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Rhinoceros Products and the Trade

By Lucy Vigne

Rhino products have been used by man, especially the Chinese, for hundreds of years. The horn and the skin have always been considered valuable commodities. Their uses have included the making of shields, sword handles and ornamental carvings including cups and dishes. One interesting use was as a poison detector: if a drink were suspected to contain poison it could be poured into a rhino horn cup and the poison would effervesce. Even the Popes were supposed to have used these cups for this purpose. In the sixteenth century the most famous Chinese pharmacist Li Shih Chen wrote twelve volumes on the medicinal uses of rhino products. The horn could be burnt and mixed with water to cure snake-bites, vomiting, boils, fever and headaches. His 12,000 medicinal recipes are the basis for many prescriptions today in Asia.

Rhino products are still popular in the traditional medicine shops throughout Asia, sold mostly by Chinese, Korean and Japanese pharmacists, to members of society of all religions and classes. The medicine shops generally remain open from 9 am to 10 pm and much guidance is given to the customer concerning the remedies necessary for an illness. Very often a customer with skin ailments will be prescribed rhino skin for treatment; those suffering from bone disorders will be offered rhino bone products and customers lacking in energy will be given rhino blood to cure them. Even rhino dung, collected from the lower part of the large intestine, can be supplied as a laxative. The horn, however, is the most widely used part of the rhino and is thought to be the most powerful cure of high fever in traditional

medicine. It is therefore the most expensive. The quality of a drug is considered 'temperature related' by the Chinese, hence rhino horn is called 'hot'. The tip of a fresh dark horn from a male rhino is the most preferred, especially if it is Asian. The white rhino is mistakenly believed to have a pale horn because of its name and is not so valuable. In some Asian countries an old fashioned hand-scale is used by the pharmacist to price the horn, but in Japan, specialist companies slice rhino horn by electric machines and wrap it up in polyethylene bags. Three grammes of rhino horn shavings vary in price from \$5 for African horn in Japan up to \$84 for Asian horn in Malaysia. Horn can be prepared as shavings or as a powder and steamed in water. The resulting liquid is drunk primarily as a fever reducing drug and contrary to the western world's belief, only very rarely as an aphrodisiac, and then only by a few Gujaratis.

Concerning the exports of rhino products, rhinos from Africa have been killed and their products exported throughout history, but in East Africa the big kill off of rhinos occurred in the mid-1970s. In the early 1980s this spread to Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) and rhino products are still being exported from NE Africa. Remnant Asian rhino populations exist primarily in India, Nepal, Malaysia and Indonesia. Rhinos are killed illegally and rhino products are exported from all these countries, except Nepal, from estimated populations of 1,650 Indian rhinos and 660 Sumatran rhinos. The Javan rhino, of which there are only about 60 left, is rarely seen. The African rhinos make up over 90% of the trade in international

rhino products, partly because there are five times more African rhinos than Asian.

In the last 15 years a very different use for rhino horn developed. About 50% of Africa's rhino horn is used for making dagger handles in North Yemen. The prestigious daggers called *jambia* are worn constantly by most Yemeni men in the northern part of the country. The handle is magnificently carved and adorned with gold and silver coins. One kilo of rhino horn will make about three dagger handles (black rhinos carry about three kilos of horn). The average price for new rhino horn daggers range from \$435 to \$875. Most young Yemeni men who work in the oil-rich Gulf States can afford rhino horn dagger handles as opposed to the poorer substitutes, cow and water buffalo horn. From 1969 to 1977, according to official North Yemen statistics, 22,645 kilos of rhino horn were imported, representing the death of approximately 8,000 rhinos (almost the same figure as that of legal rhino exports from East Africa at that time).

The North Yemen demand for African rhino horn increased supplies and caused the prices to rocket world-wide. In 1971 a kilo cost \$30 wholesale and in 1976 it reached \$105. By September 1979 the minimum wholesale price was \$675 a kilo.

What laws, if any, now operate to deter the trade in the major importing countries? CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, outlaws all trade in rhinoceros products. Not all countries have joined CITES, thus giving them the freedom to continue importing rhino products legally and even some countries which have joined

CITES are unable to prevent illegal imports.

North Yemen has not joined CITES, but after much pressure initiated by Esmond Bradley Martin and the African Wildlife Foundation, the North Yemen government banned rhino horn imports in 1982. However, their customs officials have little control over illegal imports of anything. Rhino horn is still passed in hand luggage to a few dealers at Sana's airport.

Asian countries used to receive rhino products mostly from Hong Kong, which was the main entrepot for all rhino horn and skin. However, in 1978 the dealers requested the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries not to grant any more import licences for rhino horn, and the ban has been successful. Hong Kong is still allowed to export old stock under licence and in possession before 1979, which it continues to do. China has joined CITES but is nevertheless still a major supplier of rhino-based tablets and tonics which are not covered by regulations. Singapore remains a problem as an entrepot for Indian and Sumatran rhino horn. There are unfortunately still no trade restrictions in Singapore for rhino products.

Other major countries which still allow the imports of rhino products are Taiwan and South Korea. Some also reaches Macao and Malaysia illegally but the risks are high and horn is becoming too expensive for many people to buy. Japan used to be a

major importer of rhino horn but it joined CITES in 1980 and all importation has now stopped.

What are the prospects for the future? The retail prices in the 1980s are no longer sharply rising. There are limits to what people will pay. The demand in Asia is unlikely to start increasing again because Hong Kong and Japan, which were the largest importers of rhino horn, have now banned it and enforced the law. Hong Kong dealers are putting substitutes on the market. Saiga antelope horn is mostly replacing the rhino horn as a fever reducing drug since it is an acceptable substitute and much cheaper. (One kilo of saiga horn in Kuala Lumpur costs retail \$120 whereas African rhino horn costs retail \$10,732 and Asian rhino horn \$17,280, although amounts sold to customers rarely exceed three grammes). Also customers have become suspicious of being sold fake rhino horn as they are becoming aware, through world-wide publicity, of the rhino decline and believe little genuine rhino horn is available. The world market for rhino horn has fallen from about eight tonnes annually between 1972 and 1978 to less than half this per year from 1979 to the present. This is because the rhinos in Africa were halved in the 1970s and southern Africa has now banned its sales of rhino horn. However, the stopping of the trade is a long way off.

Therefore, incentives to continue poaching from the approximate 12,800 rhinos left in Africa and the 2,400 rhinos left in Asia are still great. It is imperative that Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan bring in a law prohibiting all trade in rhino products. Each of these countries has the infrastructure to enforce a ban. Finally, North Yemen's incessant smuggling of rhino horn into the country must be curtailed; this is going to be the most difficult single issue facing rhino conservation in the world.

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