

Rhino poachers kill for a few scraps of horn

Julian Coleman

ZIMBABWE'S last ditch attempt to save its dwindling population of rhinos from oblivion seems to be failing. Two years ago the country's wildlife and parks department decided that the only way to deter poachers was to cut off the rhinos' horns.

Up to April this year only 14 hornless animals were killed by poachers. It seemed that the policy might be working. But no longer.

"There has been a massacre of both black and white rhinos," says Esmond Bradley Martin of the

World Wide Fund for Nature who is a world expert on rhinos. Poachers have been particularly active in Hwange National Park, where 68 of the 70 or so dehorned rhinos have been killed and the stumps of their horns removed.

Even a newly dehorned rhino is worth killing, says Bradley Martin. Around 15 per cent of the horn remains after the operation, and it regrows at a rate of around half a kilo a year. A full size horn from an African black rhino weighs between 2.5 and 3 kilograms. Many of those killed had been



Ready for the saw: removing the horn is no deterrent

dehorned more than a year ago. African rhino horn can fetch \$6000 a kilo on the black market.

For the poachers, mostly from over the border in Zambia, the stakes are high, and they take enormous risks. More than 150 poachers have been killed in Zimbabwe in the past decade. "They are willing to get very small returns economically," says Bradley Martin, "because they do not have any alternative employment."

The solution to the rhino crisis, he says, is not dehorning, but better policing, as in

Kenya and Namibia, where the number of more than 400 black rhinos and 75 white rhinos, and their horns intact. None had been killed by poachers in the past 10 years. In Namibia, where there is little poaching, the population of rhinos is increasing.

In the longer term, the most effective way to protect the rhinos is to knock the bottom out of the market for horn. Its main uses are for traditional medicine in the Far East, particularly for treating fevers in children, and for a cure for malaria in Yemen. Bradley Martin is promoting alternatives to rhino horn

for both, and is cautiously optimistic that his efforts are paying off. Demand in Yemen has fallen from 4 tonnes a year in the late 1970s to less than a tenth of that. Dagger handles are now more likely to be made from the horn of water buffalo.

In the Far East, horn from buffalo and antelope is becoming an acceptable substitute for rhino horn. So, although supplies of horn are dwindling, the price is not increasing. The price of the most valuable horn, from the Asian rhino, has not risen, while that of African horn has fallen.

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