

RHINO POACHING: WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Michael t' Sas-Rolfes

Rhino poaching is a serious contemporary global concern. Significant recent growth in demand for rhino horn in Asian consumer markets has driven black market prices to extraordinary levels, undermining attempts to conserve wild rhinos and enforce a worldwide trade ban. A closer analysis of countries that have succeeded in conserving rhinos reveals that they owe much of their success to policies that enhance the direct economic benefits flowing from rhino protection and link these to relevant local people and institutions. If trade ban enforcement alone cannot save rhinos, then other solutions must be considered. As one alternative, international conservation NGOs typically support campaigns aimed at changing consumer behavior, arguing that poaching will end when consumers stop buying rhino horn products. Skeptics of this approach argue that it would be better to displace existing demand for illegally sourced horn either with genuine horn from sustainable sources or with a synthetic substitute. All three approaches deserve careful consideration, both individually and in possible combination.

Key Concepts

- Rhino poaching can be viewed as an economic problem: as rising consumer demand drives up prices for rhino horn, incentives for illegal activity increase relative to the incentives to protect live rhinos.
- Where wild rhino populations have survived, this has been due to adequate enforcement spending and rhino-related economic benefit flows to relevant local people, not necessarily because of restrictions on rhino horn trade.
- Campaigns aimed at changing consumer behavior may ultimately reduce black market rhino horn prices, but fail to address the economic aspirations of the local people who control the animals' destiny.
- Legalizing trade in rhino horn has the potential to raise much-needed funds for rhino protection and create more lasting incentives for conservation, but faces opposition from advocates of demand reduction and requires significant institutional reforms that do not enjoy widespread political support.
- Introducing a synthetic substitute product to the market provides a third option, sharing both certain advantages and disadvantages of each of the two other approaches.

Michael t' Sas-Rolfes is an independent conservation economist based in Cape Town, South Africa. He has been actively involved in wildlife conservation for most of his life. His academic background includes a Bachelors in Business Economics and two MSc degrees, in Environmental Resource Economics (UCL) and in Biodiversity Conservation and Management (Oxford). He has specialist knowledge of the application of economic analysis and business principles to the biodiversity conservation sector, and has conducted detailed work and analysis on wildlife trade issues (especially relating to rhinos, big cats, elephants, and bears) and on innovative approaches to financing and managing both public and private protected areas.

Read the full article of Michael t' Sas-Rolfes in Solutions (Volume 7, Issue 1, Page 38-45, March 2016) – a non-profit print and online publication devoted to showcasing bold and innovative ideas for solving the world's integrated ecological, social, and economic problems. This is the solutions Website with the article: <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/237452>

For hunter-conservationists and all people who are interested in the conservation, management and sustainable use of Africa's wild natural resources. African Indaba is the official CIC Newsletter on African affairs, with editorial independence. For more information about the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation CIC go to www.cic-wildlife.org