

Trade Raider

American geographer Esmond Bradley Martin has tracked and fought the rhino horn trade for more than 12 years, independently and for WWF International. He almost single-handedly stopped the rhino horn industry in Yemen and has been instrumental in helping shape rhino horn legislation in WWF's four target countries: China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.

WWF: How did you get involved in the rhino horn trade?

EBM: In 1979 WWF funded my first trip to Southeast Asia to look at, for the first time, where the rhino horn was going, who was buying it, how it was being used, what the prices were, etc. From that single study myths were smashed from the western world! One was that the Chinese were the main consumers of rhino horn—which they weren't. The second was that most rhino horn is used for sex purposes. This is simply not true. Less than one percent is used for sex purposes, and only by Indians.

In Asia almost every part of the rhino is used: the horn is essentially used for lowering fever, the skin is used against human skin diseases, the nail is poor man's rhino horn, the bone is used for bone disorders and burnt on a pole to get insects out of people's houses, the blood is used as a tonic and for women who are suffering from menstrual problems etc.

We also discovered there is a huge price difference between the African and the Asian horn. Today for instance, the Taiwanese are importing African horn at \$2,000 a kilo while for greater one-horned rhino horn, importers

are paying \$20,000 a kilo or more. When you ask the Asians why the Asian horn is so much more valuable, they say that the horns are smaller and more concentrated—therefore a more powerful drug. This is an extremely important point—because if we had the prices in Africa that there is for Asian horn, there would be essentially no rhinos left.



WWF/M.Gunther/BIOS

Esmond Bradley Martin

WWF: What trends have you noticed in the rhino horn trade?

EBM: Since the end of 1986, the wholesale prices for both African and Asian horn have gone up. From 1987 to 1990, South Africa became a major entrepôt for African horn from surrounding countries. Fortunately in the last year or so, WWF, TRAFFIC, and

other organizations put a lot of work and publicity into closing the South African connection. The South Africans set up a special unit to look into rhino horn and ivory trade and it's been very effective. For instance in September last year, they intercepted some Taiwanese who had 114 horns!

As far as Yemen is concerned, in the seventies they were importing 40 percent of all the rhino horn in the world. Now they are importing hardly any. There are three reasons for that: the Yemeni government has

clamped down on the trade, they are now making a lot of yellowish brown plastic handles as substitutes, and Yemen has suffered an economic recession and can't compete with the Taiwanese prices.

WWF: *How much risk is involved in the work you do?*

EBM: A lot of risk, because I've been personally responsible for closing down whole industries based on rhino product trade. I'm

WWF: *What inspires you in your work? What keeps you going?*

EBM: The challenge of it! What I enjoy most is learning new information. For instance, in the ivory trade, almost no westerner knew that 55% of the ivory going into Japan was used to make name seals, called *inkan*, and that every adult over 18 has to have one of these. Nobody knew that rhino horn was used for lowering fevers, except the Chinese. They wrote about it, but of course in Chinese.



Horns of plenty: Martin in the Nairobi Ivory Room.

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unable to work in South Korea now because I was responsible for the legislation to close down their trade. The last time I was there, which was several years ago, my life was threatened.

I have to deal with traders—the people who buy and sell—and poachers. You might say, “well, these people are criminal types.” But there is no other way of getting the information. It can be very dangerous.

So what I like is getting into an area that nobody has worked in, break a few myths and write it up in scientific journals and in popular form for a publication like *National Geographic*.

Also from a conservation point of view, we have major success stories! Japan is one of the greatest success stories. Japan was importing over 800 kilos of horn a year in the seventies. Then it joined CITES in 1980.

Since then, we haven't had any examples of significant amounts of rhino horn being smuggled into Japan. TRAFFIC's follow-up work in Japan has made all the difference.

I've learned that an important point in stopping the rhino horn trade is that the average shop in Southeast Asia that stocks rhino horn probably handles 100 to 200 other

horn—nobody is solely working with rhino horn.

But the world press is always interested in the disaster stories. I had no problem selling the story that appeared last year, that Indian rhinos were being electrocuted—everybody wants to read about that type of thing. But if you put it in perspective, the Indian rhino population has increased every single year over the last 20 years.

The point is that there are places and areas in the world where things have improved, but we must keep up the pressure. Otherwise it could easily go the other way. What I fear most is that as less and less rhino horn comes onto the market the prices will become monstrously high. That will go right back to the middleman who will then give a greater price to the people to poach. So that's what we have to be careful about.

We have to keep pushing for the closing of these markets and keep pushing for the use of substitutes. That's so important! In Yemen, plastics started being used as substitutes about five years ago in a major way. In Eastern Asia, they've been using antelope, cow, and water buffalo horn, herbs, and other things as substitutes.



Martin and a black rhino.

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commodities. So, if they move out of rhino horn, not a single person will become unemployed—nobody will lose their livelihood. In fact, they can make a much higher return on a cheaper commodity like cow horn—it has a much higher profit margin. It's very different from the ivory trade where thousands of carvers have gone out of business and lost their livelihoods. Not with the rhino

WWF: *How do you see your future work developing?*

EBM: I would like to continue until most countries have implemented rational conservation plans so their rhino populations are increasing. It's an exciting time right now because we have success stories, and I'd like to see them expanded to other places. I'm an optimist.