



Rhinos: On the Horns

of a Dilemma

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How can something that's essentially useless to anybody be considered nearly priceless by some people? According to the experts, rhino horn can sell at or above the price of gold—and people will literally risk their lives to hunt down and kill rhinos for the illegal fortunes that wildlife poaching can bring. This is an ugly, deadly business that must be shut down if rhinos are to survive.

Rhino horn is not medicine. This fact attacks the centuries-old, traditional Asian medicine premise that concoctions prepared from rhino horn have a wide array of curative powers. The list of maladies or conditions that have been treated traditionally with rhino horn—and, we should add, unsuccessfully—is a mile long, including aging, arthritis, asthma, black magic, boils and carbuncles, chest cold, chicken pox, convulsions, coughs, demonic possession, diphtheria, dog bites, dysentery, epilepsy, fainting, fever, fits, food poisoning, hallucinations, headache, hemorrhoids, impotence, insanity, laryngitis, lumbago, malaria, measles, melancholy, memory loss, myopia, night blindness, nightmares, nose bleed, plague, polio, prescription overdoses, rectal bleeding, scorpion stings, smallpox, snake bite, toothache, typhoid, vomiting, and worms. Really?

On the day this issue of *Zoo View* went to press, it's likely that two or three rhinos in South Africa were killed

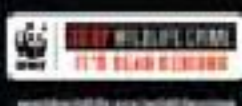
by poachers for their horns. More than a thousand might meet this same fate before the year ends if current trends continue, potentially making 2013 the worst year for rhino poaching in the past two decades. The largest illegal international markets for rhino horn are China and Vietnam, where the purported medicinal value of this commodity has taken a backseat to simple status. Purchasing rhino horn—either for oneself or as a gift—is a sign of wealth in these countries. The fact that a living creature had to lose its life to enable the transaction seems of no consequence to the customer, the merchants, or the smugglers who help bring the horn to market. Both China and Vietnam once had wild rhinos, but no longer. Vietnam lost its last rhino just three years ago. Now these cultures and economies threaten rhino survival in other nations.

Some rhino experts and economists argue that the solution is to legalize the international trade in rhino horn, thereby driving down the price and decreasing the demand. This strategy is fraught with problems and potential miscalculations that could ultimately doom rhinos to extinction. Organizations such as the International Rhino Foundation favor a combination of stronger protection measures in rhino range countries, more effective law enforcement along trade routes, pressure from the international community, and greater public awareness in consumer nations. History tells us that these measures can work.



I AM NOT MEDICINE

At least one rhino is killed every day due to the mistaken belief that rhino horn can cure cancer and hepatitis. Find out what you can do to stop wildlife crime.



www.wwf.org/wwf/wwf

WORLD WILDLIFE FUND

◀ The World Wildlife Fund launched a wide-scale public service ad campaign aimed at stopping wildlife crime.



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▲ ▲ Only about 100 Sumatran rhinos remain in small, fragmented populations in Indonesia and Sabah, Malaysia.

▲ With a population just over 20,000, the white rhino is now the most abundant of the five rhinoceros species.



▲ Black rhinos at the Pittsburgh Zoo, one of several North American zoos participating in the Species Survival Plan (SSP). ▲ Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India.

Five rhino species now walk the Earth: white, black, Indian, Javan, and Sumatran. The global rhino population is close to 30,000, the vast majority in the wild, the rest in zoological parks and special breeding centers. Surprisingly, the overall population is just barely keeping pace with increased poaching pressure in recent years. The majority of rhinos being poached are white rhinos in South Africa which, at just over 20,000 animals, account for about two-thirds of the world total. It's almost impossible to believe that the species was reduced to only a few hundred animals at the turn of the 20th century.

At just over 5,000 individuals, the black rhino is the next most abundant species, but we must not forget that its numbers plummeted from an estimated 100,000 in the 1970s to only about 2,500 in the early 1990s—a population decline of more than 95 percent. If the estimates are anywhere close to being correct, the African rhino death rate during that period—due to poaching, trophy hunting, and massive eradication campaigns—was ten or more animals per day, three to four times greater than the current poaching crisis. Yet that slaughter was eventually halted due to greater protection efforts, and black rhino numbers have essentially doubled over the last two decades.

National Park, now serves as the primary source of animals for reintroduction projects in other protected areas where the species formerly occurred. Under the auspices of Indian Rhino Vision 2020, a partnership among the International Rhino Foundation, WWF-India, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Bodo Territorial Council, and the Government of Assam, nearly two dozen individuals have already been reintroduced to Manas National Park.

Several poaching incidents have recently occurred in Manas, but those setbacks have been offset by births to translocated female rhinos. Monitoring and protection programs are being stepped up in response, and plans for the next set of reintroductions to Assam's Laohkowa Wildlife Sanctuary are already underway.

Undoubtedly, the two most endangered rhino species in the world are the Sumatran and the Javan, which are believed to number about 100 and just under 50 individuals, respectively. Their final strongholds are four Indonesian national parks, three of which are patrolled by well-

The Indian (or greater one-horned) rhino, like Africa's southern white rhino, is believed to have numbered only in the low hundreds at the turn of the 20th century. Found only in India and Nepal, its population did not rebound as strongly as did the white rhino's, but an estimated 3,300 animals now inhabit several protected areas. The largest population, found in Assam's Kaziranga



SOUTH AFRICA WHITE RHINO POACHING

▲ South Africa's white rhinos have been particularly hard hit by the current poaching crisis.



SUSIEELUS/IRF

is the last stronghold for the Indian rhinoceros.

TRAFFIC REPORT

A 2012 report by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC details the dynamics driving the escalation in illegal trade in rhino horn—focusing on the two primary countries involved: South Africa (the source) and Vietnam (the destination).

Authors Tom Milliken and Jo Shaw note that while South Africa has long promoted biodiversity conservation through the sustainable use of natural resources, the country's superlative conservation record is now under threat due to "a potent mix of some unscrupulous wildlife professionals, some corrupt government officials, together with hardened Asian criminal syndicates."

Ironically, the fate of South Africa's rhinos is now tied to market forces in Vietnam, a country that recently saw its own native rhino population slip into extinction. "The growing body of evidence clearly indicates that Vietnam is the world's leading destination and consumer of rhino horn," the report concludes, adding that this status is unlikely to change any time soon unless the country enacts strict legislative and enforcement measures.

The full TRAFFIC report, entitled *The South Africa-Vietnam Rhino Horn Trade Nexus*, is available online at www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic_species_mammals66.pdf.

I AM NOT MEDICINE

trained Rhino Protection Units (RPU). This protection program is a collaboration between Indonesia's Ministry of Forestry, the International Rhino Foundation, and Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI). Thanks to this partnership, rhino poaching in Bukit Barisan Selatan, Way Kambas, and Ujung Kulon national parks has nearly been eliminated. However, the status of both species is so precarious that poaching at any level could lead to their extinction.

As you can see, the world's five rhino species face completely different circumstances. No one action plan or conservation strategy will serve them all. That's another dilemma facing rhinos—as if they needed more than one. □

► Stories of rhinoceros poaching dominated newspaper headlines in South Africa last year.



WWF/INDIA

▲ No more than an estimated 50 Javan rhinos remain on the planet, and they currently reside in Ujung Kulon National Park.