



A typical medicine shop in Taiwan offering rhino horn for sale

Esmond Bradley Martin

Taiwan: The Greatest Threat to the Survival of Africa's Rhinos

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During the past three years, Taiwan (the Republic of China) may have become the world's largest entrepot for African and Asian rhinoceros horn. Prices in Taiwan have soared higher than ever before in the recent history of the rhino horn trade. This thriving traffic in illegal rhino horn and hide, with its little known South African connection, must be dealt with immediately if its disastrous effects on the dwindling rhino populations in both Africa and Asia are to be halted.

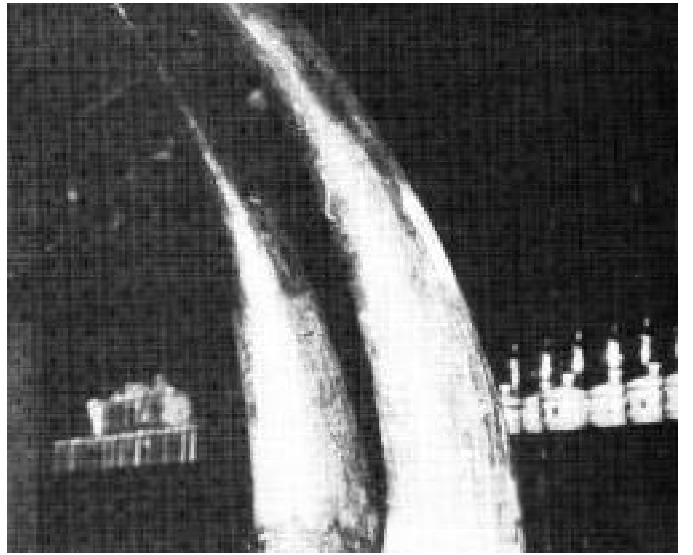
Taiwan's economy began to boom in the early 1970s and the country became a major importer of rhino horn. Customs statistics show that 7,281 kilos of rhino horn were legally imported from 1972 to August 1985, and in addition large quantities of horn were smuggled in to avoid import taxes. Pressure was mounted on Taiwan by international conservation organizations, especially the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and its government consequently prohibited imports and exports of rhino products in August 1985. Visiting Taiwan on behalf of WWF from December 1985 to January 1986, Esmond Bradley Martin had meetings with senior officials and three government ministers. These included a Minister of State, Dr Feng-shu Chang, President of the Society for Wildlife and Nature in Taiwan, who had helped to push through the official ban. It was agreed by all that the new restrictions on the international trade in rhino products would have to be enforced and ways to do this were discussed.

When Esmond Bradley Martin returned to Taiwan in July 1988, however, he found that contrary to his hopes, the law was not being upheld. Taiwanese traders had been left unhindered by their government, and the medicine shops were full of new rhino horn. Neither water buffalo horn nor saiga antelope horn had been encouraged as substitutes.

Taiwan has continued to experience rapid economic growth, with one of the strongest currencies in the world today (up by 40 per cent against the US dollar since 1986). Its foreign currency reserves of US\$75 billion are the world's third largest, and the average income is now US\$ 6,000 per person, 15 times higher than what it was in 1970. It is hardly surprising that Taiwanese businessmen are spending some of their money on rare and valuable wildlife commodities. Over 80 tonnes of raw ivory were imported in 1987, although Taiwan has only a small ivory carving industry. Rhino horn has shot up in price, yet traders do not hesitate to buy it, knowing that they will sell it easily. In the city centre of the capital, Taipei, Esmond Bradley Martin visited 60 pharmacies in July 1988. Of these, 44 sold rhino horn. In the centre of Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second largest city and major port, he visited 20 pharmacies at this time, and 18 of them were found to be offering rhino horn for sale.

Many of the 20,000,000 Taiwanese believe in the efficacy of Chinese traditional medicine and prefer to buy a few grammes of rhino horn to reduce fever than consume some modern medicines with their uncertain side effects. Sumatran and Indian rhino horn are considered to be more powerful fever-reducing agents than horn from the black or white rhino. Although Asian rhinos are rare, a quarter of the pharmacies sell Asian horn, and it is so popular that customers are willing to spend on average the equivalent of US\$ 40,000 per kilo for it, the highest retail price in the world now.

The relatively cheaper African rhino horn is more readily available. Several shops have a dozen or so of these horns on display. Shop owners and businessmen realize however, that there has been a sharp decline in African rhino numbers (an



trafficking in the black market for rhino horns.

The Johannesburg Sunday Times reported on 25 September 1988 that a very well organized group of foreigners working out of Zambia, Zaire, Angola and other neighbouring countries are moving wildlife products, including rhino horn, as a means of getting money out of Africa. The list of traders included Chinese, Greeks and Lebanese. A loophole exists in the South African Customs Union agreement which States that goods cannot be inspected while in transit from Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and Swaziland to South Africa. This, no doubt, significantly aids smugglers by allowing free movement of illicit goods among these countries. Once in South Africa, the horns and tusks are reported to be stored in 'safe houses' and then crated and shipped out of the country by freight companies passing off the contents of the crates as cow horns, wooden curios or stone carvings. The Sunday Times investigators disclosed that some rhino horn was shipped from South Africa to central Europe and then to Tianjin, 130 kilometres south-east of Beijing in the People's Republic of China. In December 1987, Esmond Bradley Martin visited this large industrial city and confirmed that the Darentang Pharmaceutical Factory in Tianjin uses rhino horn to manufacture drugs for the export market.

Much of the rhino horn entering South Africa is smuggled out by Taiwanese to their home country. Political and economic ties between the two countries have strengthened in the past few years. Since 1984, 120 new factories in South Africa have been opened and financed by Taiwanese businessmen and another 60 are under construction. There are over 2,000 Taiwanese residents in the country. Some dishonest individuals among them have the ideal opportunity to purchase rhino horn to sell in Taiwan. Every month, about 200 Chinese businessmen fly from Jan Smuts airport in Johannesburg to Taipei. Some illicitly carry rhino horn and hide with them. The smuggled products are easily brought into Taiwan according to information supplied by the traders. Customs Officers are either unaware that the commerce is illegal or are willing to accept a quick bribe of the equivalent of US\$70 to turn a blind eye to a consignment. It is not only Taiwanese businessmen who are involved in this trade. Certain Taiwanese agriculturalists and government officials resident in South Africa as well as sailors are known to be illicitly transporting rhino horn.

Trade in rhino products between South Africa and Taiwan has existed for years. In 1983, for example, a South African dealer in the Cape Province bought 99 kilos of rhino horn at an auction in Windhoek, Namibia, for US\$ 460 a kilo, which he sold to a businessman in Taipei for US\$750 along with some rhino hide for US\$ 60 a kilo. After mid-1985, however, neither country legally allowed this commerce, and the trade gathered momentum underground as dealers in southern Africa responded to Taiwan's continued demand. Smuggling has reached alarming levels now in South Africa and Taiwan, and something must be done to stop it.

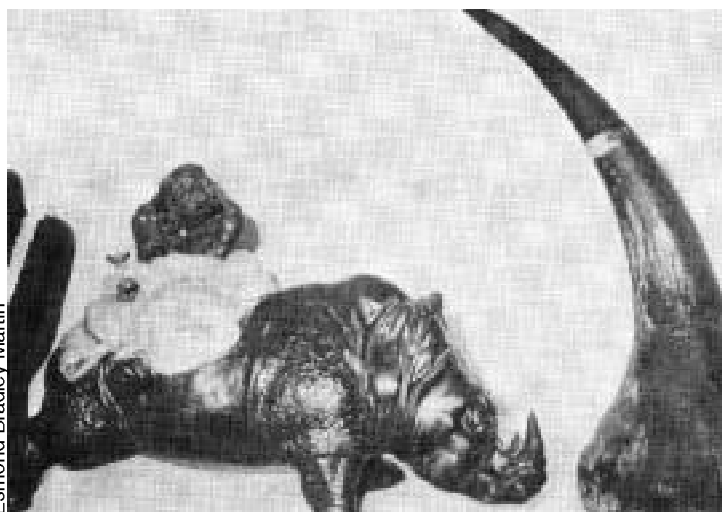
More surveillance, especially at airports in South Africa, to prevent illegal shipments of rhino products needs to be carried out. Also, stringent fines and jail sentences should be imposed on those who contravene laws protecting wildlife from trade. In March 1986 a Chinese trader in Macao was caught importing 89 kilos of rhino horn from South Africa. He was fined US\$ 15,000 and the horn was then returned to the exporter in South Africa who was apprehended and fined a mere 500 rand (the equivalent then of US\$250). Penalties for such offences should obviously be increased in South Africa. In Bophutatswana, for instance, an individual found guilty of illegally killing a rhino may be fined 100,000 rand (US\$ 42,000) and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

Unlike some countries in eastern Asia, Taiwan has the infrastructure to control the trade if it really wishes to. The Taiwanese government should quickly set up a system of law enforcement to clamp down on the rampant illegal trade in rhino products. Firstly, Customs Officers need to be briefed on how to identify rhino horn and hide, and they should focus special attention on searching passengers' luggage and packages from South Africa. Secondly, all stocks of rhino horn and hide should be officially registered, and the hundreds of horns individually marked. Owners of rhino horns should



Southern white rhinos.

be given a specific time limit to sell their stocks, after which time all internal sales of horn and hide should be prohibited. This is in accordance with Resolution Conf. 6.10 passed at the 1987 CITES meeting in Canada, which urged all Party States to implement a complete prohibition of sales, internal and external, of all rhinoceros parts and derivatives. Thirdly, government officials should regularly inspect pharmacies to check that no new supplies are coming in, and after the internal ban comes into effect, they should make sure that no horn is sold at all. Strict fines should be imposed for non-compliance, and if shop owners or traders are convicted of a second offence, their businesses should be officially closed.



A white rhino horn on display in a medicine shop in Taipei.

The appalling trade in rhino products, which is severely threatening all five species, must not be allowed to continue anywhere. People who are involved in it are too often allowed to go unpunished or are given meaningless fines and unimpressive prison sentences. Governments need to take infringements of their wildlife trade laws seriously, and they will only do so if pressured. The traders are the culprits as they are directly responsible for the continued poaching of rhinos. They deserve harsh punishment.

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