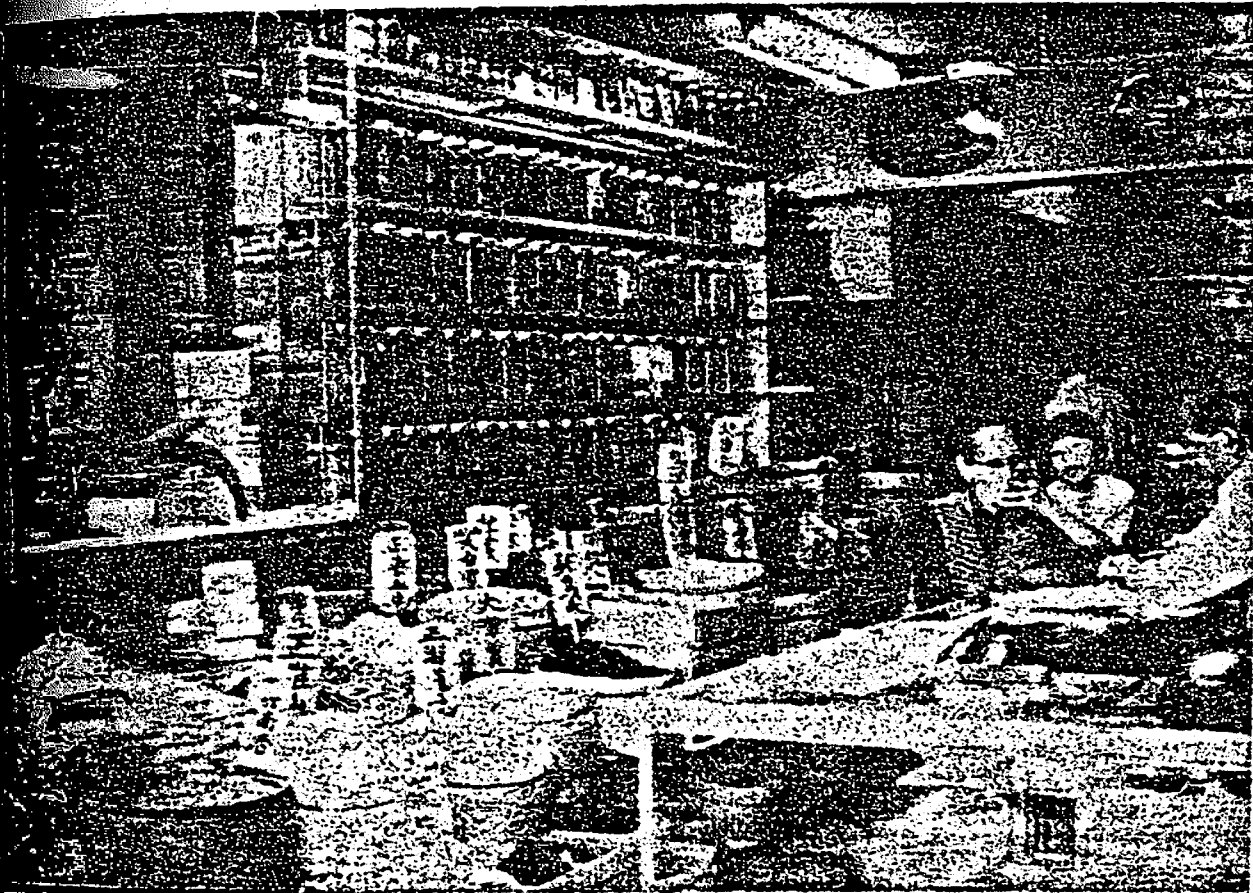


YEMENI RHINO HORN TRADE CONTINUES DESPITE BAN

(An Interview by Peter Jackson with Dr. Esmond Bradley-Martin)



Chinese Medicine Shop, Hong Kong

Photo: WWF/Peter Jackson

In November 1982, the Government of North Yemen imposed a ban on the import of rhino horn, which was being used to manufacture prestige dagger handles. Despite the ban, however, rhino horn is still being illegally imported into North Yemen, according to Dr Esmond Bradley Martin, who has made extensive surveys of the use of the horn all over the world. In an interview with Peter Jackson, Dr Bradley Martin describes proposals to curb the rhino horn trade in North Yemen and in countries of the Far East.

Q: Esmond, you have carried out considerable research all over the world on the problem of the trade in rhinoceros products, which is a serious threat to the rhino. Is it a trade that you think can be stopped?

EBM: I think it can be severely restricted, if not altogether stopped. Efforts that have been made to stop the trade in places like Hong Kong and Japan have been successful, and I think the most important thing to do now is

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try to stop the trade in North Yemen, which is continuing despite the recent ban by the Yemeni government.

Why does North Yemen take rhino horn?

North Yemen buys rhino horn because the Arab men there consider daggers that have rhino horn handles to be the most attractive of all. During the mid-1970s, and maybe even today, North Yemen could take about 40% of all the rhino horn on the market.

Arabs in other countries also want rhino horn?

There is no other Arab country that uses rhino horn for dagger handles today.

Do you think it is possible to get the North Yemenis to switch from rhino horn to something else for their dagger handles?

We must remember that approximately two-thirds of the dagger handles made today in North Yemen are out of cow horn and wood - even with the very appreciably greater income that most North Yemenis now enjoy, few can afford rhino horn handles on their daggers.

But rhino horn has a special prestige for them.

Exactly. But it's not the only thing that gives prestige to daggers in North Yemen. Very wealthy people like to have gold and silver coins superimposed on the rhino horn, which makes their daggers even more valuable. I think we're going to have to try different tactics in North Yemen to persuade the people not to use rhino horn. I think we should go to the religious leaders there - and North Yemen is a pious Muslim state - and talk to them about the problem, using quotations from the Koran against unnecessary

slaughter of animals. Obviously, there's no mention of rhinos as such in the Koran, but there are several passages that might be relevant to the situation, and it should help if the religious leaders would use these in the Friday sermons at the mosques to try to convince the people that it is wrong to buy rhino horn. Also, we should work with some of the sociologists at the university there to find out what else can be done. There was a report to WWF on the use of rhino horn in North Yemen and it was very pessimistic about the possibility of any changes. I don't entirely share this pessimism. I know it is a difficult situation. But if one country is taking 40% of the rhino horn on the market today - four times as much as any other country in the world - it's well worth making every effort to get it curtailed - and this is why I say that the major emphasis in stopping the international trade in rhino products must be put on North Yemen.

PJ: Traditionally, rhino horn has also been going to the Far East. What is it used for there?

EBM: At least 60% of the rhino horn is still going to the Far East, where it has been used for hundreds of years in various traditional medicines. Today, its main use in the Far East is for lowering fever, and perhaps as much as 95% of it sold there is for this purpose.

PJ: When you say "Far East", are you referring mainly to the Chinese and to Chinese overseas populations, or to other Far Eastern people?

EBM: Well, the Chinese and overseas Chinese especially, but the Japanese and South Koreans also use rhino horn to lower fever. In addition, there are other Asians - Burmese, Thai and Nepalese - who use a multitude of rhino products

medicinally.

PJ: In the West, of course, rhino horn is widely reputed to be used as an aphrodisiac. Is that so?

EBM: It's one of the great western myths. And even some western-educated Asians have come to believe that. However, in all my studies the only place I have found where people actually used rhino horn for sexual purposes is part of Gujarat, India. Although Asians use many, many animal products as aphrodisiacs, rhino horn is not one of these. Nor is it mentioned as such in the Chinese or Japanese literature. However, northern Thais do believe that brandy in which a rhino's penis has been soaked can be drunk to improve a man's sexual capabilities.

PJ: You say that rhino horn is used a lot in traditional medicine in the East. It seems that it would be very difficult to eradicate the demand for it.

EBM: Yes, but when it's not available, people will use other products. Moreover, in the old literature - and the contemporary literature - saiga antelope horn is considered almost as good as rhino horn for lowering fever and for curing other ailments. What we want to do is to convince rhino horn consumers that this is what they should use instead. Moreover, it's a lot cheaper and readily available.

PJ: It is already being used?

EBM: It is in many parts of South-East Asia and in Japan, too. The saiga antelope is not an endangered animal - it's commercially harvested in Siberia and the Russians export large quantities of saiga horn. Since it is already an accepted substitute for rhino horn, it is the practical alternative.

PJ: But how do you get the message across Asia? We're now talking about hundreds of millions of people.

EBM: It is a major problem, but not as impossible as it might first seem. To begin with, you approach the rhino horn importers - and there are not many of them, even in the major rhino horn consuming countries. For instance, there were only 12 in Hong Kong supplying it in substantial quantities before 1978, when they agreed to stop. And in Japan there were just five or six. Rhino horn importers are usually dealing with hundreds - even thousands - of other traditional medicine products, both animal and herbal. So, it is not as if you were asking them to give up their one major source of revenue. They're not like the ivory dealers who are engaged in importing one single commodity on which their whole livelihood is based. And that is the major difference between ivory and rhino horn importers - the latter won't lose a lot of money. They can instead import more of something else that they already buy.

PJ: But stopping imports won't alone solve the problem. What about the demand that will still exist?

EBM: You can cut that demand substantially by convincing traditional doctors not to prescribe rhino horn as a drug. Granted, there are many thousands of practitioners of traditional medicine, but you don't have to see everyone individually. Traditional doctors have their own professional associations. In South Korea, for example, there's the Korean Oriental Doctors' Association, called KODA, and every doctor belongs to it. This association holds regular meetings all over the country, which are well attended. So, you explain the rhino problem to the administra-

tors of the association, get them to agree that rhino horn should not be used, and give them the responsibility of informing their fellow members. Moreover, the doctors are going to be much more easily convinced by their own peers' arguments than those of an outsider.

PJ: What else can be done?

EBM: You can get newspapers throughout Asia to publish articles, interviews and stories about the problems we're having in trying to save the rhino. Through the Asian press you can reach a very wide audience, and I believe that if the public knew something about the decline in the numbers of rhinos in the wild, they would be more willing to use substitutes for rhino horn. This may sound overly optimistic, but I found when I first began talking to consumers of rhino horn back in 1979 that very few of them in urban areas had any knowledge at all about rhinos - and they were very surprised that rhinos were becoming rare in parts of Africa.

PJ: Turning to Africa itself, the situation is very critical. All the rhinos in the tropical part of the continent - the black and northern white - are in danger from the international trade in rhino products. Is there sufficient time left to save them?

EBM: The problem in Africa is essentially mismanagement in some countries. While the rhino populations in Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe and the Cameroon are very well looked after, those in such countries as Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Chad are not. Civil war, disrespect for law and order, corruption and lack of central control in some countries have spelt disaster for the rhino.

PJ: How would you sum up the prospects for the rhino?

EBM: Let's look at them species by species. The most endangered by far is the Javan, and five died recently from disease in Ujung Kulon, the world's only Javan rhino reserve. I think the top priority is to move out a breeding nucleus from there before this disease - or another - wipes them out. I think this is an immediate imperative. The Sumatran rhino is the next most threatened rhino; experts think there may be 300, but they may be too scattered to ensure continued breeding, even in gazetted reserves. There are also lone individuals in areas where no protection can be granted, and they will sooner or later fall prey to their changing habitat (logging is the greatest present risk). So, I also think the same should be done for Sumatran as Javan rhinos - capture a number to reproduce in a completely safe environment, perhaps put them in one of the top zoos in the world which has proved capable of providing and maintaining the type of environment and management necessary for breeding animals such as rhinos.

The Indian rhino has been a success story. In Kaziranga in 1908 there were apparently only about 12 rhinos left and now there are 1,000. In Nepal's Chitawan National Park, I believe the figure was thought to be around 100 in the late 1960s, and there are now about 375. If we count up all the Indian rhinos, their population is about 1,600 - I don't think we have to worry about them.

In Africa, the northern white rhino is the major problem. I understand that the most recent figure we have for the number in the reserve in northern Zaire is down to only about 50 or 60; we were thinking there were several hundred. So this is by far the most critical African one. On the other hand, the southern

white rhino is doing very well indeed. In fact, it's increased by 10% in some reserves, and excess numbers have been sent to other countries and to zoos all over the world. Now, there even seems to be problems in finding homes for some. As for the black rhino, we lost at least 50% in the 1970s. While conditions have improved in some countries, they are generally poor. Add to that the threats of ever-growing human populations and the demand for more and more land to be put under agriculture throughout Africa, then the prospects for the black rhino in the wild look dim in the long run.

J: Nevertheless, you're saying that, given good protection and management, rhinos can come back very strongly.

BM: Absolutely.

J: So you think the rhino can be saved?

BM: I think the Indian and southern white rhinos have been saved.

The black rhino is endangered in some countries, but at the moment it's relatively safe in a few others and I don't think it's going to disappear. There are also black rhinos in zoos abroad, and they do reproduce in captivity - although not as well as Indian rhinos. It's the Javan and Sumatran rhinos that are most threatened.

PJ: Are the Javan and Sumatran rhinos represented in zoos?

EBM: No. The last Sumatran zoo rhino died in Copenhagen in 1972. There may have been several Javan rhinos in different zoos in the past. We don't know for sure how many because zoologists used to get confused in trying to differentiate between Javan and Indian rhinos. There were many mix-ups. However, there is definitely not a single Javan rhino in any zoo today. Perhaps the Adelaide Zoo's Javan rhino, which died in the 1930s, was the last one of this species in captivity.