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HALTING THE RHINO HORN TRADE

Dr Esmond B. Martin is a Kenya-based geographer and Vice Chairman of SSC's African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group. He has recently returned from a WWF-sponsored visit of 13 Asian countries where he held meetings with government officials to discuss the ban on rhino horn imports. His country-by-country report tells which techniques have worked where in limiting the use of rhino horn and what still remains to be done if the rhino is to survive in its natural habitat.

DUE TO heavy poaching the Black rhino population of Africa has declined from approximately 15,000 in 1980 to 4500 today. Poaching for rhino horn threatens all five rhino species. In 1970 there was a world population of 70,000 rhinos; now there are approximately 11,500.

Rhino horn is in demand in North Yemen for making dagger handles and in eastern Asia, mainly for treating high fever. With the price of African horn at US\$600 a kilo (wholesale), and Asian horn at US\$9,000 a kilo, poaching gangs are determined to find and kill the few remaining rhinos. Serious poaching started in the 1970s, and millions of dollars have been spent on anti-poaching campaigns. However, the results are meagre.

A completely different approach to saving rhinos was started in 1982, when an attempt was made to curb the market in rhino products. Since July 1985, the World Wildlife Fund, with support from the New York Zoological Society, the African Fund for Endangered Wildlife and the Columbus Zoo, Ohio, have been funding a project to close down the trade in rhino products and to encourage the use of substitutes. The first phase has concentrated on eastern Asia.

In China I discovered that very little rhino horn is available in the medicine shops, and none in the capital, Beijing. However, China is the major producer of patent medicines containing rhino horn, and these are marketed throughout eastern Asia. Although China is a member of CITES which bans all international trade in rhino products, a loophole exists which allows manufactured rhino horn to be legally imported, and China has taken advantage of this. I visited several of the larger pharmaceutical factories and learned that some substitutes for rhino horn are now being used, in particular water buffalo and saiga antelope horn, but they have not entirely taken its place.

I also visited Hong Kong which used to be the major importer of rhino horn in the world. In 1979 imports were banned, but old stocks could still be re-exported. Under pressure from CITES, the Hong Kong Government agreed to stop the sale of these stocks abroad as of March 1986.

On previous visits to the major cities of Taiwan, I had found large quantities of rhino horn available. Adverse publicity in 1985 resulted in the Taiwan Government's total ban of rhino products.

South Korea is a similar success story. I had encountered strong opposition to the idea of halting the rhino horn trade when I

was there in 1982. At that time, the traditional doctors' association had refused to discuss the use of substitutes, but following the government's decision to stop the trade and use of rhino horn, scholars in the field of Korean medicine at Kyung Hee University began experiments with water buffalo horn which is now accepted as a substitute.

Esmond Bradley Martin

In 1985 Macao became the world's third largest importer of rhino horn. A Portuguese colony of only 360,000 people, it obviously was serving as an entrepot for Hong Kong and China. From the Macao viewpoint, trade was legal and I found horn in 80% of the medicine shops I visited. The government had promised that after December 1985, no more import licenses would be granted.

Japan banned rhino horn imports in November 1980 when it ratified CITES. Stocks in the country continued to be used as medicine for the next few years. The final pharmaceutical company selling manufactured rhino horn medicines has now agreed to stop.



Black rhino (Diceros bicornis): alive and well? Photo: WWF/Norman Myers

Brunei, an oil-rich sheikhdom, continues to import rhino horn, albeit in small quantities, for its Chinese population of 55,000. Most of its neighbouring countries have banned rhino horn imports. The Sultan of Brunei has been approached in an attempt to prevent the country from becoming an entrepot for rhino horn.

Singapore remains the greatest problem in Southeast Asia for both African and Asian rhino horn. Both imports and exports are still legal. Almost all the poached Asian rhino horns go to Singapore. While the Prime Minister of Singapore has stated that

the country will probably join CITES by the end of 1986, such a decision has been mooted for several years.

In Thailand, despite legal constraints on the sale of rhino products, I found that 34% of the Chinese medicine shops in Bangkok had rhino horn. In addition, many also sold rhino toenails which, like horn, are used to lower fever; and there were also several shops selling rhino skin used for treating human diseases. Some traders said they obtained whole rhino carcasses from northern Thailand, Burma and Laos in recent years. This matter should be investigated further particularly since it was thought that the rhino was probably extinct in these places. The Thai authorities have done little to discourage imports and sales of rhino products, and much more effort is needed to curtail the trade in them.

In India, where heavy poaching has been threatening half the world's remaining Asian rhino populations since 1982, the majority of the 1300 Indian rhinos are found in Assam; only 32 are left in West Bengal. A breakdown in law and order, both in Assam and West Bengal, encouraged the worst poaching in 1983. Firearms, superior to those used by the forest guards, have been supplied from Nagaland by syndicates which move the horn by ship from Calcutta to Singapore and which will pay a gang of poachers as much as US\$4000 a kilo for horn. It is worth mentioning that very little rhino horn is used in India because it is so expensive and because it can earn hard currency abroad for the syndicates.

What can we safely conclude? I believe that efforts to reduce the trade in rhino products and to encourage the use of substitutes are effective. It has only been since 75% of the world's rhinos were killed in the 1970s that such an approach was initiated. In the late 1970s medicine shops in eastern Asia were consuming almost five tonnes of rhino horn a year; by the mid-1980s they were consuming only about a tonne-and-a-half yearly. However, the price for both Asian and African rhino horn had not increased which, in itself, shows that the demand has gone down considerably. Moreover, since May 1985, four out of the five major trading countries in eastern Asia have officially banned it.

Success in halting the international trade in rhino products in eastern Asia will, in the long run, depend on whether Singapore can be persuaded to close down its market and whether China will stop exporting patent medicines containing rhino horn. A further impetus is needed also to help break those smuggling networks that supply the horn from Asian and African source countries. If public awareness campaigns continue, encouraging the use of substitutes, there is good reason to believe that the demand can be lowered still and that rhinos will be able to survive in their natural habitat. □