

■ Contraband

Rise in Vietnamese use of rhino

Surging prosperity in Asian nation has created a perfect storm for South Africa's rhinos, writes PAUL ASH

IN 2010, Vietnamese consumers, riding a wave of prosperity that shows little sign of abating, bought R83-billion worth of luxury products. Not included in that number are large numbers of rhino horns — most obtained illegally and worth millions of rands in total — smuggled from South Africa into the Vietnam market every year.

The country has emerged as a rapacious driver of the illegal trade in rhino horn, claims a new report from Traffic International, a wildlife trade monitoring organisation.

Vietnam's economy is booming. Of its 87 million people, 65% are under the age of 30, and changing attitudes are boosting demand for luxury products, leading to what Traffic calls a surge in "indulgent, status-conscious consumption".

'We are facing the loss of a conservation icon simply to meet demand for a luxury good'

Rhino horn has been used in Asia in traditional medicine for thousands of years, mostly as a palliative to reduce fevers and to purge the body of toxins, and although trade in rhino horn is illegal in Vietnam, its use has been discussed in a number of recent local manuals on traditional medicine.

But new uses for horn have emerged that have little or nothing to do with medical tradition.

"It is a completely new market," says Jo Shaw, a Traffic programme officer and co-author of the report.

"There is suspicion that rhino horn is being promoted as a miracle cure for serious diseases, breaking all traditional understanding [of its use]," says Shaw. Touts, exploiting a myth that rhino horn can cure cancer and other dread illnesses, are believed to be trolling Vietnam's hospital wards, targeting patients desperate for a cure.

The most conspicuous consumption of horn has nothing to do with



■ CURE? Serrated bowls, used for grinding rhino horn into powder

PICTURE: TOM MILLIKEN/TRAFFIC

medicine, however, says the report. An increasing number of consumers who believe horn has detoxifying properties grind it up in special serrated bowls and drink it with water or alcohol as a health tonic and hangover cure. Vietnamese websites allegedly promote rhino horn mixed with wine as "the alcoholic drink of millionaires", and there is evidence that horns are given as gifts, much like expensive watches in other parts of the world, to, as Traffic puts it, "curry favour with socio-economic and political elites".

In keeping with its luxury status, horn is also allegedly consumed at "rhino-wine associations", some of whose participants, says the report, "seem to have embraced the curious notion that rhino horn functions as a cure for impotence and an enhancement to sexual performance". This is a new development: despite the pervasive media myth, rhino horn has not previously been used as an aphrodisiac.

The irony of African horns being consumed in a country whose last rhino was poached in 2010 is a bitter one, says Shaw. "We are facing the loss of a conservation icon simply to meet demand for a luxury good."

The link between South Africa and Vietnam is fairly recent. The local trophy-hunting market, a key driver in the phenomenal growth in South Africa's white rhino numbers, was traditionally dominated by American and European hunters. From 2003 onwards, however, Traffic noted a sharp increase in the number of non-traditional hunters from countries such as Vietnam.

Although trade in rhino horn is specifically banned under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), "pseudo-hunters" have successfully exploited a loophole in the law which allows legitimate trophy hunters to export trophy horns.



■ UNDER SIEGE: The illegal trade of rhino horns has killed thousands in South Africa Picture: GETTY IMAGES

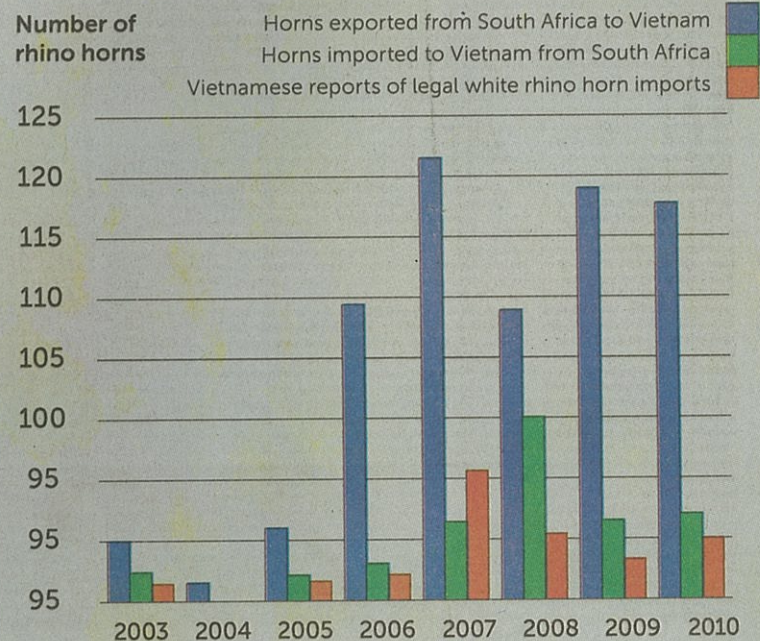
Between 2007 and 2009, 185 Vietnamese nationals took part in trophy hunts in South Africa, accounting for 48% of the total. Despite strict rules on what hunters may do with their trophies, Traffic believes many of the horns have leaked into the illegal trade.

In April, South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs stopped issuing hunting permits to Vietnamese nationals while it determines where the trophies taken by Vietnamese hunters are, says department spokesman Albie Modise. South Africa recently signed a memorandum of understand with Vietnam to co-operate on efforts to combat the trade.

Traffic says South Africa's war against poaching and the illegal trade in horns has led to some high-profile arrests and the activities of trading syndicates appear to have been disrupted. However, with 339 rhino poached so far this year, this is only a short-term solution.

The rhino's best hope, says Shaw, will be to educate the new consumers and in so doing alter the patterns of demand. In a country where new wealth and ancient traditions have converged, this is likely to be a tough prospect.

RHINO HORN TRADE BETWEEN SA & VIETNAM



According to CITES export data, from 2003 to 2010, 657 rhino horns were legally exported from South Africa as trophies to Vietnam, but that country's import data only show 170 rhino horns, indicating that 74% of the trade went undeclared.

Graphic: FIONA KRISCH

Source: TOM MILLIKEN/TRAFFIC