

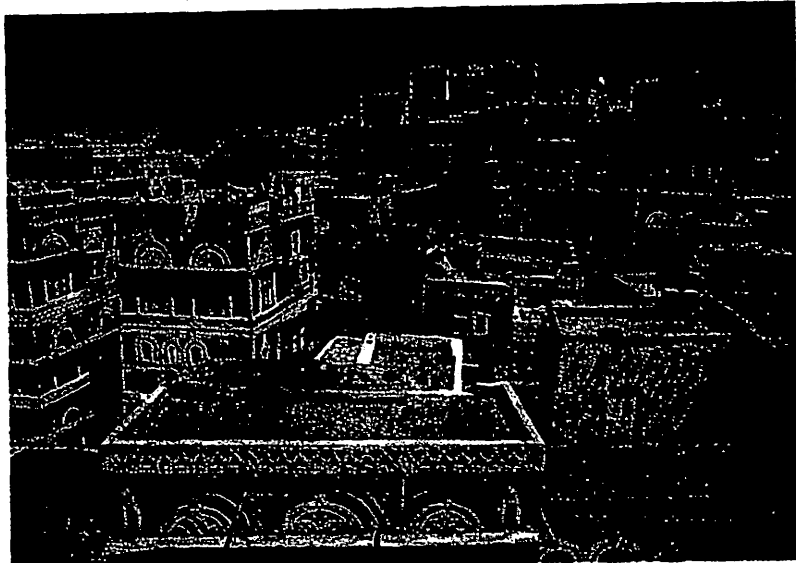
# Upsurge of Rhino Horn imports into Yemen

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

The United Nations Environment Programme recently appointed Esmond Bradley Martin as special envoy for rhino conservation in order to put additional pressure on governments concerning the illegal trade in rhino products and to help countries with rhino populations. Esmond Bradley Martin visited South Africa and Yemen in late 1992 to follow up the problems described in this article.

Although Yemen had been responsible for importing nearly half of the world's supply of African rhino horn in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a ban on imports in 1982 and increased customs control at Sanaa airport helped gradually to reduce this trade. Traditionally, Yemenis have business and family connections in eastern Africa, and it was the East African horn that was siphoned off to the Yemen market to be used for dagger handles. As the rhinos in this region of Africa dwindled in numbers, so too did the trade. Yemen had ceased to be a significant problem for rhino horn from 1985.

Instead, during the mid-1980s, Taiwan became the main importing country for rhino horn from southern Africa where rhino populations were still sizeable. Taiwan's economy was growing strongly while that in Yemen fell, and traders in Taiwan offered importers \$2 000 a kg for African horn, which was double the Yemen price.



Esmond Bradley Martin

*Within the attractive old city of Sanaa is the souk where nearly all the daggers with rhino horn handles are made.*

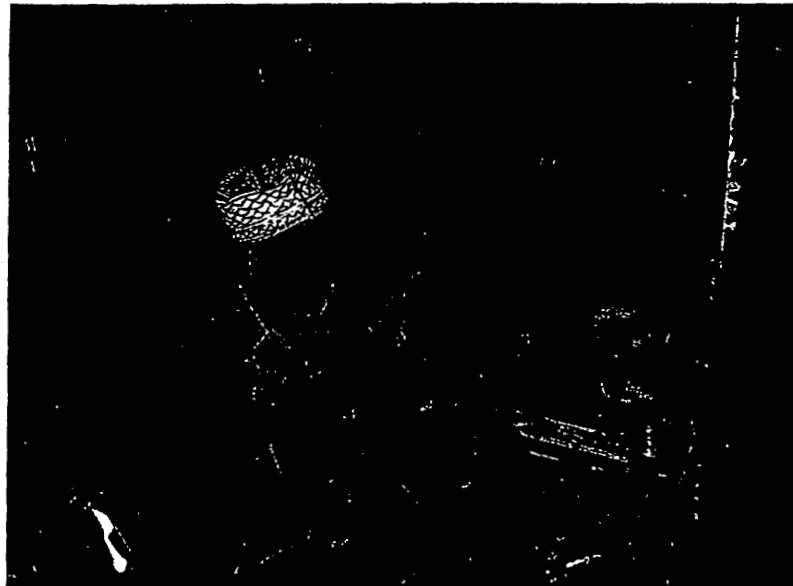
Business connections between South Africa and Taiwan enabled trade routes to open between these two countries, and horn was smuggled out of South Africa by air and sea. Most of this horn was from animals killed in Zimbabwe by Zambians who transported the horn to Lusaka. From there, it was hidden in lorries destined for South Africa or flown into Swaziland to be picked up by Taiwanese businessmen, diplomats and sailors for export to Taipei or Kaoshiung. A special section of the police force called the Endangered Species Protection Unit was created in South Africa in 1989 to combat this illegal trade, and recently the police officers have been extremely successful in intercepting consignments of rhino horn and catching traders. The Taiwan-South Africa connection is gradually being broken.

It came as a shock to us, however, during our April 1992 visit to Yemen's capital, Sanaa, to find that in 1991 rhino horn imports into the country had almost doubled. We were told that trade routes had opened up through Africa and the Middle East to Yemen. The main trader in Yemen, who handles over 80% of the country's rhino horn supplies, said that from August 1990 to March 1992, he had obtained over 750 kg of rhino horn. Most of this had been exported from Tanzania but not all of it would have originated from either recently killed animals or old stocks in Tanzania. It is possible that with stricter controls in South Africa, more horn has been moving eastwards from Zambia to Tanzania. In fact, from late 1990 to March 1992, over 250 rhinos were poached in Zimbabwe and their horns put on to the market.

Mozambique rhino horn and old stocks from Burundi could also be ending up in Tanzania for the Yemen market. Rhino horn from southern Sudan is reported to go to Yemen as well. Tanzania appeared to be the major outlet for Africa's rhino horn in 1991. The Tanzanian authorities have not yet developed a government network to combat this trade effectively.

We were informed by the main Yemeni trader that in 1991 Koreans had brought 200 kg of horn by aeroplane from Dar es Salaam to the United Arab Emirates. In Sharjah, it was packed on to lorries, taken by Yemenis overland and smuggled across the border into Yemen. Saudi Arabia is also a popular entrepôt, unlike the UAE, it is not a member of CITES. As over 30% of all imported goods are smuggled into Yemen from its rich neighbours, it is not difficult to bring in horn. Smuggling has become easier since the unification of North and South Yemen in May 1990, which greatly enlarged the country's land boundary with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. As large stretches of the desert are unpatrolled, vehicles can cross into Yemen unnoticed. The profitable activity of smuggling is likely to continue until Yemen's import duties are reduced and the long international boundaries are more effectively policed.

Yemen's unification was closely followed by the Gulf War in early 1991, and both these events were major cost factors for the government. Yemen did not support the Allied invasion of Iraq. As a result, much foreign aid was cancelled, amounting to about \$500 million a year. Saudi Arabia sent around 850,000 Yemeni workers back to Yemen, imme-



Esmond Bradley Martin

*A Yemeni dagger craftsman fixes a handle on to a blade in his workshop in Sanaa's souk.*

diately increasing the population by 8%, and causing Yemen to lose remittances of about \$1 billion per annum. This resulted in high unemployment of perhaps 25%. Yemen's per capita income has therefore been falling, and there has been a 50% decline in the market value of the Yemeni rial since November 1990: from 15 to 30 to the US dollar by March 1992. What saved Yemen's economy was the recent earnings from new oil exports, worth \$450 million a year.

Despite Yemen's recent economic difficulties, the rhino horn trade is flourishing. How can this be explained? First, as it has become far easier to smuggle rhino horn into Yemen than into eastern Asia, middlemen are prepared to sell it more cheaply. The price in US dollars for rhino horn in Yemen has remained the same, about US\$1000 a kg, since 1985, although in rials the price has risen over three times. Secondly, Yemenis are extremely proud of their traditions, and to them, the curved dagger (jambia) epitomises Yemeni manhood. So far, no substitute for the jambia



Esmond Bradley Martin

*In 1990, Yemeni craftsmen showed Lucy Vigne two rhino horns to be made into dagger handles, the only time the authors have ever been shown new rhino horn in Sanaa's souk.*

handle has been developed that has anything approaching the prestige of rhino horn. Large numbers of people are therefore prepared to pay the necessary cost for a jambia with a rhino horn handle.

In the jambia workshops in Sanaa's souk, water buffalo horn is the predominant material used for making dagger handles. It is encouraging that traders today are allowed to obtain from private (not government) sources as much hard currency as they can afford in order to import horn from the domestic buffalo in India. Large

Larry Vigneri



The daggers with the amber-coloured plastic handles in the foreground and those with the darker water buffalo horn handles behind sell for less than \$10 each compared to nearly \$600 for one with a prestigious new rhino horn handle.

Larry Vigneri



This dagger handle was made in Dhamar from camel nail, a cheap substitute for rhino horn.

quantities of water buffalo horn have therefore become available. The other main substitute, an amber-coloured plastic, which was introduced by the main trader in the late 1980s when water buffalo horn and rhino horn were difficult to import, is still being widely used for the cheaper jambia handles.

On the debit side, however, craftsmen are now able to make more jambias with rhino horn handles, due to the increase in imports since late 1990. In April 1992, in the main trader's work-

shop, we saw a man at the back of the shop holding a whole rhino horn that had been sliced in half with its tip removed. We tried to take a flash photograph, and the craftsmen were furious. One craftsman in this shop was in the process of making nine handles out of rhino horn. It is noticeably lighter in colour than the ubiquitous water buffalo horn, with a grained appearance. Normally two or three handles can be made from 1 kg of horn. The craftsman very carefully marked with a black felt-tip pen small dots on to a handle which he would later drill and fill with metal for decoration.

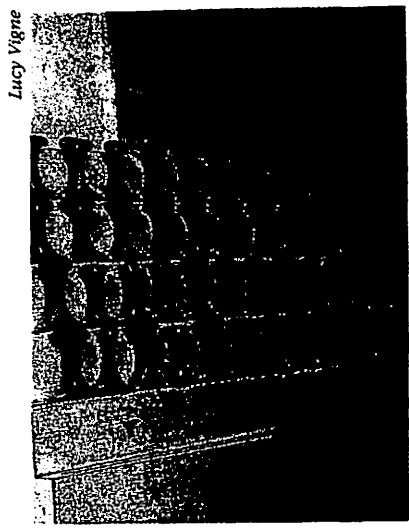
For water buffalo horn, far less artistry is employed, and dots are usually not made before drilling. Under the roughly shaped handles was a sheet of plastic on which had collected fine grey shavings of rhino horn from his filing work. The main trader later said that he currently possessed 10 kg of these shavings, and that a Chinese trader would be coming to buy it all in the next few days, for about \$167 a kg, or 5 000

rials. In 1986, shavings were selling for \$227 a kilo or 2 200 rials. The Yemen government banned the export of rhino horn scraps and shavings in 1987, and it is regrettable that the Chinese are still buying the material. The shavings are smuggled into China and processed into traditional medicines despite pleas from international conservation organisations for this practice to stop.

In the dagger retail section of the souk, it was discouraging to see more new rhino horn handles than had been available in the late 1980s. Some were connected to blades and others were displayed on their own. This verified the evidence of a considerable rise in rhino horn imports after 1990. In April 1992, a new dagger with a plastic handle was selling for about \$5, and one with a water buffalo horn handle was around \$8. A dagger with a new rhino horn handle was priced at an average of \$580, while antique rhino horn jambias, being the most prestigious, were selling usually for around \$1 200 each.

The busiest time for selling jambias is just prior to the two annual Ids (Islamic festivals) when everyone wants to look their best for the celebrations. The Id al-Fitr (the festival of the breaking of the month-long fast) was occurring during our visit. Craftsmen had been working late into the night in order to meet the increased demand for jambias. The traders admitted that they had not used up their rhino horn stocks and were eager for new supplies, no doubt as a result of the extra production during Ramadan. Yemeni merchants usually keep very small stockpiles (unlike the Taiwanese) and normally consume what they obtain in the same year.

We reported our disheartening findings to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Abdul Karim Al-Tryani, in an hour-long meeting at his house. Despite many other pressures, this "Renaissance man" has a serious interest in rhino conservation and has tried hard to end the rhino horn trade in Yemen. Due to the problems of unification and the Gulf War, however, Dr Al-Tryani had not followed up the 1990 action plan which we devised with him on our previous visit to Sanaa. He again agreed that he would try to get the government to join CITES, and would ask the Grand Mufti (religious leader) to issue an edict opposing the rhino horn trade. As a third plan of action, he suggested showing a film about the rhino crisis on Yemeni television as a plea to those involved to stop buying rhino horn. Although imports of rhino horn have been banned for ten years, there has been no internal prohibition. Dr Al-Tryani composed with us a draft decree banning the sales of raw (unworked) rhino horn within Yemen, and stating that any old rhino horn supplies would have to be marked and recorded by the Ministry of Trade, which would later make surprise inspections of the workshops. If any new horns were found, there would be a heavy fine, equal to the value of the horns. We would like to hear whether this decree has been issued. This would be easier to enforce than legislation banning rhino horn imports, and could be very effective in curtailing the trade. Yemen particularly wants to improve its international image following the country's unpopularity during the Gulf War. The actions of a small handful of traders responsible for Yemen's renewed role as a major market



Many new daggers with rhino horn handles, such as these, were on sale in April 1992.

for rhino horn will only further damage the country's reputation. We spoke to several Yemeni officials and academics who want to end the rhino horn trade, and who believe public awareness and education to be the long term solution. The Ministry of Information, the Environment Protection Council and the Yemen Times newspaper all agreed to publish material on the problem, and a professor from Sanaa University who is presently in charge of redesigning the school curricula agreed to incorporate the rhino conservation message into it.

Our information on the increased rhino horn trade in Yemen distressed many Yemenis we saw. Their helpful responses and enthusiasm to do something about it were encouraging. But continued support and pressure from international conservation organisations is needed. Otherwise, that eagerness amongst officials to work towards stopping the rhino horn trade will dwindle and other conservation issues within the country will take its place.

"Should not Africa put its own house in order?" is an understandable question asked

by some Yemenis. And it is true that far more effort is needed in Africa, especially in Tanzania and Zambia, to stop the smuggling networks. Intelligence gathering is the most cost-effective way to identify and prosecute traders. This strategy must be developed further in eastern Africa as well if the illegal trade routes are to be broken. It is imperative that the neighbouring Arab countries which are acting as entrepôts also help; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates could do far more to police their airports and intercept rhino horn consignments. And if Yemen bans domestic trade in unworked rhino horn and increases public awareness, the jambia craftsmen may develop prestigious substitutes in place of new rhino horn.

Only then would it be conceivable for Africa's rhino populations to recover and be safe enough from poachers for conservationists to think seriously of establishing a highly controlled legal trade in rhino horn exports to Yemen. Another possibility would be for Yemeni businessmen to purchase a breeding group of rhinos from southern Africa and to farm them commercially in Yemen. Every year or so the horn could be cut and sold to the dagger craftsmen. In reality, however, rhino farming is presently a long way off. It is essential that Yemeni traders accept that they must stop importing new rhino horn for the foreseeable future.

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