

My name is John Hume and my passion and mission in life is to save the rhino species from extinction, which I believe it is currently inexorably heading towards. I am the largest private rhino farmer in South Africa and my experience with rhino and deep concern for their plight are motives for my letter to you. I would like to rally the support of intelligent and sympathetic influentials who understand that South Africa's "Big 5" will soon be the "Big 4" if we do not come to the aid of the rhino. Rhinos are vulnerable and totally dependent on wise men for their survival.

We have to find innovative ways to increase the number of rhinos and find people who want to breed them. My belief is that unless we reverse the current law of zero trade in rhino horn we will not reverse the current trend.

Rational use of wildlife is indispensable to wildlife conservation. Gone forever is the era of total state sponsorship. One of the pioneers of wildlife management, Aldo Leopold, in his 1933 book "Game Management" defined it as "the art of making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game for recreational use. Modern science and technology could be used to restore and improve wildlife habitat and thus produce abundant "crops" of ducks, deer, and other valued wild animals."

We all know that rhinos are seriously threatened with extinction. They are being slaughtered for their horns which are sold to Asian consumers. The use of horn in Traditional Chinese Medicine is cultural and dates back thousands of years. Whether rhino horn can be scientifically proven to work as medicine is most likely irrelevant to those who use it. A large portion of the world's human population uses healing systems other than the science-based Western pharmaceutical approach and those people believe that they have the right to do so. Ironically, there is no need to kill one single rhino for the consumers of horn as rhino horn is a renewable resource that can be easily harvested and the consumers do not need a trophy.

At present, we have three sections of our community, who are slaughtering our rhino:

1. The owner of the rhino who gets a legal permit to kill the rhino and thus the buyer gets a permit to export the horn legally.
2. The owner of the rhino who does not wish to be bothered with all the red tape accompanying the application for a permit to kill. He merely contracts with an illegal dealer, they shoot the rhino, bury the carcass, the owner pockets the monies, no vat, no income tax and we never hear of this sad incident again.

These two sections kill mainly, but not only, male animals. It is unfortunate that some females are worth more dead than alive.

3. The third section being the poachers who are indiscriminately and brutally killing lactating mothers or pregnant females, males, youngsters and any other unfortunate rhino who wanders into their sights. Unfortunately this is the section that is growing the fastest. Recently, a pregnant rhino was poached in the Kruger National Park – she was cut open, the foetus removed and the tiny little stump of a horn was hacked off the unborn rhino.

If the trade in rhino horn was legalized the first two sections above would disappear immediately, because which owner of a rhino would kill the hen that lays the golden egg? I say this because a male rhino will grow approximately 1 kilo of horn per year and a female rhino approximately 600 grams per year and they live to the age of 35-40 years. During this time, horn can be removed periodically with almost no risk of injury to the animal.

We would certainly not be able to immediately stop the third section - being the poachers - but consider a future where horn would be legally available to Eastern buyers. It is not currently available unless they go through the rigmarole of killing the rhino legally. This coupled with the fact that the farmers would have finance and incentive to protect their rhino will make the legal buying of horns far more attractive to the people that require the horn than dealing with the poachers. I believe that this will turn the tide and in due course we would win the war against the poaching.

The rhino and CITES

In 1977 rhinoceroses were listed in Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), thereby banning all international commercial trade except in exceptional circumstances and in pre-Convention specimens. Since 1994 the South African population of white rhinos was down-listed to Appendix 2 and this allowed trade in live animals and trophy hunting.

The rhino trophy hunting market has encouraged increased private sector investment in live rhino production and expansion of habitat in the last twenty years. Today, white rhino numbers in South Africa stand at some 19000, up from some 6000 in 1993 with 25% of these in private hands. However, this Southern African success story remains under threat because of the world's refusal to recognize a legitimate demand for rhino horn. It is unfortunate that South Africa's Appendix 2 down-listing for white rhinos did not extend to rhino horn.

A trade ban does not end trade. Making it illegal simply raises the risks, and therefore costs of trading. In theory, if all consumers are law-abiding, a trade ban should reduce demand. In practice consumers are not always law-abiding. If demand for a product persists after a trade ban, the black market supply will continue if the price is right. Many of the people involved in the trade are simply responding to market signals. The problem with price-inelastic demand is that when you restrict supply, the illegal trade actually becomes more profitable, not less.

Recent events have proven that the CITES approach is a dismal failure. The demand for rhino horn is stronger than ever and driving a new wave of intense poaching. The illegal trade is driven by the high price for rhino horn. The price is unnecessarily high because a world-wide trade ban has made rhino horn artificially scarce. The irony is that as CITES measures are progressively implemented and tightened, the trade becomes ever harder to monitor or control, which leads to calls for even tighter restrictions. The end result could be the complete closure of all legal markets (including trophy hunting), thereby severely reducing the incentives for private investment in rhino conservation, with disastrous consequences for rhinos.

Unfortunately the only way this law can be changed is by majority vote on the legalization of the trade in rhino horn at a "Conference of the Parties" held by CITES every four years. The ban on the trade in rhino horn has been a dismal failure and during its existence we have probably had 100 000 rhinos poached in Africa. It is an unfortunate part of world politics that this will not make CITES pro-active in changing this legislation. The next COP is in Bangkok in March 2013, but an enormous amount of preparation for this is necessary and I'm afraid the South African government is simply not doing it. Thus the slaughtering will continue unless we can do something about it.

The rhino horn trade ban no longer makes either economic or conservation sense. The natural mortality rate of rhinos alone yields as much horn as has been poached to supply the market in recent years. Furthermore, rhino horn is a renewable resource that can easily be harvested without killing rhinos. African conservation agencies and private farmers already hold between 15 to 30 years' supply of rhino horn (at the current rate of black market supply). These stockpiles are worth millions of dollars - money that could be usefully spent on rhino conservation - but the ban will not allow them to be sold to raise this money. The best way to ensure the rhino's future is to make live rhino as economically valuable as possible.

CITES presents a significant challenge to the role of the private sector in the wildlife industry. To repeal the CITES trade ban on rhino horn would be a time-consuming process and necessitate a serious lobbying effort to win the necessary country votes. We seem to forget that between 1960 and 1990 approximately 100 000 rhino were poached on the African continent and we only have 20 000 left. Time is a precious commodity in the war against rhino extinction.

The rhino and the economy

In the year 1800 about 1 million rhinos lived on earth. Today less than 25 000 survive where more than 20 000 are white rhinos. Why has the southern white rhino fared better than the other species?

Economics provides the answer!

White rhino conservation efforts were driven by South Africa, which has developed a vibrant market economy for wildlife within the last 50 years. This economy rests on three pillars:

1. Recognizing and actively developing legal markets for things that people value about rhinos, such as tourist viewing and trophy hunting.
2. Allowing private landowners to legally own rhinos, thereby giving them strong direct incentives to manage them responsibly.
3. Enabling all landowners (private, communal or public) to retain the money they earn from selling.

The financial incentives which drew private wildlife ranches into owning rhino have all but disappeared. Rhino poaching is increasing daily. It is life-threatening to have anything that resembles a rhino on your property. The horn is so valuable that poachers will stop at nothing to obtain it. The regulatory authorities have restricted the industry so much and so ineffectively that only once your paperwork weighs as much as your rhino are you able to do anything with them and security for your rhino now costs more than they are worth - the end result being that most rhino owners want to get rid of their animals and would-be rhino owners are far better off investing money in alternative species which they are able to utilize.

The wildlife ranching sector, were it given the opportunity to prosper through utilization - both consumptive and non-consumptive - is the one and only buffer which we have which will ensure the future survival of our rhino population. The age-old cliché "if it pays, it stays" is going to be particularly pertinent to rhino conservation decision-makers in the very near future. It seems bizarre that private rhino owners who have invested millions of rand on game farming land and animals seem to be left out of the decision-making loop.

I believe that emergent black farmers and communities could become very viable rhino farmers with the help of the international communities that could purchase the rhino on their behalf from our game reserves, which are fully stocked. We could teach them how to farm with rhino and the fact that they would have the hen that lays the golden egg, would encourage them to protect their rhinos with their lives.

Currently the commercial farmer, any emergent black farmers or communities are completely disincentivised from farming with rhino even to the extent where current owners of rhino only want to get rid of them. Rhino farmers ask the question as to why a sheep farmer can shear his sheep and legally sell the wool without killing the sheep, a peach farmer can grow his trees and pick the fruit without being forced to chop the tree down, but a rhino farmer must kill his animal to sell the horn. This thought disheartens him so much that he wants to get rid of his rhino. It is an unfortunate fact that most rhinos are worth more dead than alive. The legalization of the trade in rhino horn would immediately change all of this and we would be encouraging farmers to farm with rhino and empowering them financially to protect their existing rhino from the poachers.

The private sector can and must unite to play a leading role in this initiative. What is important is that farmers can help to conserve the rhinos. The government should be encouraging the emergent black farmers and the communities to get involved in rhino farming to increase the numbers and range of rhino in Africa. Legalization of the trade in rhino horn would enable farmers to sustainably produce and harvest rhino horn without killing the rhino when it would bring a much-needed income for communities and commercial farmers.

In summary

- 🐘 Rhino horn is a renewable resource.
- 🐘 The *status quo* of the CITES stance on the trade in rhino horn is clearly not working with regards to protecting the rhino.
- 🐘 Dehorning is a painless, fast procedure with the only risk to the animal being the use of anaesthetics.
- 🐘 With a legal trade in rhino horn, rhino farming will play an instrumental role in alleviating poverty in Southern Africa – one of the biggest threats to rhino populations and to global biodiversity in general.
- 🐘 With a legal trade in rhino horn, rhino farming will create more habitats for rhino, as well as many other threatened wildlife species – habitat destruction is the biggest threat to all wildlife on the planet.
- 🐘 Studies show that rhino breed very well on private farms so encouraging their farming will undoubtedly alter their threatened status.
- 🐘 Emergent black farmers and rural communities can be assisted and taught to farm rhino, leading to community-based wildlife management and addressing the issue of poverty amongst these communities.
- 🐘 Programs can be developed to assist and educate emergent rhino farmers, where, with international funding and guidelines, a holistic approach to rhino farming throughout Africa can be implemented.
- 🐘 As the rhino population increases, these emergent farmers can be assisted through donations of rhino from National Parks or private farmers with surplus numbers of rhino.

Links to success stories

- Vicuña saved from the brink of extinction – a parallel to the rhino
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2074156,00.html>
<http://www.bonnydoonalpacas.org/vicunart.html>
<http://www.perc.org/articles/article174.php>
<http://www.thecommonsjournal.org/index.php/ijc/article/view/139/89>
- Black-footed ferret saved through captive breeding programme
<http://www.blackfootedferret.org/captive-breeding>
- Whooping crane recovery through innovative ideas and human endeavours
<http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Wildlife-Library/Birds/Whooping-Crane.aspx>