



# NEWS CHINA



February 2014

Digital Edition

Customer Service

HOME

ABOUT US

MAGAZINE

SECTIONS

SUBSCR

HOT TOPICS: POLITICAL PROCESS | E-COMMERCE | INTERNET | CORRUPTION | SEX EDUCATION

## Environment

Print Article | Write the Editors

Imported Rhinos



464



12

3

# No Introduction Necessary?

The controversial introduction of seven non-native white rhinos into Pu'er National Park in southern China has been marketed as a “re-introduction” of an extinct, unrelated local species. However, critics claim it is an attempt to kick-start a rhino-farming operation to feed China’s insatiable demand for rhino horn

June 2013 Issue | by Wang Yan



South African white rhinos in Yunnan Wild Animal Park, July 27, 2010 PHOTO BY CFP

From late March to Early April, a total of seven white rhinos raised in the Yunnan Wild Animal Park (YWAP), Kunming, Yunnan Province, were transported to a national park in Pu'er. Both State and provincial media covered the event, claiming it a successful example of the reintroduction of an extinct species into the wild.

There was one flaw in this narrative. These were African white rhinos, which have never lived in Asia.

According to Li Li, marketing manager from YWAP, these rhinos, now juveniles of six to seven-years old, are expected to breed in the wild in three to five years.

“These rhinos have come to stay in the YWAP for two years and eight months, and grew accustomed to the climate and environment here before they were released,” Li Li told *NewsChina* during a telephone interview in mid-April. “In Pu'er National Park, which covers 216 square kilometers, they will enjoy a wetland range of over 66,667 square meters (717,594 sq ft) in the first phase of the reintroduction program.”

### Extinction

Five species of wild rhinoceros survive worldwide; the Javan, Sumatran and Indian rhino in Asia, and the black rhino and white rhino in Africa. Historically, all three Asian rhino species were found in southwestern China, and are even mentioned in Tang Dynasty (618-907) records as living in Hunan, Guizhou, Hubei and Sichuan provinces. However, by the Song Dynasty (960-1279), records indicate the number of wild rhinos was dwindling. Rhino horn, a precious medicine in China, led all three species to be extensively hunted.

Consequently, the range of wild rhinos retreated from the heavily-populated central China plain until it was restricted to the remotest corners of Yunnan Province. In 1933 the last two surviving Javan rhinos were shot for their horns and skin.

Elsewhere in the world, rhinos were also under threat from big game hunters and poachers. The illegal trade in rhino horn, most of which ends up in Chinese medicine, poses the

greatest threat to rhinos today. According to Saving Rhinos, an animal protection NGO, “the trade is run by organized crime syndicates, who stay in business because of the medicinal myths about rhino horn.”

Now three species of rhinos are listed as Critically Endangered (Sumatran, Javan and black rhino) on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The Indian and white rhino are classified as Vulnerable and Near Threatened respectively. However, conservation was not at the forefront of the decision to introduce non-native rhinos to southern China.

Pan Hua, former General Manager of YWAP, told *NewsChina* that the idea of importing rhinos from South Africa stemmed from a 2007 decision by national park directors to bring exotic species into the park to attract more tourists. Park officials have since attempted to retroactively mold the narrative along conservationist lines, adopting a rather tortured logic in the process.

“As we started contacting and visiting South Africa’s national parks and private game reserves, we gradually developed the idea of importing more for the purpose of reintroducing the species to Yunnan,” Pan continued: “despite the fact that the white rhino is not the same species as the now-extinct indigenous Chinese rhino, Yunnan is where this species died out. Thus in 2009, after a long negotiation process, we signed the contract to buy 12 white rhinos from South Africa.”

However, the South African Department of Environmental Affairs (SADEA), alongside the country’s CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species) Management Authority, told *NewsChina* that, based on information relating to permits for the export of live white rhino, 6 white were exported to China in July 2010, for “zoological purposes” only.

A recent downturn in the bilateral relationship between China and India over longstanding territorial disputes effectively made Indian rhinos, a closer species to the extinct Yunnan rhino, off-limits. Pan told our reporter that the scarcity of other rhino species discouraged him from attempting to secure Javan or Sumatran specimens. Instead, YWAP chose South Africa, a country with close ties to the Chinese government, and, more importantly, one with a sizeable wild population of white rhinos, as the donor.

In total, YWAP purchased 12 white rhinos from diversified sources, including the Kruger National Park and private game reserves.

“Three were dead upon arrival due to the long journey,” Li Li admitted to our reporter. “After passing the customs quarantine and examination process, the remaining nine rhinos finally arrived in the YWAP.”

The total expense of bringing the rhinos to China was not divulged. However, Li admitted that Kingland Group Co., Ltd, an oil and gas pipeline operator as well as an eco-tourism promoter and the investor backing the project, laid out a hefty sum of money.

Li went on to say that Kingland planned to import another 30 rhinos for the sake of building up a healthy herd, yet further negotiations with South Africa and other African countries had recently stalled.

In response to *NewsChina's* inquiries about the reintroduction of white rhinos, SADEA responded by email, stating that it will not allow the export of live rhino to China for "reintroduction or rewilding" attempt since southern China does not form part of the natural range of the white rhino.

## **Stunt?**

Jiang Xuelong, a researcher at the Kunming Institute of Zoology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the project's unofficial zoological consultant, claims what he calls the "reintroduction" of non-native rhinos to China will "raise awareness of the harmonious interaction between animals, nature and humanity."

Jiang Zhigang from Institute of Zoology with Chinese Academy of Sciences also calls the project "pioneering," claiming it will not negatively impact South Africa's white rhino species, comparing it to the "Re-wild North America" project which aimed to reintroduce extinct or rare native species to the plains of the US midwest. However, critics have pointed out that the reintroduction of extinct or vulnerable species to their native environment, as China is attempting to do with the giant panda, is very different from introducing completely non-native species to an unfamiliar habitat, as in the case of the Yunnan white rhinos.

Jiang Zhigang, however, will not be deterred. "This is a meaningful attempt to see the reactions of white rhinos to a comparatively larger natural habitat," he told our reporter. "However, the project itself is not a re-wilding project, since these rhinos will still be managed in a national park."

While unflaggingly optimistic about the scientific value of the YWAP project, Jiang Zhigang did voice concerns that the scheme was being subverted for commercial gain, an accusation environmentalists and academics have made against the plan from the beginning.

As *NewsChina* learned from YWAP, so far, the reintroduction project of white rhinos does not relate to any research or study projects from the academic circle, and the only involved scientist is Jiang Xuelong from Kunming Zoology Institute.

Zhang Li, Director of Programs of Conservation International (CI) in China and an associate professor at Beijing Normal University on Animal Behavior told our reporter in early April that white rhino is a completely different subspecies, largely unrelated to the Javan rhino which vanished in Yunnan 80 years ago, thus, from a conservation perspective, the project was neither a "re-introduction" nor necessarily beneficial to the local ecosystem.

"Furthermore, mammals require a breeding population of at least 50 to sustain their development and biodiversity in their original environment," he continued. "Small groups will gradually degrade." Zhang added that, strictly speaking, this is a commercially-operated rhino husbandry project rather than an academic endeavor, and should be marketed as such.

Xie Yan, China's National Program Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has been personally involved in many previous reintroduction projects including the reintroduction of Chinese alligator, a species categorized as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. According to Xie, despite many successful examples such as Przewalski's wild horse and Père David's deer reintroduction projects in China during the late 1980s, not all species could be reintroduced.

"Sufficient scientific research and investigation, not just the release of some animals, is required," Xie told our reporter. In her view, five prerequisites must be met before any reintroduction project can begin, namely: the species reintroduced should be indigenous; second, enough space and a proper environment must be provided for the population to be self-sustaining; third, sufficient numbers should be present to maintain a breeding population; fourth, the health and wellbeing of the newly-introduced animals must be carefully monitored; fifth, the animals should receive appropriate protection from poaching

and human activity, and likewise, local communities should receive protection from potentially dangerous species.

“Generally speaking, I do not support the rhino reintroduction project, since they are large, fiercely territorial animals which can be potentially dangerous to humans,” Xie told *NewsChina*. “Individual rhinos require a wide territory, yet human development has encroached upon most of Yunnan’s former wildernesses. There are frequent clashes in the area between wild elephants and local people due to habitat loss, and rhinos, if released into the wild, are similarly likely to cause damage to human life and property.”

“From my perspective, China is not ready to rush out the re-introduction of this extinct species,” he added.

## **Underhanded Exploitation**

Other critics have accused YWAP of exploitation, with some even suggesting the project is ultimately a step towards the farming of rhinos for their horns.

Illegal rhino horn is sold in slices or processed into powder and marketed by wildlife traffickers as a remedy for pain, fever, acne, laryngitis, impotence and even cancer. The Javan rhino was hunted to extinction in Vietnam in 2011 due to the popularity of its horn as a status symbol.

Demand has soared alongside incomes in China and Southeast Asia, with many people still keen to consume illegal animal derivatives as medicine, or exhibit exotic animal parts in their homes. The trade in rhino horn, like the trade in processed coral, elephant and narwhal ivory, and turtle shell, has continued to grow despite the bans, which are generally poorly enforced by customs agents.

Between 1990 and 2005, poachers in South Africa killed an average of 14 rhinos a year. Since then the number has soared. In 2010, 333 rhinos were shot. In 2011, it was 448. 2012 marks the deadliest wave of rhino shootings since records began, an annual 633 rhinos killed, according to the country’s environmental ministry.

A 2012 report in the *Guardian* quoted Tom Milliken from TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, as saying: “Losing 500 a year, when it used to be 12 or 14 a year, is a crisis.”

Despite the elimination of rhino horn from China’s official State pharmacopeia in 1993, followed by a ban on its sale in 2003, the bulk of the illegal rhino horn trade remains destined for China and other neighboring Southeast Asian countries. According to Jeremy Smith, writing for *Chinadialogue*, research shows that China consumes up to one third of the world’s total of illegally trafficked rhino horns.

While trade in rhino horn is prohibited under CITES, increasing demand from countries like Vietnam has continuously driven up the black market price.

“Ordinary people cannot afford to use [rhino horn], since the price has skyrocketed since the trade ban,” said Jiang Zhigang. “Now it is sold for at least US\$100 per gram.”

While no concrete links between the YWAP project and the animal parts trade have been uncovered, conservationists are scrutinizing the deal to see if it might lead towards the harvesting of the newly-introduced animals’ horns.

An insider source told *NewsChina* there have been recent attempts in Hainan Province to breed captive white rhinos for the purpose of grinding powder from their horns. “Since rhino horns are comprised of compressed keratin, like hair or fingernails, the horns were shaved from the living animal,” the anonymous source told our reporter.

A critical article from the Saving Rhinos' website also mentioned the Hainan project and concluded that "Horn harvesting experiments are apparently taking place under the guise of 'reintroducing wild rhinoceroses from overseas through the establishment of breeding centers'."

The reintroduction of white rhinos in Yunnan, according to the source, might be closely related to the Hainan program, though YWAP has denied these allegations to the reporter.

In early March, a group of environmental researchers including Duane Biggs from the University of Queensland, Australia published an article in Science arguing that a global ban has failed to stem an "insatiable international demand" for rhino horn. The authors say the market could be met by humanely shaving the horns of live, farmed rhinos rather than relying on poaching. However, international conservationists have opposed this idea, arguing that it is impossible to determine whether or not such procedures cause pain or severe long-term damage to rhinoceroses.

Xie Yan expressed her strong opposition to any such move. "If the consumption of farmed rhino horn is legalized, social demand will surge and the market will stimulate poaching." Precedents for this include the market for elephant ivory, shark's fin, turtle shell and animal hides.

Jiang Zhigang disclosed that during the recent CITES COP 16 meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, South African delegates expressed their country's willingness to commercialize their "rhino resources" so as to develop a rhino farming economy. SADEA confirmed the initiative, and states "the modalities of rhino economics will be developed through a process of consultation both nationally and internationally... all decisions to be made relating to this matter will be aimed at protecting the species, securing populations and ensuring the long-term conservation of the species."

For now, it seems, the safety of this tiny, anachronistic community of African white rhinos in Yunnan Province is no more clear than the reasons why they were brought there in the first place.

Tags:

## EDITOR'S PICKS



### Sex for Snacks

In cities like Shanghai and Chongqing, a handful of high school...[\[More\]](#)



### Prize Fighter

Elevated into the State-approved pantheon of great Chinese writers thanks to...[\[More\]](#)

### China Legislates Against Terrorism

The Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, the country's legislative body, passed a new...[\[More\]](#)



### Progressive Porn

A new primer on elementary children



Subscribe to News China and Sa