
African and Asian Rhino Products for Sale in Bangkok

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Thailand continues to display a greater variety of rhino products on retail sale in its capital city, Bangkok, than are to be found anywhere else in the world. These products are from both the African and Asian rhino species. There is an urgent need to stop this trade once and for all.

Bangkok's Medicine Shops

Many Thai people of Chinese origin live and shop in Bangkok's China Town where there is a very large number of traditional Chinese medicine shops lining the crowded streets. Compared to those in Hong Kong and Singapore, these Bangkok pharmacies are less modernized and rather run-down, with poor lighting and usually no air-conditioning. On the walls are the typical lines of shelves carrying bottles, large glass jars and wooden boxes containing minerals, herbs and dried animals or animal parts. Particularly abundant are ginseng and deer antlers which are consumed as tonics and aphrodisiacs. African rhino horn, used by the Chinese to reduce fever (not as an aphrodisiac), is sometimes displayed in the window to attract customers, being much larger than Asian rhino horn. Under the glass counter in saucers, a larger selection of rhino products, usually from the Sumatran rhino, is often available. Most common today is skin, but occasionally nails and even dried penises are for sale. Sometimes at the back of the medicine shop can be seen on a small altar a statue of Buddha and a 'rhino' horn beside it for worship. These horns are not for sale and in fact they are usually fakes, characteristically shiny, with knobly bases.

The 1990 Survey

In early 1990, we carried out a survey of 46 such medicine shops in Bangkok, interviewing the owners, doctors and salesmen. The previous survey by EBM - which is reported in *Pachyderm* 11 - had been done two years before in early 1988. Since then, the prices had gone up a little, and overall, the amount of rhino horn in the shops had dropped slightly. In the past, Asian horn had always predominated whereas now Asian and African horn were available in roughly equal amounts. As for Sumatran rhino hide, the number of pharmacies selling this had nearly tripled since early 1988. Obviously, there had been a new supply of both African rhino horn and Sumatran rhino hide since EBM's last survey.

Rhino products were displayed so openly that it was hard to believe that at least since 1972, the Thai government had banned international and internal trade in Sumatran rhino products, and being a member of CITES since 1983, the international trade in all rhino species' products since then was supposedly prohibited.



This is a large traditional medicine shop in Bangkok selling an assortment of animal and plant products

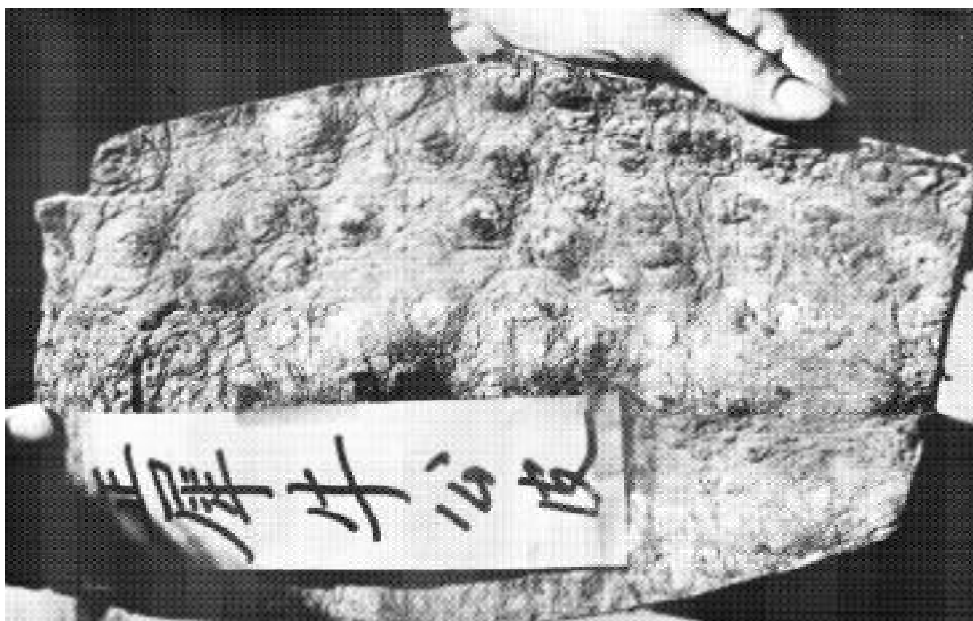
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Forest Department officials do not enforce these laws; they scarcely ever inspect the pharmacies for illegal wildlife products. Shopkeepers thus have little to worry about. Sometimes the pharmacists were suspicious of our survey, but usually they were very helpful and, if rhino products were not in the show cases, they would fetch them for us from the back of the shop so we could determine their authenticity. Or they would show us pictures of rhino horns they kept at home. Some owners allowed us to take photographs, and we even could carry the rhino products out on to the street for better light.

Although several shop owners claimed their rhino horns were over 20 years old or said their Sumatran rhino skin came from their fathers and grandfathers, others admitted to receiving rhino products in the past two years, or so. Many dealers and foreign smugglers sell rhino products in Bangkok as the demand for them there and the lack of law enforcement are well known. It is also where most of Thailand's rich Chinese live; elsewhere in the country, rhino products are not so easy to get.

Rhino Products from Africa

One shop owner, who is also a major trader and wholesaler, told us that these days more people offer him rhino horn from Africa than Asia; Asian horn has been hard to get these past two years. This helps to explain why the ratio of African to Asian horn has increased in the shops since 1988. In April 1989, a German and a Tanzanian invited this trader to their rented house to see two cases holding 50 horns from Tanzania, weighing about 70 kilos. The trader would have been willing to buy a couple of rhino horns, but the partners wanted to sell all of them or nothing, so on this occasion he did not take any. The Bangkok trader believed about half the horns were fakes, probably made from bones as they were too sharp and too long. He thought they would have taken the horns to Macao in order to sell them to



Indian rhino hide sells retail in Bangkok for over US\$ 2,000 a kilo today, but hardly any African hide is available

China. African rhino horn, normally from the black rhino, is today available retail in Bangkok at an average of US\$ 10,300 a kilo. African hide is far less common than Sumatran and sells for only US\$ 230 a kilo retail, a reason probably why few people bother to smuggle it to Thailand, apart from the fact that not many poachers in Africa are aware of the demand for it.

Rhino Products from the Greater One-horned or Indian Rhino

Of the eleven shops we saw displaying rhino horn only one sold Indian rhino horn, and this was for the highest price of all: US\$ 36,500 a kilo. Of the 21 shops we found selling skin, only three offered that from Indian rhinos and at a cost of over US\$ 2,000 a kilo retail. Of course, customers do not buy large amounts; it is priced to them per *liong*, which is 37.5 grammes, and customers usually buy only several grammes of horn at a time.

Trade in Sumatran rhino predicts: skin, horn, blood and penis

The main trader we interviewed said that he buys from Thai dealers, who come to sell Sumatran rhino products, whenever he can but sometimes obtains products directly from poachers. The last occasion for this was in 1988 when he travelled deep into the forest of Kanchanaburi Province in western Thailand on the Burmese frontier and bought some hide. Since then, poachers have been unable to find any Sumatran rhinos there although the trader believes that some 20 are left in that region of Burma. A whole rhino carcass including the

horn is worth a fortune to the poachers, creating a great incentive for them to hunt out what soon will be the very last in the forest, unless something is quickly done to stop Thailand's trade and protect the rhinos.

The trader added that this visit to the Burmese border in 1988 had provided his last batch of rhino hide; none had been available since then. Presumably that hide entered the Bangkok market just after EBM's 1988 survey, when only 13% of the medicine shops he visited sold rhino hide, and that 1988 supply is still available in the shops today since nearly half the pharmacies we visited in early 1990 sold Sumatran hide. It may be easily distinguished from knobbly Indian hide as it is covered in short

wiry black hairs and is smoother. The prices differ greatly, with shoulder skin worth over ten times the price of stomach skin, in line with the supposed healing power. Male rhino hide is reputedly more difficult to obtain and considered a stronger healing agent than female hide. Our survey showed that male skin sold retail for US\$ 5,200 a kilo while female skin was a mere US\$720 a kilo. On average, however, Sumatran rhino hide sold for US\$ 1,700 a kilo retail. Another reason for the variation in price was that some, no doubt, was old stock.

The most expensive Sumatran rhino product in the shops is horn priced at an average of US\$ 16,300 a kilo. Sumatran rhino nails are known as poor man's horn as they, too, are prescribed to treat fever. Nails cost some US\$ 2,000 a kilo, about an eighth the price of horn, and several pharmacies offered them for sale. The main trader told us that he had been unable to buy Sumatran



A pharmacist in Bangkok displays two saiga antelope horns. These are for sale in nearly all Bangkok's traditional medicine shops. Shavings from the horn are sold to reduce fever a substitute for rhino horn

rhino blood since 1988. He bought his last stock already dried and kept it in a refrigerator to avoid fungal attack. Wholesale, it costs US\$ 78 a kilo, and retail it is US\$ 156 a kilo, dried. Similarly, he had not had a chance to buy recently any new rhino penises, but said he would willingly pay up to US\$ 400 for one. If it is fresh, he first dries it out and then sells it by weight. A complete penis weighs about 150 grammes when dry. In the last two years, he had sold four whole penises for about US\$800 each to a Chinese from Hong Kong, a Korean, a Japanese and a Taiwanese. These customers all knew how to use them: the penis is cut into pieces and boiled in water with other ingredients, the resultant liquid is drunk as an aphrodisiac. This trader said he had two penises in stock. In another shop, there was in a saucer one full penis, two that were sliced in half, and four smaller pieces; these were US\$ 156 for one *liong*, or about US\$ 600 per penis. Of the 46 shops we surveyed, only these two were selling Sumatran rhino penises.

Manufactured Medicines containing Rhino Horn

Commonly available were febrifugal tablets and laryngitis pills both containing rhino horn and both manufactured in China. From Japan were Kyushin tablets made in 1983, according to the label. In October 1989 some government representatives from a Beijing pharmaceutical factory visited Bangkok to check the prices of rhino horn. No doubt on these occasions, the pharmacists receive Chinese medicines, perhaps even in exchange for a little rhino horn.

Present Trade Regulations

1. According to CITES regulations (and Thailand has been a member since 1983), no international trade is allowed in any rhino products since all five species are on Appendix 1. This prohibition on all imports and exports includes medicines containing rhino products.
2. The internal or domestic trade in Sumatran rhino products has been illegal since at least the early 1970s.
3. Although CITES in 1987, in Conference number 6.10, urged all member states to ban internal sales of all rhinoceros parts and derivatives, Thailand has not yet complied with this. So

the internal trade in African and Indian rhino products is still legal, as is that for medicines containing rhino products.

Recommendations

1. In accordance with CITES, Customs officers need to check more rigorously to prevent illegal imports and exports of rhino products.
2. The Forest Department must carry Out an inventory of rhino products in Bangkok. Following this, the Department should grant a grace period of several months within which owners of rhino products must dispose of them within the local market. After a specific date, all internal trade should be prohibited.
3. Forest Department officials need to be trained to recognize rhino products and must regularly inspect medicine shops to ensure that no new rhino products appear for sale. After the internal ban, they must check that no rhino products at all are for sale.
4. The government must encourage pharmacists to use appropriate substitutes for rhino products such as saiga antelope horn which is readily available in Bangkok and costs US\$ 2,000 a kilo retail only, and domestic water-buffalo skin, a good and cheap substitute for rhino skin.
5. A management plan is required to secure the future of Thailand's and Burma's few remaining rhinos. Such a plan must be implemented with adequate finances and manpower.
6. International pressure is essential in order to get the Thai government to act on these important matters.

It reflects badly on the Forest Department that this rampant trade in rhino products continues in Bangkok, threatening the last Sumatran rhinos in the area and putting pressure on African rhino populations. The need to bring it to an end is vital and the amount of effort required by government comparatively small. Stopping the commerce in rhino products would have, for both the country and the future of these threatened rhinos, beneficial results which must surely not be allowed to go by default.

Average Retail Prices of Rhinoceros Horn and Hide in Bangkok

| Year | Total no. of pharmacies visited | Number and % selling horn | Type of hide | Average price per kilo in US\$ | Number and % selling horn | Type of hide | Average price per kilo in US\$ |
|------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1979 | 23 | 12 52% | Mostly African | 3,654 | — — | — | — |
| 1986 | 44 | 15 34% | Mostly Asian | 11,629 | 8 18% | Sumatran | 395 |
| 1988 | 52 | 17 33% | Mostly Sumatran | 13,111 | 7 13% | Sumatran | 1,254 |
| 1990 | 46 | 11 24% | Half Asian, half African | 15,205 | 21 46% | Asian, most Sumatran African | 1,717 220 |

Source: Surveys carried out by the authors

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