

The illegal trade in rhino horn: Traditional Asian medicine

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Let's correct a common myth. Rhino horn is not used as an aphrodisiac, except in very limited parts of Gujarat and northern India. So all the speculation about "Viagra saving the rhino" is incorrect. Rhino horn is made up of long filaments of keratin, a material also found in hair and nails. Would you fancy chewing someone else's toenails as a warm up to sex?

Of far more concern to conservationists was the outbreak of SARS earlier this year. In Asian medicine, rhino horn is almost always used to bring down the high fever that accompanies SARS. A research institute based in Beijing interviewed traditional Chinese medical practitioners in provinces where SARS raged for their thoughts on treating the sometimes-fatal respiratory ailment. One doctor's precise recipe included rhino horn among the combination of medicinal plants to be boiled and drunk like soup. Fortunately, the SARS outbreak was contained and proved not to be the global epidemic everyone had feared.

Three researchers at the Chinese University at Hong Kong have shown that rhino horn does lower fever in rats. The same research revealed that saiga antelope horn and water buffalo horn also reduce fever in the animals, but scientists suggest that further studies are needed to determine the effects of the different horns on humans.

Rhino horn has been used as an ingredient in traditional Asian medicine for 2,000 years. Ancient literary works record how cups made from rhino horn were used for detecting poisons. Popular belief, still held by Rudolf II in the 16th century, held that a poisonous liquid poured into the cup would bubble up. The cups may have succeeded occasionally in detecting strong alkaloid poisons, which would have reacted on contact with the keratin.

As well as supposedly detecting poison, the 16th-century pharmacist Li Shih Chen stated that the main ailments treatable with rhino horn included snakebites, hallucinations, typhoid, headaches, carbuncles, boils, fever, vomiting, food poisoning, and "devil possession." His immense book contains the classic text on preparation and use of rhino horn, and many pharmacists still use his text when they prescribe it today. Although rhino horn tablets are available, most people want to see the pharmacist shave the horn to ensure that they are getting the real thing.

And it's not just the rhino horn that gets used: the rhino's ears, urine, penis, blood, faeces, hide, stomach, tail and even dung have traditional medicinal properties. Uses of these body parts include sexual impotency, hemorrhoids, lumbago

(piles, baldness, impotence and a bad back), arthritis, polio, bumpy skin, stiff necks, coughs, sore throats, etc.

Rhino parts also turn up in religious ceremonies. The Nepalese use rhino hide containers for milk and water, part of the ceremony of Shradha, by which Hindus and Buddhists commemorate their parents and grandparents on the anniversaries of their deaths. Oil lamps are made from the bones which are used in religious ceremonies, while bone rings are thought to ward off evil spirits.

Conservationists have tried suggesting alternative sources of horn, but one such, the saiga antelope, is itself now endangered. It is hard to know how to change centuries of tradition. Until we do so, perhaps by supporting community conservation initiatives in rhino areas, and developing sustainable methods of income such as eco-tourism, a rhino will continue to be perceived as worth more dead than alive.



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