

Survey of Rhino Horn on Sale in Singapore

A survey was recently carried out in Singapore by two local graduate students in order to discover the extent of the availability of rhino horn in medicine shops, and to try and establish the volume of trade in this product. The report of this survey, supplied to us by the CITES Secretariat, is summarised below.

METHODS

The yellow pages of the Singapore telephone directory have ninety entries under the heading "Medicines-Patent and Proprietary-Retail", and it is under this heading that most of the local shops were selected. When these shops were visited it was often found that others were nearby. To save travelling time and to increase the survey sample size, these shops were also visited. In total, thirty shops were sampled for the survey.

The students, who could speak a variety of dialects, approached shop owners on the pretext of undertaking an assignment as part of their studies. Using a questionnaire, they asked various questions concerning the trade in rhino horn. Several of the questions were not relevant to the aims of the survey but were included as 'blinds' to make the charade more convincing.

RESULTS

Of the thirty shops approached, only one had rhino horn on sale at the time and the owner of another shop said he had some rhino horn in stock, from old business. Twenty-two of the shop owners claimed to have no knowledge of the trade and could not, or would not, answer any further questions. Eight shops had previously dealt in rhino horn and were willing to answer questions relating to the trade.

SUMMARY OF ANSWERS

The quoted costs for rhinoceros horn ranged from S\$50 (US\$49.8) per kg to \$8000 a tahl (= 1.33oz (c. 38g)); several prices quoted were in the S\$700-3000 a tahl range. The extremely low price of S\$50 was quoted for African horn by a shop owner who also said that Indonesian rhino horn was worth \$3000 a tahl; and another confirmed that African horn was cheaper, although adding that the price range is narrower than it used to be.

All but one of the eight respondents recognised different qualities of horn. One claimed there were two types: white from Manchuria and black from Sarawak. Another said that black horn came from Indonesia. According to one dealer, inferior quality horn always has skin sticking to it.

All respondents named Asian or South-east Asian countries and states (Borneo, India, Indonesia, Java, Malaysia, Sarawak) as the origin of horn in trade and four out of seven also identified Africa.

One shopkeeper said that his supply was smuggled by sailors, and two other answers specified either sailors or smugglers as the suppliers.

Four respondents recognised that no official permit was needed to obtain rhino horn in Singapore, although one of the four confirmed that he knew it was illegal to deal in rhino horn, adding that only old stock was available.

Chinese people were identified by five shop owners as the major consumers of horn.

Only one respondent recognised the aphrodisiac reputation of the horn, and he stated that it was sold to Arabs for this purpose. All eight respondents claimed it was used mainly for its 'cooling' (fever-reducing) effects, although one stated that antlers were better for this purpose.

Only three respondents could quote any sales rates and none of these seemed to have sold any in recent years. According to one dealer, although ten to twenty pairs were sold a year, a few years ago, there was much greater demand ten years ago. The other shops had reported '1-2 sales a year' and 'one piece every 4-5 years'.

All respondents were aware of the existence of fake rhino horns and knew how to recognize it, unless it had been ground.

DISCUSSION

The two students who conducted this survey had recently graduated from university and held good honours degrees in a biological subject. They were intelligent and looked authentic in their roles. There is no reason to assume that their appearance or behaviour in any way influenced the answers given by traders and this is an important advantage of having such surveys carried out by local people. None of the shopkeepers seemed suspicious or to be hiding information and only two refused outright to enter into any discussion. Most of the twenty-two shops which did not yield any useful information seemed genuinely to be ignorant of the trade.

The wide range of quoted profit margins would seem to indicate a very poor knowledge of the trade or at least of the recent trade. Answers varied from five to fifty per cent. Whilst the latter figure is probably nearer the truth, only three respondents gave it, including the two who had horn in stock. It could also be that the other replies were deliberately misleading since profit margins are a particularly sensitive area for those in business.

It is apparent from the results that the level of rhino horn trade in Singapore is very low indeed. This is indicated not only from the answer to a question regarding the amount of rhino horn sold each week/month/year, but also from the disparity in the answers to other questions (e.g. costs), which suggest that the traders have only scant, or outdated knowledge of the market.

The results of this survey are in accordance with the observations of Mr K Scriven of WWF-Malaysia. Formerly he conducted business with Chinese medicine shops in Malaysia and Singapore and took an interest in items for sale. Whilst there were various other animal parts for sale, he concluded that rhino horn was not widely offered.

The general opinion is that rhino horn is a much more popular item in shops in Hong Kong. It has been suggested that this is because the Hong Kong Chinese are much more traditional than the emigrant population which make up the South-east Asian Chinese community. It is difficult to judge the validity of this suggestion. It is probable that, since the primary use of rhino horn is as a fever-reducing drug, and there are cheaper, effective alternatives available, these are used instead.



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