

## Tackling the Rhino Horn Trade — a New Approach

Africa's black rhino population has declined from approximately 15,000 in 1980 to 4500 today, due to heavy poaching for the horn. All five rhino species in Africa and Asia are threatened. In 1970 there was a world population of 70,000; today there are approximately 11,500.

In North Yemen the horn is wanted for making dagger handles, and in eastern Asia mainly for treating high fever. With African horn priced at US \$600 a kilo (wholesale) and Asian horn at \$9000 a kilo, poaching gangs are determined to find and kill the last animals. Serious poaching started in the 1970s. Millions of dollars have been spent on anti-poaching campaigns, but the results are meagre.

In 1982 it was decided to try a completely different approach and attack 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, has funded a project to close down the trade in rhino products and encourage the use of substitutes. The first phase concentrated on eastern Asia, and Dr Esmond Bradley Martin, was appointed to lead this international project.

Between November 1985 and April 1986, he visited thirteen Asian countries, where he discussed the ban on rhino horn imports with senior government officials and investigated various aspects of the trade.

In China he discovered that very little rhino horn is available in the medicine shops, and none in the capital, Beijing. But 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, China has taken advantage of a loophole that allows manufactured horn to be legally imported. Dr Martin found that several of the larger pharmaceutical factories use some substitutes, in particular water buffalo and saiga antelope horn, but these have not entirely replaced rhino horn.

In Hong Kong, which used to be the major importer of rhino horn in the world, and where in 1979 imports were banned, although old stocks could still be re-exported, the Government agreed, under

Rhinoceros horn is used in many traditional medicines in South-east Asia and sold in most pharmacies. The ones pictured here include tonics for headaches in hot weather, tablets for night blindness, fever-reducing pills and a wax ball containing rhino horn and other ingredients for treating poor blood circulation.



pressure from Dr Martin and CITES, to stop the sale of these stocks abroad as of March, 1986.

In Taiwan, formerly a major user, the Minister of State, Chang Feng Shu, had imposed a total ban on rhino products in August, 1985, following a letter from Prince Philip, President of WWF.

South Korea is a similar success story, although Dr Martin had encountered strong opposition when he was there in 1982. The traditional doctors' association had refused to discuss the use of substitutes, but when the Government stopped the trade and use of rhino horn, scholars in the field of Korean medicine at the Kyung Hee University experimented with water buffalo horn and have now accepted it as a substitute.

In 1985 Macao, a Portuguese colony of only 360,000 people, became the world's third largest importer of rhino horn. Obviously it was serving as an entrepôt for Hong Kong and China. The trade was completely legal for Macao, and Dr Martin found rhino horn in 80 per cent of the medicine shops he visited. However, the Government promised him that no more import licences would be granted.

Japan banned rhino horn imports in November, 1980, when it ratified CITES, but stocks continued to be used as medicine for the next few years. On this visit Dr Martin learned that only one pharmaceutical company was still selling manufactured rhino horn medicines. Tom Milliken, of TRAFFIC Japan, followed this up, and the company has now agreed to stop.

Brunei, an oil-rich sheikhdom, continues to import small quantities of rhino horn for its Chinese population of 55,000. Most of its neighbours have banned imports, so, to prevent Brunei becoming an entrepôt, Dr Martin discussed the need for an import ban with senior government officials, backed up by a letter from Prince Philip to the Sultan of Brunei in March, 1986.

Singapore remains the greatest problem in South-east Asia for both African and Asian rhino horn. Both imports and exports are still legal, and almost all the poached Asian rhino horns go to Singapore. Dr Martin urged government officials to consider bringing in a specific law against rhino horn imports.

In Thailand 34 per cent of the Chinese medicine shops in Bangkok had rhino horn, despite legal constraints. Many also sold rhino toenails which, like horn, are used to lower fever, and several were also selling rhino skin, used for treating human skin diseases. Some traders said they had obtained whole rhino carcasses from northern Thailand, Burma and Laos in recent years, which if true, and Dr Martin believes it is, should be investigated. The Thai authorities have done little to discourage imports and sales of rhino products.

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 in Assam; only 32 are left in West Bengal — a breakdown in law and order in both states encouraged the worst poaching in 1983. Syndicates in Nagaland, which move the horn by ship from Calcutta to Singapore, will pay a gang of poachers as much as US \$4,000 a kilo for the horn, and have supplied them with firearms superior to those used by the forest guards. Very little rhino horn is used in India because it is so expensive and because it can earn hard currency abroad for the syndicates.

## Results

This new approach to the problem of the rhino horn trade is proving effective. In the late 1970s medicine shops in eastern Asia were consuming almost five tonnes of rhino horn a year; by the mid-1980s the figure was only about a tonne and a half yearly. Moreover, the price for both Asian and African rhino horn had not increased, which in itself shows that the demand has gone down considerably, and since May 1985, four out of the five major trading countries in eastern Asia have officially banned it.

In the long run, says Dr Martin, total success will depend on whether Singapore can be persuaded to close down its market and whether China will stop exporting patent medicines containing rhino horn. And a further impetus is needed to help break up those smuggling networks that supply the horn from Asian and African source countries.