

Medicinal Myth?

The Truth Behind the Rhino Horn Debate

Westerners have long been sceptical about the Asian belief in the healing powers of rhino horn. Most often used as an ingredient in fever-reducing medicines in China, rhino horn is also taken as treatment against flu, convulsions, epilepsy, and other ailments. The idea that Chinese covet rhino horn as an aphrodisiac is a Western fabrication.

Outside China, other rhino parts, such as the penis, skin, and blood are sometimes taken against such things as impotence, skin diseases, and menstrual problems.

The Divine Plowman's Herbal, a book of Chinese medicines written between 200 BC and 200 AD, lists rhinoceros horn as a cure for intoxications and delirium. The reputation of rhino horn as an important medicine has remained intact for 2,000 years.



In a traditional Chinese medicine factory.

As recently as 1986, a Chinese doctor claimed rhino horn helped AIDS patients with fever and blood heat symptoms.

Last year, three doctors from the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Department of

Biology and Chinese Medicinal Material Research Centre, partially funded by WWF-Hong Kong, tested rhinoceros horn for antipyretic, or fever-reducing, effects. The results? When fever-induced rats were in-

Human Uses of Rhino Products

Horn: primarily to treat fever and nose bleeds. Also used for convulsions, flu, epilepsy, poisoning, restlessness, delirium, boils, abscesses

Skin: skin diseases

Penis: aphrodisiac

Nails: budget substitute for horn

Bone: bone disorders, burned as insect repellent

Blood: tonic, menstrual problems

Urine: asthma, throat ailments

jected with large doses of a solution containing rhino horn, their temperatures dropped. In other words, as far as fevers are concerned, rhino horn works.

The results were a surprise. Conservationists generally had previously accepted the European firm Hoffman-LaRoche's 1982 test results that said rhino horn was not an effective fever-reducing agent.

However, the Hong Kong team, led by Dr. Paul Pui-hay But, also tested the horn of saiga antelope with the same results. Water buffalo and cattle horn were also found to reduce fever, but much higher doses were needed. The study proves that rhino horn is not an indispensable ingredient in Chinese medicines. Dr. But's results are important in establishing the use of rhino horn alternatives. WWF-Hong Kong plans on translating the report into such languages as Chinese and Korean.

The effectiveness of rhino horn combatting other illnesses such as epilepsy, flu, or poisoning remains to be seen.