

## Rhino horn drug leads to poaching

Janet Pelley

Members of Vietnam's nouveau riche are driving a rhinoceros poaching epidemic in South Africa, according to TRAFFIC, a non-governmental organization that monitors international wildlife trade. Young Vietnamese mix powdered rhino horn with wine as a hangover cure, flaunting the illegal substance as a show of wealth. TRAFFIC's new report, *The South Africa-Vietnam Rhino Horn Trade Nexus* ([www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic\\_species\\_mammals66.pdf](http://www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic_species_mammals66.pdf)), describes how booming demand for horn, facilitated by international crime syndicates, has escalated rhino poaching in South Africa to a record 448 animals killed in 2011.

While Vietnam's rhino population slipped into extinction in 2010, South Africa is home to nearly three-quarters of all wild rhinos worldwide. South Africa has a superlative conservation record; it supports a population of 1915 black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*) and 18 800 southern white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*),

explains Jo Shaw, a program officer for TRAFFIC East/Southern Africa (Gauteng, South Africa). Admittedly the country allows regulated sport hunting of white rhinos and, from 1995 to 2011, roughly 1200 white rhinos were legally hunted. Although authorized international hunters can take their rhino trophies home, both South Africa and Vietnam prohibit commercial trade in rhinos and their products.

"So far this year, 373 rhinos are known to have died [as a result of unlawful killings] and, at this rate, over 500 will be dead by year's end", Shaw says. Rhino numbers are still growing in South Africa, but the magnitude of the illegal slaughter leaves no room for complacency, she adds. The 2012 report found that the illegal trade in rhino horn occurs along a chain: beginning with poachers and corrupt officials in Africa, through exporters and couriers, to consumers in Vietnam.

"Historically, demand for rhino



Female southern white rhinoceros with calf.

M. Harvey / WWF-Cannon

horn in countries such as Japan, Yemen, South Korea, and Taiwan has created surges in illegal trade and poaching that have later subsided due to legislation, domestic trade bans, and education efforts advocating that it's not cool to consume rhino horn", Shaw continues. She is optimistic that the current increase in illegal trade can also be stopped. South Africa has stepped up enforcement but success in Vietnam ultimately depends on high-level commitment, effective law enforcement, and campaigns to reduce consumer demand. ■

## Restoration dilemma over birds and rivers

Claire Miller

On paper, it made a lot of sense. Spend AU\$24 million of taxpayers' money to buy Toorale, a large irrigation and grazing property in central New South Wales in Australia, and dismantle its six dams. That way, up to 80 billion L more water a year could flow downstream into the Murray-Darling River Basin's degraded lower lakes, located 1000 km away, and help keep the Murray River mouth open.

Trouble is, a whole new ecological community has developed around Toorale's dams over the past century, in part mitigating the loss of more than 50% of the former natural wetlands across the vast Murray-Darling Basin due to over-allocation of water, alteration of river flows, and

draining of swamps. Letting Toorale's water go now might help the lower lakes, but at the cost of valuable, scarce habitat for protected waterbirds including straw-necked ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) and broilgas (*Grus rubicunda*). Partial decommissioning of the dams, on the other hand, means falling short of promises to save the lower lakes.

"My big concern is that the government is spending huge amounts of money buying back water across the Murray-Darling and not really understanding what to do with it", explains ecologist Richard Kingsford (Australian Wetlands and Rivers Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney). "It's a huge worry because most of the water is held in dams, and decisions have to be made. Certainly, there are some dams that are good for some waterbirds and fish, but you have to check

if they are – and inevitably there is no 'free' water in these systems."

The 2008 Toorale purchase was part of a AU\$10 billion government program to cut irrigation diversions by up to 30%. Allowing more water to flow into the lower lakes has been an overriding policy objective, but Kingsford warns that each of the major tributaries also has end-of-system wetlands. "Their ecology has value in its own right", says Kingsford. "Lots of tributaries are not quite as degraded as the lower lakes but close to it, and they also need water; not all of the water goes to the lower lakes. I think there are a couple of things to think about, and this is a discussion that has to be had in the scientific community as well as more broadly. What is the value of the ecology at a local scale and at a basin scale? And what are the objectives for this system?" ■