

## The Horns of a Dilemma: Dealing with Growing Asian Demand for Rhino Horn From the International Rhino Foundation, June 2011

This week, TIME magazine broke a story about a disturbing issue that has been on our radar for some time. Since 2006, Chinese interests have imported nearly 150 South African white rhinos, with the apparent intention of moving forward with a major rhino horn farming initiative.

The parent company of this initiative, the Manchuria-based Hawk Group, an arms manufacturer with a subsidiary which works in traditional Chinese medicine, is planning to import at least 40 more rhinos this year and hopes to expand its ownership to at least 200 animals within five years.

We first got wind of this alarming trend at the African Rhino Specialist Group meetings in South Africa in March – at that time, more than 70 additional permits were awaiting approval at the South African CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) office.

According to TRAFFIC, rhino horn trade patterns in Asia have shifted over time. In the 1970s-1990s, rhino horn trade centered in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China.

But since 2003, Vietnam has rapidly emerged as the leading destination for illicit trade in rhino horn. Several years ago, a rumor started that a high-level government official was cured of cancer by using rhino-horn powder.

Although this individual has yet to be identified, or the story verified, the idea intrigued the Vietnamese, particularly wealthy individuals. Studies by pharmaceutical company Hoffmann-La Roche and the Zoological Society of London have reported no medicinal value in rhino horn. (A person might as well chew their fingernails, which also are made of keratin.) But unfortunately, even though there is no traditional Chinese medicine practice linking rhino horn and cancer treatment, and China's official traditional-medicine authority publicly refuted the horn's curative powers, many Asians have come to believe the rumor.

Vietnam's Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, has been seriously implicated in illegal trade in rhino horn on a number of occasions. The economic attaché, Khanh Toan Nguyen, was arrested in April 2006 and the First Secretary, Vu Moc Anh, was filmed purchasing rhino horn outside the Vietnam Embassy in September

2008. And last year, just before the World Cup, three Vietnamese were arrested at the Johannesburg airport with 24 pieces of horn.

The "South Africa/Vietnam Connection" was highlighted in the TRAFFIC/IUCN report to the CITES Conference of the Parties 15, which IRF attended last year in Qatar. In 1993, international trade in rhino horn was banned by the Convention, to which China and Vietnam are signatories along with 173 other nations.

All the while, Asian criminals also have been posing as big-game hunters, applying for costly licenses to legally shoot South African rhinos. Added to the rhino farming scheme, TIME quotes John Sellar, head of enforcement for the CITES Secretariat, who says that these elements "amount to "the most sophisticated organized crime that the convention has had to face in its history."

Wildlife trade economics are complicated. The debate on legalizing rhino horn trade is looming. The IRF has not yet taken a position about legalizing rhino horn trade.

There are still a lot of information gaps which need to be filled before we do so: What are the current rhino horn trade dynamics? What are the legal incentives for rhino horn production? What happens if the demand in Asia rises if legal trade is allowed? Will farmed rhino horn be able to meet the demand or will the rampant killing of African rhinos continue?

Consumer countries have signed on to CITES and have banned trade, but what are the ramifications if a legal market is opened up? How would private owners of rhinos, especially in South Africa, be regulated with respect to horn harvest? How would the risk of the corrupt elite (e.g., in African countries) taking control of rhino resources be managed if legal trade is allowed? And if trade is legalized, what can we do to protect rhino populations (short-term) until and during the time controlled trade (long-term) is implemented?

The TIME article notes that in 2008, a legal auction of 119 tons of ivory didn't halt elephant poaching in Africa; in fact, some believe the influx of tusks catalyzed further slaughter of elephants as more people developed a taste for ivory.

Our number one priority is ensuring the long-term

survival of rhino populations in the wild, and we carry out that work through protection and public awareness. But, conserving rhinos is not always straightforward. I hope you'll take the time to read the

TIME article <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2075283,00.html> and think about the rhino horn trade and farming issues.

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**WORLD RHINO DAY**

*rhino horn is NOT medicine*

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