

CHAPTER 2

CITES AND SOUTH AFRICA'S PROPOSAL TO LEGALISE RHINO HORN TRADE

AUTHOR: WILL TRAVERS – BORN FREE FOUNDATION

1. IVORY TRADE

My name is Will Travers, one of the founders of Born Free 30 years ago. 40 years ago I saw my poached rhino and my first poached elephant. Sadly an experience to be repeated many times since. I have been to every CITES meeting since 1989 – 10 CITES Conferences of the Parties and almost ever Standing Committee in between. I have seen the ebb and flow....

Let me start by exploring the ivory trade.

In 2008/9 the CITES Standing Committee (which included the British government of the day) approved China as one of two official ivory trading partners (along with Japan), and the sale of more than 100 tonnes of legal ivory went ahead. We campaigned desperately against this but to no avail.

Far from satisfying demand, demand was stimulated and elephant poaching has gone through the roof, the volume of illegal ivory in trade has hit 25 year highs and the price being paid for 1 kilo of illegal ivory is 1000% higher now than the legal sale prices of just a few years ago. Many countries in Africa may lose their elephants entirely as a result. Now we have a similar scenario for rhino.

Proponents of rhino horn trade – the South African government, the Private Rhino Owners' Association, the Professional Sport Hunters' Association and others – say that legalisation will enable them to control the market and generate resources to fight poaching. In my view they are, at best, extremely naïve.

They want to establish a CSO, a Central Selling Organisation - a cartel - which they say would allow them to control the supply of rhino horn and to manipulate demand through price-fixing.

Too much demand, increase the price: Too little demand, reduce the price.

Imagine that they establish an official price of US\$50,000 a kilo. What will the poachers' reaction be? To offer illegal, poached rhino horn at US\$40k a kilo or US\$30k a kilo.

These prices are so fantastical that poor people will continue to be exploited by criminal networks, willing to risk someone else's life to make a killing.

Remember the ivory sales that were supposed to meet demand? It was wrong thinking then – it's wrong thinking now! I can assure you that legal trade is not going to satisfy demand, it's going to stimulate demand, and that demand is going to be met by poaching.

But there is another equally disturbing and more insidious factor in all this. Legalising rhino horn will also legitimise claims made by some that it works as a hangover cure or as a treatment for cancer.

At the CITES Conference in Bangkok in March 2013, I attended a meeting about legalising rhino horn trade, organised by the South African Minister, Edna Molewa, billed as an opportunity for her to listen to the views of the wider community.

The Minister asked for any comments. I raised my hand and briefly set out my fundamental concerns, and then I asked one question. “Do you believe it works?” I said. “Don’t be shy. Raise your hand if you believe that rhino horn works”.

No one moved a muscle. Then, somewhat sheepishly, the panel admitted that they did not believe rhino horn worked....

For me that reveals a shocking degree of cynical exploitation running through this whole issue.

I imagine a Chinese or Vietnamese family a few years from now. Their elderly mother is dying of cancer. The children, hearing that rhino horn is the cure, scrape together their last resources and buy some. Legal, exorbitantly expensive – and USELESS. Their mother dies. They are in poverty. And their tragic circumstances are as a direct result of the blatant exploitation of their vulnerability, ignorance and superstition by those who know better but who are in ‘the business of Rhinonomics’.

I asked preeminent conservation biologist, lawyer and CITES expert, Dr Ron Orenstein for his views concerning the claims that have been made linking the management of vicuña and the harvesting of their wool to the potential management of rhinos and the harvesting of their horn.

These are my questions and Dr Orenstein’s compelling and informed responses.

2. DID LEGAL TRADE SAVE THE VICUÑA?

By the 1960s, massive killing of vicuñas for their wool had reduced a species that once numbered in the millions to only about 10,000 animals. Today, the global population is in the order of 300,000 – a definite conservation success, at least as far as population numbers are concerned. However, what trade proponents fail to point out is that legal international trade in vicuña wool was not restored until populations had rebounded. The population recovery happened under a regime of strict protection and improved enforcement under the terms of the two Vicuña Conventions, signed in 1969 and 1979, and a CITES Appendix I listing. In Peru, vicuña populations had been reduced by 1966 to between 5,000 and 10,000 animals, 1% of their former numbers. The change in the species’ fortune over subsequent years was the result of strict protection. By 1987, populations in the country had risen to 63,223. The enormous rise in Peruvian vicuña numbers – a staggering 1100% by 1994 – happened before international legal trade was allowed.

3. HAS LEGAL TRADE SUPPRESSED POACHING?

Poaching of vicuña remains a serious problem – so much so that, rather than the legal trade having put poachers out of business, poaching has been named as one of the greatest existing threats to the legal trade regime. Over 350 vicuña poached in Peru in one spate around April 10th 2013 and now, a couple of weeks ago, a further 149.

The ex-president of the Lima region’s vicuña breeding association reported in 2009 that “in Lima and Apurímac... 30-40% of the population has been slaughtered. Of the 17,689 animals that existed in the region of Lima in 2000, it is feared the population is now around 10,000”.

Rather than legal trade making intense enforcement efforts unnecessary, these efforts are now essential if the legal trade itself is to survive.

4. ARE THE VICUÑA AND PROPOSED RHINO PROGRAMMES REALLY ALIKE?

Although there are certainly similarities between the existing programs for vicuña and the proposed sale of rhinoceros horn, there are also some fundamental differences. In particular, the vicuña program (at least as originally conceived) is a roundup and harvest of fully wild animals, designed to benefit extremely poor people.

In fact, one of the criticisms that has been made of the way in which the vicuña program has progressed since its inception has been concerns about its increasing monopolization by textile corporations and a shift towards farmed animals, both of which are seen as potentially detrimental to the conservation of the species in the wild. The primary purpose of the legalization of vicuña wool was not to reduce poaching or increase numbers, but to create a system in which poor villagers would live in harmony with free-living wild vicuña populations – a very different objective to that proposed for rhinos which involves largely captive animals held on private land, with the primary beneficiaries being the owners of these animals, at least some of whom are apparently extremely wealthy.

5. WOULD A VICUÑA-TYPE PROGRAMME SAVE RHINOS?

It should be apparent that the vicuña program has not only not eliminated poaching, but that it was never intended to do so. This was always seen as the task of law enforcement. Nor is there any evidence that it has driven down prices for vicuña wool.

Instead, the marketing program was designed to allow poor people sharing the vicuña's habitat to benefit from a conservation success that had already been achieved (and thereby to create a climate for coexistence, shared management and continuing improvement of the species' status).

Though supporters argue that a legal trade will nonetheless reduce poaching by driving down prices, as noted, the vicuña programme, and the ivory trade example, provide no support for this idea.

In short, it is arguable that the vicuña programs are either sufficiently unlike that proposed for rhino to be relevant, or, where they are similar, that they demonstrate both that such schemes are ineffective in controlling poaching, and that they provide a warning that an increasing shift towards commercial farming as a way to deal with the species may harm, rather than assist, in the overall conservation of the white rhinoceros as a truly wild animal.

"We need to join hands and work together to fight these criminals," Minister Molewa recently stated. "These solutions need to be sought in partnership with stakeholders in the rhino and wildlife industries including communities, and with our partners within government especially the enforcement and security authorities in the country."

Recently the Mdluli Tribal Authority received one of five rhino during a ceremonial handover from the Minister. These rhino are being donated by SANParks to the Mdluli Tribal Authority as part of the community's contribution to conserving these magnificent animals.

The Minister said the donation of the rhino to the Mdluli community should serve as an incentive to encourage all communities to help in the fight against rhino poaching. It is hoped that ownership of these animals will promote awareness and increase the wildlife ecotourism potential of the community's land.

"Placing the future of these five rhino in your care enhances the government's belief and policy that the animals in national parks, provincial and private game reserves, are owned by all South Africans. This means that we all need to ensure they are protected for future generations," said Minister Molewa.

I believe that this is a fairly weak attempt to make rhino conservation relevant to some local communities. It will only be able to claim success if all 5 rhino survive. However, with all the publicity attached to the placement of the rhino with this community I fear that this may be simply an advertisement to poachers.

This strategy raises more questions in my mind than it answers.

What resources has the government deployed with the local community to help ensure the safety of these rhino? What equipment, what training of community scouts, what radio comms, night vision, local liaison structures with anti-poaching, police, etc., have been put in place?

What costs have been loaded now onto the local community in respect of protecting these animals? What plans are there to bring tourist dollars to the community in order to make a positive commercial contribution and what infrastructure is in place to service tourists?

And how will success be measured? No rhino poached? Increased revenue at a local level (and by what amount)? Breeding success? Employment benefits?

Who will do the independent cost/benefit analysis?

I cannot state strongly enough that, in my opinion, the plans for rhino and rhino horn trade currently under discussion spell disaster for rhino in the wild in South Africa and possibly extinction in all the other range States.

So if we care about the rhinoceros, the only *sane* decision is to end speculation and discussion about trade in rhino horn unequivocally, universally, and in perpetuity.

There are simply too many of us and too few of them - 400,000 elephants, 30,000 lions, 25,000 rhino, 3,500 tigers.

It's time for us to think differently. Maybe we need to establish World Heritage Species to fund their protection and conservation on a global, non-commercial basis. It's time to park talk of a legal rhino horn trade, get round the table and, together, work to conserve the species, not consume it.

Will Travers OBE

Founder Born Free

will@bornfree.org.uk