

DEHORNING RHINO: WELFARE, ETHICS AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

KAREN TRENDLER – WORKING WILD

Dehorning and legalising the trade in rhino horn are being considered as possible deterrents to poaching. The issues are complex. In preparation for this presentation, it became increasingly apparent that there is inadequate data. More research and a better understanding of all the components are necessary to make ethical, informed and responsible decisions (and ensure that we do the right thing, in the right way for the right reasons).

Rhino horn is a tubular, non-bony hair-like structure, consisting of keratin, calcium and melanin; growing continuously throughout the life of the rhino and may be broken off during normal activities. The horn, which is non-living tissue, can be cut off whilst the animal is chemically immobilised. There are risks associated with anaesthesia and immobilising a large animal. But if a 'rhino experienced' wildlife vet, using the correct drugs, procedures and precautions, carries out the dehorning procedure these risks can be reduced. If this is done incorrectly it can cause infection, maggot infestation, cavitations in the horn and re-growth deformities.

Rhinos use their horns for self-, calf-, and territorial defence, foraging, digging and displays. The effects of dehorning on behaviour and thus welfare and survivability have not been well researched, with positive, negative and neutral effects reported. The differences in impacts on behaviour appear to be related to differences in vegetation density, habitat, predator type and density, rhino population dynamics, status, sex, age and whether it is an extensive or intensive management situation.

Dehorning rhino as a deterrent to poaching has limitations. A stub of horn remains and re-grows and sufficient horn remains to have 'poaching' value. Revenge killing and killing to reduce 'need to track' have been reported on dehorned rhino. Dehorning transfers but does not eliminate security risk. Dehorning in some areas may push poaching into areas where rhino are not dehorned. The South African National Parks (SANParks), EKZNP and North West Parks and Tourism Board (NWP) have decided not to dehorn for economic, logistical and tourism considerations. Dehorning in other areas may put additional pressure on these populations. Dehorning should be considered as only a single tool and must be combined with increased security and management options.

Rhino horn is primarily used in traditional medicine in East Asia. Rhino horn has been proven to have no medicinal properties. The demand has increased as a result of economic growth, 'marketing' and easier access.

The impacts of legalising trade are unknown and may have negative impacts for rhino conservation, putting more vulnerable Asian rhino populations at risk. Indications from research on other high value wildlife products indicate that legalising trade would not stop the black market illegal trade.

Rhino horn is associated with organised crime (drugs, weapons, human trafficking and wildlife). The South African wildlife industry's reputation, especially with industry involvement and our current status with regards to crime and corruption is poor. The proposal for trade should be carefully considered in view of the circumstances, unknowns, risks, ethical issues and would benefit only a few.

From an ethical perspective "There is never the right way to do the wrong thing"