not be touched, but left as is. These must be pointed out to the SAPS member who attends the scene.

Unknown objects, for example broken lights or rails of vehicles, which is found at a crime scene, must not be touched or moved from the scene until these objects have been shown to the person who attends to the scene or the investigating officer. This evidence could assist the SAPS' forensic laboratory to physically match and fit

evidence that has been found at the scene or in the possession of criminals.

Make a habit of noting all details observed at the crime scene and convey this information to the investigating officer. Study and record the various techniques employed by stock thieves on any given property. Do not hesitate or be scared to disclose any information to the stock-theft unit – even if you might think that it is unimportant.

When livestock owners report a stock-theft case, a reference number must be obtained from the SAPS for future reference and to clear up any possible misunderstanding that may arise.

When arriving at the scene of the crime, the investigating officer will request a detailed description of the stolen livestock, as well as the identification marks in terms of the Animal Identification Act, 2002. Therefore, the livestock owner should make sure that all his/her animals are marked and that all records are up to date.

Livestock owners often do not have a complete description of missing livestock and, in such cases, the SAPS is unable to circulate the livestock as stolen.

The necessity of keeping a detailed stock register cannot be emphasised enough. Keep the stock register up to date and verify the totals regularly. This is also applicable to livestock kept by employees. A well-kept stock register will also serve to convince a magistrate that the livestock owner is in full control of his/her livestock and knows what is happening on his/her farm.



## FACT BOX

If an animal has been marked with a registered brand or tattoo, many disputes could be avoided. According to the Animal Identification Act (Act No. 6 of 2002), animals should be marked as follows:

### Cattle

- Cattle should be marked at the age of six months.
- Calves may be tattooed at the age of one month.
- Calves may be branded at the age of six months.
- Cattle should be branded from the age of 18 months or when they reach the two-tooth stage.

### Small stock

- Small stock must be tattooed by the age of one month.

Make sure that all the animals are marked with a registered brand mark or tattoo. Employees should also mark their livestock properly, preferably by branding them. Tattoo marks are preferred to ordinary earmarks and clippings. The stock-theft unit's work is impeded when livestock are marked by other methods, or not marked at all.

If a suspect is caught red-handed and he makes certain remarks to the owner of the stolen animals, which boil down to a confession, these remarks may be conveyed to the investigating officer.

However, take care not to transgress Section 35 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996) and Section 39 of the Criminal Procedures Act, 1977 (Act No. 51 of 1977).

Do not assault the suspect. Any wrongful assault makes you susceptible to possible criminal prosecution, which only jeopardises the entire stock-theft case. 