

DRIVERS OF THE TRADE IN RHINO HORN

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In the last year South Africa lost 333 rhinos compared to 133 poached in 2009. Indeed, more rhino were poached in 2010 than the cumulative total of the past decade. This catastrophe begs the question: What are the drivers of the trade in rhino horn?

Rhino horn is composed mostly of keratin protein, which is also the major component of any hair, fingernails, cockatoo bills, turtle beaks and animal's hooves. The other ingredients are calcium and melanin. A person therefore gains the same medicinal value from rhino horn as from biting their nails.

It has long been believed that the Yemeni market was the most significant for illegal trade, however a 2009 IUCN and the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network (TRAFFIC) report (www.cites.org/common/com/SC/58?E58i-10.pdf) shows that a large percentage of horn is now destined mainly to the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) markets in China, Thailand and Vietnam, but is also found in TCM stores throughout the region. It is mainly used to cure fever and the effects of strokes. In an official Vietnamese Government website, the use of rhino horn is being touted as a cure for cancer. Although this has nothing to do with the government or its policy, there is no attempt to decry or disparage this theory. Research has been done to give truth to the age old claims that a natural mixture of keratin, calcium and melanin can reduce fever. Research conducted by the Chinese University in Hong Kong found that large doses of rhino horn could slightly lower fever in rats, but so does extracts from the horn of Saiga antelope and Water Buffalo. The problem is that the doses dispensed by TCM are only a fraction of those used in the experiments. The use of rhino horn in Yemen is mainly for ceremonial and decorative purposes. Although traditional Jambiya handles are made from rhino horn, today the handles are made from water buffalo horn, camel nails or even plastic.

Today gold is trading at approximately \$1,410.96 an ounce (\pm \$49,665.80 / kg) whereas a kilogram of rhino horn hits the black market in Asia at between \$50,000 and \$60,000 a kilogram.

Money and greed, not medicine or daggers are the real drivers behind the trade in rhino horn. More crock cures and false claims will be made in the name of rhino horn in an attempt to drive up demand. A higher demand will lead to an increase in the value of the product. The higher the value, the bigger the risk a poacher will be willing to take.

The law in South Africa should be made equal. The province that has suffered the biggest loss of rhino (57) is the North West Province and is also the only province with a fine that is half that of the other provinces at US\$14,000, which range from \$28,000 to \$35,000. The provincial fines are not in line with the fines prescribed in terms of the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act, which currently stand at US\$1, 4 million.

It is the author's belief that the trade in rhino horn should be banned. Government should, under strict criteria, be permitted to sell the horn from deceased or surplus animals in a transparent and strictly monitored process, similar to the Kimberley process for the sale of diamonds. The author also believes that, despite objections from provinces that might be tourist-asset poor, government must make a conscious decision to be either a green destination with a managed wildlife population that will satisfy environmental organisations and drive tourism to the country, or be a hunting friendly destination, which will attract fewer tourists. Consumers in the rest of the world are very aware of what type of destination South Africa professes to be and they do follow the hunting trade show circuit.