

# North Yemen takes fresh steps to crack-down on rhino horn trade

In recent years, North Yemen has been the world's largest consumer of rhino horn, importing over half of all the African rhino horn on the world market in the early 1980s. Daggers adorned with finely carved rhino horn handles are in significant demand among traditional North Yemeni men who are the beneficiaries of the new wealth that flowed in from Saudi Arabia during the oil boom years of the 1970s and early 1980s. The North Yemen government banned rhino horn imports in 1982, but the law was not strictly enforced and smugglers had little trouble bringing rhino horn into the country.

In December 1986, funded by various conservation organizations, we visited Sanaa, the capital of North Yemen. The purpose of our work was threefold: to monitor the rhino horn trade, meet government officials in order to discuss ways of enforcing

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their ban on rhino horn imports and to suggest to the officials possible new regulations against the trade that could be implemented.

All the craftsmen who make rhino horn daggers (jambias) work in Sanaa's city market (souk), sitting cross-legged in their cupboard-sized workshops which line some of the narrow souk alleyways. As one's eyes grow accustomed to the darkness, an array of partly carved dagger handles can be seen surrounding the craftsman, who diligently files and polishes them throughout the day. A penetrating shaft of sunlight sometimes catches the walls of the workshop, to reveal brightly the finished jambias hanging in neat lines. Most of these have water-buffalo horn handles, but

amongst them the craftsman can point out some that have rhino horn handles (al-kerkedan, in Arabic). Less than one out of twenty jambias are made with rhino horn handles today. Carvers are producing more wooden handles, and even plastic ones are being made for the first time.

We talked to various rhino horn traders and craftsmen, all of whom stated that it is becoming harder to obtain rhino horn. Our investigations showed that from 1980 to 1984, about 1 700 kilos of rhino horn per year were being imported into North Yemen. Imports fell to just under 1 000 kilos in 1985, however and to less than 500 kilos in 1986. The most interesting trade figures we received were those from the one major dealer in Sanaa, who has handled more than two-thirds of North Yemen's rhino horn over these crucial years:



Sanaa souk, where all daggers with rhino horn handles are made, nestling inside the attractive old town.

Year	Total kg	Wholesale price for rhino horn in Sanaa per kg		Where horn is shipped from
		rials	US\$	
1980	1,050	3,500	764	Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia
1981	1,320	3,500	764	India, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan
1982	1,585	3,600	786	Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan
1983	1,120	4,100	891	India, Kenya, Sudan
1984	1,058	4,300	796	Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan
1985	475	8,300	1,150	Ethiopia, Sudan
1986	100	10,000	1,032	Sudan

One explanation of the reduction in rhino horn imports is the decline in North Yemen's economy since 1983. No longer are large remittances coming in from so many Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia, and donor aid to the Government has been reduced from 400 to 100 million dollars per year. The Yemeni rial has consequently fallen in value against the dollar from 4.7 in January 1984 to 11.9 in December 1986. With the sharp devaluation of the currency, the wholesale price of rhino horn in rials has increased 2.5 times during this period. With the falling economy, fewer people can afford to spend the equivalent of several hundred dollars on a dagger with a rhino horn handle.

The traders further explained that rhino horn is becoming harder to obtain now because of the scarcity of the animals and because the government has been tightening up its customs control at Sanaa airport in order to prevent losses from import revenues. In the early 1980s, up to 70% of consumer goods were being smuggled into the country, but now the government has improved its border checkpoints and smuggling overland has been reduced considerably.

We did, nevertheless, see several rhino horn handles being made during our visit. The craftsmen were happy for us to watch as they heated the base of a shining blade in a powerful flame until it was red-hot, and then joined a rhino horn handle to it, engulfing us in clouds of smoke, with the stifling smell of burnt hair. Our interpreter said, "If you believe the Chinese, inhaling this smoke will be good for your cough!" The craftsmen showed us plastic bags of rhino horn shavings to be sold for the equivalent of about \$200 per kilo to a businessman for export to eastern Asia. The carvers complained that they are having to use up their old stocks of rhino horn and there are only a few hundred kilos of it left in

Sanaa. Most new horn has been stockpiled in Burundi and the United Arab Emirates until the middlemen can find a way of getting it into North Yemen.

Our meetings with the government officials were very encouraging. Both the American and British Ambassadors attended the meetings and gave us their full support, first with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is also the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Abdul Karim al-Iryani, and secondly with the Minister of Economy, Supply and Trade, Mr Mohamed al-Khadam

al-Wajih. We warned the ministers that if North Yemen did not stop this trade in rhinoceros horn, there would be an international outcry in the world's press and it was possible that foreign aid from certain western countries would be reduced. We listed six ways that North Yemen could enforce the ban on the rhino horn trade, including certain new regulations which the ministers were keen to implement as soon as possible. We were very encouraged to find both ministers determined to try to stop the trade and save the remaining rhinos in Africa. The six-point action plan was:

1. The Customs Department would encourage water-buffalo horn as a substitute for rhino horn by eliminating all duties on it.
2. The government would issue a decree prohibiting the export of rhino horn shavings.
3. Both the Prime Minister and Dr Iryani would appeal to the main trader to desist from handling new supplies of rhino horn.



A Yemeni jambia craftsman sits in his workshop in Sanaa souk fitting his newly carved rhino horn handle on to a sharp blade.

4. The government would request the Grand Mufti to issue (a) a *fatwa* (religious edict) stating that it is against the will of God for man to eliminate an animal species, (b) and/or to give a public interview about it.
5. The government would require all jambia craftsmen to sign an affidavit stating that they would not use rhino horn, in default of which their licences would be withdrawn.
6. Dr Iryani would talk to Sheikh Zayed, President of the United Arab Emirates, about controlling the illegal imports of rhino horn into the UAE which eventually make their way illicitly into North Yemen.

Esmond Bradley Martin again visited Sanaa in March 1987 to find out what the ministers had achieved during the previous few weeks. He had another meeting with Dr Iryani, who informed him that on 31 December 1986 the cabinet had fully agreed to implement all the points in the action plan. The Prime Minister himself had had discussions with the main dealer in rhino horn in North Yemen, warning him to stop buying new stocks. Dr Iryani had asked a senior official of the United Arab Emirates how imports of rhino horn could be stopped from coming into the Emirates, and the official suggested contacting the relevant authorities in the individual sheikhdoms such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. Followup is underway. On 20 January 1987, the Minister of Economy, Mr

Wajih, had issued an edict prohibiting the export of rhino horn and shavings from North Yemen.

Half the action plan has been implemented. The three measures that remain include perhaps the most important proposal: the affidavit system, by which all craftsmen and merchants using rhino horn will have to sign a sworn statement that they will no longer deal in rhino horn. Esmond Bradley Martin discussed the three remaining points with both the Foreign Minister and the Deputy Minister of Economy who each promised that these last measures would be implemented by the end of 1987, and that many affidavits would be signed by July 1987.

North Yemen must be congratulated on these efforts to stop the trade in order to save the rhinos. Indeed, we must encourage the government to continue to enforce these new measures and to complete the remaining three points this year as they have promised.

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Yemeni men, especially in Sanaa, wear their daggers proudly every day.



Rhino horn shavings are sold for use in eastern Asia for medicinal purposes.