

Conservationists keep rhinos from becoming jambiyas

By Cole Estrada
Yemen Observer

No rhinoceros roams the wilds of Yemen, yet this country and that animal are intimately entwined, in a relationship that has put the rhino at great risk of extinction.

The connection between Yemen and the dwindling herds of rhinoceros can be found hanging from the belts of Yemeni men.

Traditionally, the rhino's horn has been used in Yemen as the preferred material for the handle of the *jambiya*, the ceremonial dagger worn by Yemeni men. Yemen has been importing rhino horn from eastern Africa since the second century, according to the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a Greek monograph describing navigation and trade in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf.

The use of rhino horn in the crafting of *jambiya* handles has decimated their herds, triggering decades of work by conservationists to save them.

Last year was designated "the year of the rhino" by the international wildlife conservation community, in an effort to draw attention to their precarious state.

But one year is not enough to save an animal so at risk. Nairobi-based conservationists Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne continue to work to save the vanishing animal; the two are currently in Yemen, on a trip sponsored by the European Zoo Association, as part of their ongoing efforts to discourage the use of rhino horn in *jambiyas*.

Historically, the *jambiya* was worn in a certain position to indicate the wearer's status. Only the upper classes, including *qadis* and *sayyids* (judges and descendants of the prophet) and the very rich could afford expensive *jambiyas* with rhino horn handles, and imports of the horn were minimal.

Domestic water buffalo horn,

15,000. The White Rhino was faring scarcely better.

From 1969-1977 official statistics show an average of 2878kg of horn imported every year, but the actual figure is likely significantly higher, according to the 1997 TRAFFIC Network Report. While importation of rhino horn was legal during this period, a significant amount was smuggled into the country illicitly to avoid customs charges.

From the average 2878kg of imported horn, *jambiya* artisans could fashion approximately 8750 handles. At the peak of trade in the 1970's, production reached 12,000 handles per year. Fully sixty percent of horn is left over as waste, in the form of shavings and chips, which found a lucrative market in re-export to Asia where it is used in traditional medicines.

South Yemen did not participate in this bonanza in any appreciable way. Under British colonial rule, *jambiyas* were banned, as were imports of rhino horn, from as early as 1901, according to the TRAFFIC report. The socialist government that succeeded the British following the revolution in the south maintained the prohibition, and southern Yemenis have not taken up the *jambiya* since unification in 1990. The consumption of rhino horn was restricted to northern Yemen, with its hub in the heart of Old Sana'a.

Currently, only five species of rhinoceros are left in the world; three species exist in small numbers in Asia, and two, the White Rhino and the Black Rhino, are found in Africa.

No species of rhino is endemic to the Arabian Peninsula, and until recently, they were not easily identifiable by the majority of Yemenis.

Now known as *wahid al-qarn* (the one with the horn) the rhino was formerly better known as *zarafa*, Arabic for giraffe. The source of this confusion is unknown, but it tells much about

lifted to promote its use as an alternative. That same year, an affidavit was issued which every *jambiya* craftsman was compelled to sign, agreeing not to use rhino horn.

However, enforcement of these initiatives remained lax, and it was generally agreed that Yemen lacked the resources and had more pressing economic concerns to effectively ban imports of rhino horn.

Demand remained high through the end of the 1980s, but diminishing stocks in Africa drove the price of horn way up.

The high cost of new horn, currently estimated at around \$1300-1400 per kilo, is due to the extreme scarcity of supply. In 1970, a kilo of rhino horn cost just \$50. By 1980, the price had shot up to \$766 per kilo, as stocks began to dwindle and horn got harder to come by. By 1985 when rhino stocks had been decimated, and imports had been officially banned in Yemen three years earlier, traders in Sana'a were paying \$1000 for a kilo. Demand was still high, but rhino populations had been nearly depleted.

The gulf war in 1991 saw the collapse of the Yemeni economy, when laborers throughout the gulf were expelled or voluntarily returned home, en masse. Yemen supported Iraq in its invasion of Kuwait, and Yemeni laborers were no longer welcome in the gulf. According to official government statistics, per capita income fell from USD 701 to USD 359, from 1990-1998. Ironically, this catastrophe indirectly put the brakes on another impending one. Without the remittances sent from abroad, which were the underpinning of the Yemeni economy, and with the flood of recently repatriated laborers now lack-



Rhinos reproduce only once every three to four years, so it will be a long time before wild populations reach comfortable levels, even with total moratorium on hunting.



in large quantities in Yemen and is a candidate for the high-end *jambiya* market. An agate-handled *jambiya* was presented to President Saleh in 1994, and Saleh in

Martin and Vigne have secured funding from the European Zoo Association to install two large metal billboards at the new Sana'a Zoo promoting wildlife conservation in general, and rhino conservation in particular. Zoos are considered the point of first contact between most people and wild animals, and they can be very effective educational institutions. When people encounter wild animals in the safe environment of the zoo, they often gain a new appreciation for them, say conservationists.

For example, the Arabian leopard was once found throughout the Arabian Peninsula and into the mountainous areas of Jordan; these days, they are exceedingly rare. Estimates indicate that there are approximately 200

survival, according to CITES literature. By joining CITES, Yemen has declared to the international community that it is committed to rhino conservation. As a member country, Yemen is eligible for funding and other resources, such as training and expert consultation to implement national laws restricting the trade in endangered species. Conservation groups had been encouraging Yemen to join CITES since the early 1980s, but internal problems created by the gulf war, the war of unification and the subsequent civil war, kept this issue low on the list of priorities. But conservation efforts were not without support; former Foreign Minister and current advisor to the president Abdul-Karim al-Eryani was a tireless supporter of

majority of *jambiyas*. This situation continued right through the 50s and 60s of the last century. However, in 1970, Yemen's evolving economy disrupted the relatively sustainable level of domestic demand for rhino horn and the subsequent harvest of rhinos in Africa.

The oil economics of the Arabian Gulf states brought unprecedented wealth to the region by the beginning of the 1970s. Yemen's oil reserves had yet to be exploited at that time, and its economy was small and undeveloped; however, Yemenis working abroad throughout the Arabian peninsula were earning considerably more than their counterparts back home, and the money they sent home had a transformative effect on the Yemeni economy. Remittances sent home from laborers in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and the other Gulf states totaled \$1 billion per year through the end of 1991. Yemenis were flush with cash and the Yemeni currency was trading at YR5 to the dollar, giving Yemenis considerable buying power.

During this period, the demand for rhino horn skyrocketed. With plenty of disposable income, more and more Yemenis began to take up habits previously reserved for the privileged elite; chewing qat became common among average citizens, and men were able to indulge their desire for expensive, status-conferring *jambiyas*. In the past, only a minority could afford a *jambiya* with a rhino horn handle, but now they were being produced in large numbers. As a result, populations of wild rhinos in Africa plummeted to meet demand. In 1970 there were an estimated 65,000 black rhinos in Africa; by 1980, there were less than

this animal. In Yemen, the reality of the rhino is that of a commodity and not as a living, breathing animal.

Before 1980 there was virtually no awareness in North Yemen of the conservation issue surrounding the trade in rhino horn. Martin and Vigne have been working to change that. As part of the TRAFFIC Network, a program of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) established to monitor trade in wild plants and animals, this is their 14th trip to Yemen to monitor the state of the rhino horn trade and encourage government efforts to keep it in check.

Around 1980, international conservation NGO's initiated campaigns aimed at exposing North Yemen's staggering consumption of rhino horn, according to the 1997 TRAFFIC report.

In August of 1982, the Ministry of Economy and Trade issued Ministerial Decree No. 193-82, which banned the importation of rhinoceros horn in any form. However, this decree did not see enforcement, and it was generally felt that the decline in rhino numbers was "an African dilemma," according to the report.

It was felt that the African countries that were killing the rhinos and exporting their horns were ultimately responsible for stemming the trade.

Despite this, the campaigns continued, and in 1986, Foreign Minister Abdul-Karim al-Eryani drew up an action plan to implement the trade ban in collaboration with the WWF.

The action plan was implemented the following year. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Economy, Supply and Trade issued Decree No. 29 banning the re-export of rhino horn, and import restrictions on water buffalo horn were

now *jambiyas* in North Yemen evaporated, and the rhinos in Africa avoided near certain extinction.

The rhinos got a reprieve, but their situation was precarious. An upswing in the economy would mean a revived demand for horn. Conservationists continued their work, focusing their campaigns on educating the public about the imminent demise of the rhinos in Africa, and trying to stoke their interest in alternatives.

In November 1990, the American Ambassador and a WWF delegation met with the Grand Mufti of Yemen to discuss the issuance of a fatwa (religious decree) to help change the public's attitude about rhino consumption, an idea first put forth in the action plan of 1986.

In 1992, Grand Mufti Ahmad Mohammed Zabara issued the fatwa stating, "...Islam prohibits the killing of animals, except those slaughtered for their meat, or predatory animals for the protection of mankind. However, killing them to benefit from their horns, skin or other purposes, is prohibited and not allowed. Therefore, killing the rhinoceros for its horn must be prevented, and we must protect their existence and allow them their freedom until their natural death."

The search was on for alternative materials to replace the rhino horn in *jambiya* handles. The majority of handles were now being carved from water buffalo horn, as it is durable and inexpensive. Occasionally one will see a handle made from camel bone, or even camel nail, but these are rare, the latter considered overly difficult to work with by craftsmen.

Agate, a caramel-colored semi-transparent semi-precious stone, is found

to be presented as gifts to foreign dignitaries. However agate has not caught on among craftsmen, as it is difficult to work. Coral, amber and silver have also been used.

Demand for new rhino horn is slim these days. Martin estimates that less than a hundred kilos are entering the country each year. When they can afford it, Yemenis prefer to buy antique rhino horn for their *jambiyas*, which are considered more prestigious and can fetch several thousand dollars apiece. Due to the massive consumption during the 70s and 80s, there is plenty of the stuff available on the market. Martin and Vigne hope that Yemenis will limit their consumption to older horn already found in the country, thereby allowing the populations of wild rhinos in Africa to recuperate.

As for rhino horn and the tourist market, "Foreigners shouldn't buy it at all," says Martin. "Leave the horn for local consumption." The growing numbers of tourists visiting every year means that there are actually more *jambiya* workshops now than at any other time in history, according to Martin. Tourists are buying them as souvenirs in larger and larger numbers, and Martin and Vigne hope that the tourist market will help in increasing the popularity of rhino horn alternatives. Tourists and foreigners working in the country should actively seek out *jambiyas* with handles made from alternative materials and give the seller a good price for it, so that it is profitable and viable, says Martin.

Getting Yemenis to change their attitudes toward wildlife conservation, a fairly new concept in Yemen, is no mean feat.

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YEMEN A. R.
Casistry House
The Grand Mufti
P. O. Box: 2214

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المصدقين الكرامين اسوند برادلي مارتن
ولوسي فييفر حفظكم الله السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته
اشكروا الله ثم شوبكم في باليزاره الى بيتي لعنتوس بشان تنكر كركت لاجل قرن
وشد انتيت بان لايجوز فالاسلام يحرم قتل الحيوانات الا الذبح لما يترك
لا نتمه والبقر والابل والابقاصر والامالاجل لاجل اوقيد اواي غرمتيوك
فوام لايجوز فالاذرام مع قتل الكركدن لاجل قرنه وتجب الحفظ
عليه نميش والارض منه ما تقيس سائر الحيوانات حتى يموت با جلد
الذي قدح منه ميعرض هذا على المسؤل لمن قتله
رقد سبق بواسطه الوزير الولد احمد لتي ن والوزير الدكتور عبيد الكرم
الاربابي محوريك واسلم عليكم الشئاعم للجمهوريه اليمنية
لصبرك




Jambiya craftsmen working with rhino horn in the 1980s; this sight has become increasingly rare in the workshops of Old Sana'a.



The survival of the rhino is due in large part to efforts by African governments to curb illegal poaching. Many countries have "shoot on sight" policies to deter poachers.

of which may be in Yemen where rural villagers generally shoot them on sight, as they are considered livestock raiders. The four leopards in residence at the Sana'a Zoo are arguably the zoo's most popular exhibits, especially with children, according to the International Zoo News.

Currently, the zoo lacks funding and technical expertise, but the Mayor of Sana'a, Yahya al-Shuaibi, under whose authority the zoo operates, is extremely interested in developing the zoo, in cooperation with international experts. As part of their mission in Yemen, Martin and Vigne are assessing the needs of both the Sana'a and Ta'iz zoos, and will coordinate with the London Zoo, which has pledged to send one of its experts to train the staff at the Yemeni zoos in veterinary care, nutrition and other aspects of zoo operation. It is hoped that with proper support, the zoo might one day serve as an important breeding center for Arabian leopard, and other endangered local species, such as the Yemeni ibex.

In 1997, Yemen joined the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international agreement between governments whose aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their

al-Eryani has been our main support in Yemen," said Martin.

The over-consumption of African rhino horn by Yemenis during the 70s and 80s and the weakness of the Yemeni economy has ensured that demand for new horn will remain low. In 2006, there were approximately 3600 Black Rhinos left in Africa—mostly in southern Africa, with which, Yemen has no historical trade ties. The Northern White Rhino has all but disappeared from its range in eastern Africa. There are three or four individuals still living in Garamba National Park in the DRC. Kenya's current population of 225 Southern White Rhinos is the second population imported from southern Africa. The first, a replacement for the indigenous Northern White Rhinos that had been wiped out for their horns, was also wiped out, in short order.

Rhino numbers have stabilized in the past few years, and in some cases are actually starting to rise, according to *Pachyderm*, a journal of the IUCN. But if Yemen's economy were to take a dramatic turn for the better, demand for new horn is sure to rise and the intense pressure on the supply side, given the extremely high value of illicit horn, would engulf the last of Africa's rhinos in much less than the twenty years that brought them to the edge of extinction.