

The rhino wars

With the large-scale upsurge in rhino poaching, **Abré J Steyn** looks at the only solution that might work in the long term to combat the scourge – legalising a sustainable rhino-horn supply to fill demand.

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL MAN HAS surrounded himself with beautiful things. Many of them, like sculptures and paintings, have no value other than to be looked at. Humans even applied paint to themselves to look more beautiful. Modern women still do it. Both ancient and modern man disembowelled the earth to find rare minerals, like diamonds and gold, to decorate himself and his temples and palaces. There was, however, not enough to go around and as the demand increased, so did the value.

Today, the value of absolutely everything in life is sadly measured against the value of gold. While it was once valued because it was beautiful, few people nowadays ever see their gold. For them it's enough to look at their bank statements and know they've got it.

Utensils and the hunting tools of field sports people have been embellished with decorations for centuries. Quality guns were often engraved and inlaid with gold and hunting knives are even today fitted with grips of exotic materials and shapes

that are often more beautiful than useful.

Although I use knives every day, I'm not immune to the temptation of beauty and own more knives than I can use in a lifetime. I bought many of them simply because they were beautiful and once even tried my hand at knife making. It was to be a sheath knife and it took me two years to finish. I fashioned its hollow-ground blade from high-carbon steel used to make bits for steel-cutting lathes. It was unbelievably

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hard, but not brittle and could cut a slice off the blade of any commercial knife.

The grip, which fitted my hand as if it was part of it, was a section of natural impala horn and the finger guard and bolster at the rear was of thick, solid brass, with a large lanyard hole through it. It wasn't very practical as a hunting knife, but it was beautiful and I proudly carried it everywhere in a very nice leather sheath,

but unfortunately I didn't always attach the lanyard and one day I lost it during a falconry hunt and despite days of searching, never found it again. I can therefore understand that people adorn their knives and other personal items with beautiful, natural materials such as exotic wood, horn or even the ivory of elephants already dead.

However, to kill an animal for the sole purpose of making a knife handle from some part of its body I find repulsive and despicable. Even more so when that animal is a rhino, of which some species are on the brink of extinction.

The rhinoceros is one of the world's most magnificent creatures with its almost prehistoric appearance. It's one of Africa's Big Five and differs from its relatives, the tapir and the horse, by its huge bulk, thick elephant-like skin and by being the only mammal with horns on its nose. In prehistoric times a wide variety of rhino species existed, but today only five remain, most of which are, sadly, seriously threatened with extinction. Three of these species are found in Asia – the Indian

Despite the fact that the black rhinoceros is one of the most remarkable animals on the planet, trying to preserve it without utilisation will surely lead to its extinction.

COURTESY OF ABRÉ STEYN



rhino, with a population about 1 500, the Sumatran, which numbers about 200 and the Javan rhino of which less than 50 are left.

The other two rhino are found here in Africa. They have by far the longest horns and are the only ones with two. The white rhino is the only grazing rhino and the second largest land animal on earth. Their numbers were once estimated at only 40 left in Umfolozi. By 1930 there were about 100, but through the efforts of the old Natal Parks Board, they have made a remarkable recovery in then Zululand and were eventually made available to game farmers. In 1997 there were already 8 000 in private hands, while in KwaZulu-Natal alone the present total population is about 2 000.

The black rhino on the other hand, is much scarcer. The only certainty about its population on the African continent is it's steady decline. From at least 100 000 in 1960, across most of Africa south of the Sahara, there are today fewer than 3% left.

Most African rhino survive in a few Southern African countries, where most conservation staff and game farmers are dedicated to protecting them. However, poachers are managing to kill rhino in all of these countries, despite protection.

A history of demand

Rhino horn is often described as compacted hair, but this is incorrect. Its structure is more like the hoof of a horse. It has, unfortunately, a beautiful translucent colour when carved and is in high demand in a number of Gulf states, particularly Yemen, where men traditionally wear curved daggers, called *djambiyas*, as a sign of manhood and devotion to the Muslim religion.

The handles of the most expensive daggers are still made of carved rhino horn, which unlike materials such as water buffalo horn, improves in lustre with age. Agate has only recently emerged as a high-quality substitute dagger-handle material, but the demand for rhino horn is still so great and the prices paid for it so astronomical that the rhino wars of a few decades ago seem to have erupted again with renewed ferocity. With a price of around R65 000/kg, poachers and smugglers are on the rampage in our rhino sanctuaries and national parks.

Throughout history dagger handles were, however, not the only mundane purpose for which rhinos had to pay with their lives. As far back as the fifth century BC,

the ancient Persians and later the Chinese made ornamental drinking cups from the horn, to detect poisoned liquids. Many early poisons were alkaloids that reacted strongly with the keratin and gelatine in rhino horn and by forming bubbles indicated the presence of poison. This practice even persisted into the 18th and 19th centuries among the royal courts of Europe.

In many Asian countries, including China, where rhino horn is considered an aphrodisiac, its powdered form was for centuries used to treat just about any malady, even snakebites. Ironically, recent research in Hong Kong has shown it's all based on superstition and instead "you can just as well chew your own fingernails". At present, however, it's this traditional medicine trade that's mainly responsible for the big upsurge in rhino poaching and horn smuggling, and it's happening right under our noses.

I know of at least four rhinos recently poached on private land in the area where I now live, 12 in KZN and at least 30 in Kruger Park. What are our authorities doing about it? Very little, it seems. When 50/50 recently



- Rhinos don't need to be killed for their horns as they are not part of the skull.
- Goblets made of rhino horn were used to detect poison until the 18th and 19th century.
- Farming rhino for horns could be sustainable.

'When broken or sawn off, the horn grows back.'

showed footage of illegal rhino horn transactions, conducted by Vietnamese officials with diplomatic immunity, right in front of their embassy in Pretoria, neither the Vietnamese embassy nor the South African Foreign Affairs Ministry chose to comment on the report. The usually, soft-spoken minister had apparently lost her voice completely, as her department was as silent as a rhino grave. They didn't even bother to turn up to discuss the matter on 50/50 or reply to letters of invitation.

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) whose mission it is to protect these magnificent beasts, did attend, but had to admit that after 14 years

in office and four years after placing both black and white rhino on the endangered or protected list, they still don't have the necessary legislation in place to regulate the trade and smuggling of rhino horn.

In Zimbabwe, which has far fewer rhino than we do, it's even worse. According to a report released by the World Wildlife Fund, poachers killed 70 rhino in their Lowveld conservancies since Mugabe's land grab started in 2000. Of this, 27 were killed in the first nine months of this year alone and these are the ones they know of. It was reported last month that a young rhino cow, heavily pregnant with her first calf, was shot at Chipangali by a ZANU PF official with a high-powered rifle. He hacked off her small horn and left the carcass to rot. The elation over the arrest of the four poachers responsible for the deaths of 18 rhino, including three killed at Imire Safari Park, was short-lived after they were released on bail and apparently fled to South Africa.

The renewed upsurge in rhino poaching must be nipped in the bud before it becomes uncontrollable, but the demand for rhino horn will not go away. Attempts to dissuade consumer nations from using it are futile and whether we consider the slaughter uncivilised and barbaric means nothing to these people.

Ironically, the unique nature of rhino horn holds the key to their survival. You don't have to kill a rhino to get its horn. The horn has no bony core and it's not attached to the skull, but to the skin. When broken or sawn off, it grows back. With the conservation of white rhinos in South Africa, being the success story it is, the optimum carrying capacity on suitable free-range land, like with elephants, will soon be reached. Rather than culled or sterilised, surplus animals should be farmed as we do with crocodiles, their horns periodically harvested and legal trade, now forbidden by CITES, allowed.

This way the white rhino could be the salvation of its black cousin as well as of the Asian species, which have small horns in any case. Before this can happen CITES will have to be persuaded and DEAT will have to get their act together. If we don't do this and the politics of Africa, our own included, remains as unstable as they are, this magnificent animal will become extinct as sure as there is a sun in the sky. — *Abré J Steyn*
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