

YEMEN THE PRESSURE IS ON

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Photographs by Lucy Vigne

Assessing developments in the souks of Yemen, home of the trade in rhino horn dagger handles

The Yemen government has delayed joining the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and has not strictly enforced its ban on rhino horn for too long,



exasperating the international community. Yemeni officials, aware of their own inertia, have even asked to be pushed and reminded about their obligations. This was exactly what we did on a visit to Yemen in October and November 1993.

We were also there to carry out undercover work in order to investigate the illegal rhino horn trade. On our first day in the country we surveyed the Sanaa workshops making *jambias* (daggers), counting a total of 55 open workshops and 94 craftsmen (compared with 57 and 85 respectively in January 1993). The count was in the afternoon, as the *jambia* makers are most active then, when they start chewing their *qat* (a mild leaf stimulant, extremely popular in Yemen). We saw nobody working rhino horn, the first time that this happened on our many trips to Sanaa since 1978. The traders had no advance knowledge of our visit. So this lack of crafting rhino horn was an extremely positive sign that less new rhino horn is being used.

Every other day we looked for new rhino horn handles being made. Only once in the entire week did we see a craftsman making a rhino horn handle (compared with three craftsmen we saw making ten handles nine months earlier). As usual, as he filed the handle, the pale shavings were collected on a plastic sheet underneath, for a hoped-for sale. We returned moments after first seeing him to try to photograph this handle, but it had been hidden.

Most of the handles being worked during our visit were of water buffalo horn. The prices of daggers vary mainly according to the handle's age, workmanship and size. Apart from the

Most jambias are made in Sanaa, a city famous for its beautiful old buildings.

prestigious rhino horn, the material for the handle – whether it be water buffalo horn, camel nail or plastic – is less important in governing price. The cheapest jambia is only about three U.S. dollars, but a fairly good one a few years old is around \$150. Those with rhino horn handles are several hundred dollars new and thousands of dollars if old.

We also saw a respectable tribesman wearing a jambia with an ivory handle. He told us that the dagger was 75 years old and was worth about \$4 000. These ivory-handled jambias used to be made in southern Yemen in the Shabwa region. In general, the jambia is worn traditionally by men in the north, but only by rural tribesmen in the south, as opposed to by townspeople as well. Many Shabwa tribesmen hid their daggers during the period of communist rule in South Yemen from 1967 to 1990 when daggers were prohibited, and started wearing them in public again only after unification of the country. The younger men in Shabwa, however, who were not brought up with daggers, tend not to wear them. Hence it is likely that this tradition will die out among the tribesmen in the south in a couple of generations.

We had an excellent informant whom we shall call Hussein, who posed as a middleman for rhino horn, and he visited various traders in the *souk* (market) daily to collect information for us.

The main jambia trader, Mohammed, said he had obtained only one consignment of rhino horn in 1993: about 80 kilos in March, via Dubai. He said the horns had come from China and were brought to the Persian Gulf by Bangladeshis working on commercial ships. He further said that when a consignment was ready, his family's agent in Dubai telephoned. The agent and Mohammed then determined a particular meeting point. Two Land Cruisers were used to collect the rhino horn and other smuggled goods; enough food and water were taken for the remote desert crossing and for the return journey.

Mohammed was very anxious to obtain more rhino horn if he could. He explained that

This prosperous tribesman from Shabwa in southern Yemen wears a jambia with a fairly old ivory handle – this type is very rare.

this was his family's main source of income and that they could not live without it! He offered Hussein \$1 200 a kilo for the new horn, but he wanted it brought to him in the Sanaa souk if possible. He offered \$900 if rhino horn were brought to Jeddah or Abu Dhabi airports, where he had friends who could "arrange anything" who could collect it. These prices were similar to those offered in January 1993.

Our investigator asked Mohammed for his agent's name and address in Dubai, so that a "friend" – who Hussein said, could bring many kilos of rhino horn from Sudan – could contact Mohammed. No problem said Mohammed, asking for the friend to send details of his Dubai visa. Mohammed would send the friend a contact address in Addis Ababa, where he should go and where Mohammed would telephone him with the name and address of his Dubai agent, who in turn would receive the friend at Dubai airport. It seemed easy to organise.

The second trader our informant met offered a better price for rhino horn than the main





A Yemeni salesman in the Sanaa souk displays a shining collection of jambias, most with quite old rhino horn handles.

trader: \$1 250 a kilo for small horns and \$1 500 a kilo for large ones – after bargaining (if these figures can be believed). The trader claimed he was ready to offer cash for all our informant said he had, which was 136 kilos of rhino horn. The trader said he had last imported rhino horn in 1987: 40 kilos from Zanzibar. The horns had been brought by an “iron yacht” up the African coast. The yacht had crossed at a point parallel to Djibouti, where the gap between the continents is smallest, and had landed at a village south of Mocha on the Yemeni coast. Since then, he had purchased rhino horn only twice, both times in Sanaa from the main trader. Mohammed: 26 kilos in 1990 and 10 kilos in 1993. He thought that Mohammed had brought over 100 kilos during 1993 from China via one of the Gulf countries. The trader said there were many ways to bring the horn from Africa to Yemen and that moving it presented no problems. He suggested a detailed smuggling route through Sudan to the Ethiopian border, where a friend could collect and pay for the horns: he had many friends in Addis, Taiz and Sanaa airports. He said the horns could also be cut into rough handles in the villages around Addis, as handles are easier than full horns to transport by air.

Hussein talked to about 10 jambia traders in total in and around the souk. The others were nearly all enthusiastic to buy rhino horn, but were unable to afford much of it. Most of them had not bought rhino horn for several years, but one man had bought five kilos in 1993 from an African in Yemen. He showed a tin containing about a quarter of a kilo of rhino horn powder, offering it for about \$182. An Asian nurse had offered \$164 for it, which he did not accept. Another trader told our informant that rhino horn powder was priced at about \$450 a kilo. The trade in rhino horn, although much reduced, has not stopped.

Why is the campaign against the import and use of rhino horn in Yemen not being taken more seriously by the government? Since North and South Yemen became one country in 1990, and since the first ever multi-party elections were held in 1992, the government has had many preoccupations. Every policy must be now discussed in parliament, and the rhino horn issue has been low on the list of priorities. The joining of CITES, although agreed to in 1992, has been essentially forgotten. The country has severe economic difficulties to contend with and worse still, political instability. The vice president,

living in Aden, has disagreed on various issues with the president, who lives in Sanaa, and there was even an assassination attempt on the vice president's son. It was remarkable in the circumstances that two ministers, including the foreign minister, and two deputy ministers agreed to see us in separate meetings for discussions on the rhino horn issue in November 1993.

Yemen does not want bad publicity over the rhino horn problem, as the country is gradually recovering its reputation following the Gulf crisis, and wants to be seen as worthy of being helped. So what can be done to decrease the rhino horn trade further? We explained to the officials we visited that there was a serious threat from the U.S. government: the so-called Pelly Amendment might impose trade sanctions on Yemen if the government did not follow up its decrees passed in 1992. Decree 240 passed through the Cabinet on 2 December 1992 stated that Yemen would join CITES. Decree 124 (initially issued on 19 May 1992, but few people were informed, and re-issued on 2 December 1992) stated that the internal trade in raw rhino horn was prohibited (imports and exports had been banned since 1982 and 1986 respectively), and that traders had a 60-day period for their remaining rhino horn stocks to be registered: 30 days later inspectors could confiscate any unregistered rhino horn.

The Ministry of Supply and Trade agreed to start working on Decree 124 immediately, after our meeting with the minister. The foreign minister, among others, promised us that he would personally follow up the matter of joining CITES and would try to push it through Parliament as fast as possible. "You keep pushing us, or we might slip," he urged, as we departed. Foreign diplomats in Sanaa have an important role to play too, especially the American and British ambassadors. In August 1992, the American ambassador had given the then foreign minister the details on joining CITES, and had warned him of the consequences if Yemen did not join. The ambassador agreed with us that he would follow it up again. It is important that the international conservation organisations keep pressurizing the



An ivory-handled jambia from Shabwa.

Yemen government to act. There has been inertia on both sides, and the rhino is still being illegally killed for the Yemen market. Continued outside pressure is essential for the ministers to take action.

Other needs in Yemen include propaganda for the rhino, including films to be shown on television. Yemen needs educational material; few people even know what a rhino looks like; how can one expect their sympathy and help without their understanding?

Talks with the main jambia trading family in January 1993 and again in late 1993 revealed that they would happily accept a new material in place of rhino horn, if it had similar properties. What is needed is a high quality substance that can be carved into dagger handles, withstand heat, and not have the appearance and texture of the cheap yellow plastic now used for inexpensive handles. This new material would not be sold as imitation rhino horn but as a new, valuable substance. The family asked for our assistance in producing this special material, and

when something suitable is produced by the factory we contacted in the United Kingdom, we hope the demand for rhino horn will wane further. More efforts to create new materials and to promote their use should be pursued.

Regular monitoring to ascertain whether new supplies of rhino horn have been smuggled into Yemen is vital. More undercover work must be carried out on the smuggling routes into and within Yemen for the horn. Most illicit trade is difficult to control in Yemen. There are 63 forbidden commodities, including rhino horn, and all are smuggled in! The government, however, can do more, and regular follow-ups are needed.

After our visit to Yemen, the deputy minister of Supply and Trade telephoned to inform us that his ministry had registered 40 traders with 722,5 kilos of left-over rhino horn powder and chips. The main trader had declared 500 kilos, and the second most important trading family 116 kilos. An inspection had also been carried out. The ministry was looking into means of law enforcement and further inspections. At last

there was action. It showed that determined and frequent reminders to Yemen government officials could produce successful results, and that international wildlife organisations have a vital part to play in encouraging development and enforcement of laws. Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency. Yemen has yet to join CITES.

Still, it was encouraging that in 1993, to our knowledge, less rhino horn was imported into Yemen than in any one year since the 1960s, in total about 85 kilos. In 1992, we were informed, about 150 kilos were imported. The import price in U.S. dollars has been roughly the same since 1985 – also good news. Furthermore, we saw only one rhino horn handle being made during our October/November 1993 visit. These are hopeful indicators. But a market still exists. The ancient tradition of jambia wearing and rhino horn handles may die out in a couple of generations, but this is not soon enough for the rhino. Suitable action must be taken in Yemen or the rhinos of Africa will be devastatingly affected.

WEAKNESSES IN SA IMPLEMENTATION OF CITES

TRAFFIC EAST/ SOUTHERN AFRICA

South Africa has a proud record in conservation, but the news on wildlife trade leaves much to be desired. According to an early 1996 report released by TRAFFIC's East/Southern Africa office in Johannesburg, inadequate trade control, administration and legislation have allowed legitimising of otherwise illegal shipments of animals, plants, and their parts and products.

Implementation of wildlife trade controls in South Africa can best be described as *ad hoc*, a situation that enables traders to thwart laws aimed at protecting or regulating trade in both native and exotic wildlife.

One key finding of a new study by TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa is that South Africa has yet to adopt national legislation to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endang-