

A legal trade in rhino horn?

The Rhinocerotidae were possibly the most diverse group of mammalian megaherbivores to have existed. Their collective population decline in more recent years has been caused by the poaching of rhino for their horn. In an attempt to stem the decline in wild rhino populations, an international ban prohibiting its trade was initiated in 1976. The ban contributed to massive price increases in horn during the 1970s and 1980s, which subsequently increased the incentive to poach rhino, in turn leading to accelerated declines in rhino numbers. The black rhino suffered its most significant declines in the years after the trade ban. Most rhino states have inadequate funds to protect their rhino in the light of such strong poaching pressure, and as a result, rhino populations in many areas continue to decline.

The arguments in favour of legalising the trade in rhino horn

The illegality of the horn trade has denied rhino states the right to manage their rhino such that funds can be made available for protecting wild populations and thus stemming the dramatic population decline. The depletion of the world's rhino can, it is argued, only be realistically halted by international and national political measures that result in a decline in the price of rhino horn and an increase in the funds available for the protecting of wild rhino. These joint goals could be achieved most effectively by the instigation of a strictly regulated trade in rhino horn (in practice, only that derived from the African species), with the profits being reinvested in rhino protection: in short, giving African nations ownership of their rhino resources.

It is further suggested that by instigating a regulated trade in rhino horn, the incidence of poaching would decline. This would occur as a result of:

- a reduction in the global price of rhino horn, leading to a reduction in the incentive to poach for both African and Asian species
- regular dehorning would result in fewer large specimens of horn being available, which when combined with an increase in resources for anti-poaching patrols, would dramatically reduce the incentive to poach and thus the illegal killing of rhino
- the increased incentive to protect rhino, due to the profits they would be capable of generating

Other outcomes might include surplus black and white male rhinos in South Africa and Namibia no longer being culled or sold for sport hunting, as the funds for translocations would be provided by business people willing to invest in farming rhinos for their horn. Furthermore, a rhino could generate a regular income throughout its life, whereas if sold for sport, can only provide a one-off return.

Until now, the means by which such a trade could be regulated have been elusive, but with the advent of chemical forensic fingerprinting, such that the origin and date

of purchase of the horn can be encoded onto the horn. This can also be detected in derivative products, making the identification of illegal horn now possible. A central selling organisation would be required to be established in order to regulate prices.

The flux of horn on the market maintained at considerably lower prices than illegal horn would encourage stockpilers to sell their horn before prices drop further, thus flooding the market and subsequently further reducing the poaching pressure on wild rhino. It has been suggested that stockpilers are banking on the extinction of rhino to boost their investments. However, stockpilers could be given the option to sell their horn to the newly established central selling organisation, such that this horn can be added to the legal stockpile and released on the market in a more controlled manner.

Legalisation of the horn trade would take control of the trade away from the criminal syndicates that presently run it, allowing the trade to be monitored more effectively, and run for the benefit of rhinos rather than horn traders.

The arguments against legalising the trade in rhino horn

On the converse, it is often argued that allowing a legal trade in rhino horn would create as many problems as it would solve.

Chief among these are the risks to the rhinos themselves in the collection of the horn. Although removing the horn is, in itself, as simple as cutting fingernails, rhinos must be tranquillised for the procedure to be carried out. Despite the advances in chemical immobilisation, tranquillisation of rhino always carries a risk, not just from the use of the drugs, but also because there is a danger that rhinos may become killed or injured as they succumb to the tranquillising agent, for example by falling into a waterhole or stumbling into a ravine. Additional concerns have been raised over the inhibitory effects of tranquillisation on rhino reproduction.

A common question is whether rhinos actually need, or use their horns. As explained in the descriptions of the five species, Asian rhinos use their incisor teeth rather than their horns to fight each other, but the African rhinos do use their horns and can inflict serious injuries. There is evidence to suggest that, with up to 33% of female black rhinos actually being killed by intra-specific fighting, dehorning might seem worthwhile just to reduce fighting-related mortality! However, limited studies have also shown that dehorned black rhino may be less able to defend calves from predators such as hyena or lion (and tigers in Asia), while rhinos of all species are known to use their horns to push obstacles out of their way, and to protect their faces and eyes from thick undergrowth.

It could also be argued that, given the low starting point of rhino populations, even a legal trade in rhino horn could not satisfy the demand for horn, and that poachers would continue to kill rhinos from National Parks or places not practising rhino horn

“farming”, and find it easier to export than they are currently able.

Conservationists may also find it difficult adequately to explain why some people are allowed to dehorn rhinos (albeit without involving the death of the animal) and profit from that, while others may not. Those able to participate in the scheme would tend to be larger, commercial landowners, or those involved in communal area conservancies, such as in Namibia and Zimbabwe. The gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” might apply not just to the rhinos (with or without their horns) but also to local communities.

Possibly the biggest argument against this trade would be concerns over the management of it, and the practicalities of ensuring the trade is managed effectively for the benefit of rhinos, rather than corrupt officials in both range states and areas where horn is traded.

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