

# A call to action

*Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne implore international wildlife organisations to pay far greater attention to Yemen.*

Yemen is a relatively little known country in Arabia, but contains that region's most outstanding fauna and flora. For example, some of the spectacular vegetation on the island of Socotra is unique (see SWARA Vol. 24 No. 3, 2001) and half of the leopards of Arabia inhabit the country. On the other hand, Yemen has been responsible for the demise of eastern Africa's rhinos. Certain traders in Sanaa still hold the dubious distinction of being the world's major importers of illegal rhino horn.

Except for Socotra, Yemen receives very little attention from international wildlife organisations. Of the major ones, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and Conservation International (CI), none has a branch or office in the country, and nor has any spent much money to date on conservation projects in Yemen.

Compared with the other Gulf states, Yemen is a poor country of 21-million people and cannot afford to spend a lot of money protecting its endangered fauna and flora, let alone on preventing trade in rhino horn (a foreign product). There is a government agency called the Environment Protection Authority that is responsible for dealing with the environment as a whole, but this has limited funds for wildlife field actions and few skilled personnel. Yemen does not even have a functioning national parks system.

From a global conservation perspective, the main problem in Yemen is the continuing illicit import of rhino horn, which is used to make handles for daggers called jambiyas. This demand is still fueling rhino poaching, especially in Kenya, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (where perhaps only four animals now remain).

Poachers and government field staff are sometimes killed in eastern Africa, and the trade is adding to the corruption prevalent in Africa and Yemen. Unfortunately, since 2003, the price of rhino horn in the main jambiya souk of Sanaa has risen by 40%. This increase will no doubt encourage yet more rhino poaching. Greater financial

input and manpower will be needed to protect these endangered animals.

Communication and co-operation between the eastern African governments and Yemen regarding smuggling routes should be much more frequent, and e-mails should make this easier today than in the past. Eastern African governments must take up the issue more seriously in Yemen, since it is their rhinos that are suffering.

Yemenis need to do more to reduce the shameful amount of rhino horn coming into their country, and to stop craftsmen using this illegal new horn for jambiya handles. It would help if the craftsmen had a high-quality substitute for rhino horn. Neither agate nor plastics have worked, as these materials break or melt easily. The Yemeni craftsmen, though, are keen to be offered another material they can try out.

The vast majority of handles are made of horn from India's domestic water buffalo and are not valuable enough for expensive jambiyas, for which – given the growing population and middle class – there is a growing demand. The general public needs, through better education, to be made much more aware of the rhino problem, if we are to see a reduction in demand for new rhino horns.

As Yemen is a poor country, it cannot solve this problem on its own. The Yemeni government has not even been able to budget sufficient money properly to manage the animals' well-being in the Sanaa and Taiz Zoos, two of the main public facilities catering to large numbers of people. They would welcome more outside assistance, especially in the form of expertise and equipment from other zoos.

Yemen must receive greater attention and assistance from international wildlife conservation bodies to protect its endangered wildlife and to establish and manage more protected areas for wildlife, as well as to improve the zoos. International attention is also desperately needed if the country is going to be able to reduce the import and use of new rhino horn.

Compared with other areas of wildlife conservation importance in the world, Yemen has been conspicuously overlooked. Yet what makes Yemen different from some countries is that its government welcomes outside help, knowing that – faced with so many people-related internal problems – its commitment and finances are sadly limited. We have been visiting Yemen since 1978 and have always found Yemeni government officials eager to help us during our visits.

Conservation organisations have funded our work in Yemen, normally for periods of a couple of weeks every two years or so, and for this we are most grateful. However, during our long absences, the global bodies have neglected Yemen, with the result



**Sanaa, Yemen, 2007: Is the horn tip on this craftsman's shelf from a rhino or from a water buffalo, we wanted to know. But the craftsman chased us away.**

that there has been virtually no follow up. Without continual pressure and financial support, little can be achieved in the long term to solve the rhino horn problem.

An important step would for at least one international conservation NGO office to be set up in Sanaa. Such a full-time office would provide a much needed channel for communication, while facilitating action against the rhino horn trade. It could also help to stop the growing threats to Yemen's own wildlife. It is not too late for international conservation organisations to become more pro-active in Yemen.

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