

## Going undercover and meeting TCM practitioners in Viet Nam

Paul Blackthorne is an actor and director currently starring as Quentin Lance in the hit US TV show *Arrow*. He spends the majority of the year flying between his home near LA and the TV studios in Vancouver, working long hours on set.

**Susie Offord-Woolley** | Managing Director

So, when he gets a break from filming, you'd expect he would want to spend a couple of weeks relaxing on a beach or visiting friends and family. However, Paul has another great passion in life – rhinos and elephants. When he heard that the vast majority of rhino horn ends up purchased by consumers in Viet Nam, he was driven to do something that would tackle the root cause of the poaching crisis. That's when he picked up the phone, and called us at Rhino HQ.

In May 2016, Paul, together with Arsenal mid-fielder and fellow rhino ambassador Aaron Ramsey, launched the #SavetheRhinoVietnam t-shirt campaign. Featuring a bespoke design by artist Rob Prior, the t-shirts were a huge hit with our supporters. For the next couple of months, in-between filming *Arrow* and his new film *Daisy Winters*, Paul galvanised his friends, colleagues and fans to support the campaign, with a host of celebrities including Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, the cast of *Arrow*, *Doctor Who*'s Matt Smith and Karen Gillan, *Thor*'s Chris Hemsworth and Arsenal, Manchester City and Chelsea football players. All funds raised went directly to our partner NGO in Viet Nam, Education for Nature-Vietnam (ENV), and its work tackling the country's illicit rhino horn trade.

Once the filming for the latest season of *Arrow* had come to an end, Paul jetted off on a 20-hour flight from LA to Hanoi, with a quick pit-stop in London for a pint with friends (once a Brit, always a Brit). Paul was heading to Viet Nam to launch the campaign and generate media interest to put the horn trade firmly on the public agenda. Joined by his godson and video-editing whizz Jake Dudman and myself as Save the Rhino's Managing Director, we all arrived tired but raring to go.

Once in Viet Nam there was no time for rest, or to acclimatise to the intense 90% humidity in Hanoi. On day one, and somewhat jet-lagged, Paul and I met with staff at the British Embassy, and later in

the day, Paul delivered a fantastic talk at Hanoi's Thang Long University, one of the wealthiest universities in Viet Nam, and a key training ground for Viet Nam's future elite; exactly the kind of young people who could, one day, find themselves exposed to the rhino horn trade. Paul spoke about his love of rhinos and how important it is that we need to change the current fashion in rhino horn in Viet Nam. The audience were overwhelmingly supportive of the #SavetheRhinoVietnam campaign, and eager to take selfies with Paul, a theme quickly emerging throughout the trip.

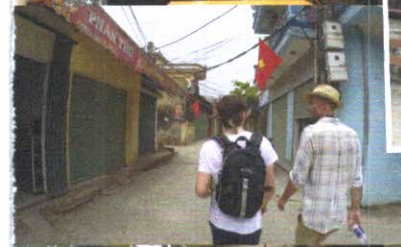
Day two brought one of the most eye-opening experiences in the whole trip. Paul travelled to Nhi Khe village, an infamous hub for wildlife trafficking, especially in rhino horn and ivory. Going undercover, with a secret microphone and camera, he posed as a tourist looking to buy rhino horn. The village consists of one main shopping thoroughfare lined with small, family-run shops where grandparents, toddlers, mothers and fathers all sat together near counters that back onto their houses.

Many of the items being sold were just wooden carvings but, on closer inspection, there was a substantial amount of ivory – carved into chop sticks, bangles or lucky charms – openly on display. The shopkeepers were quite happy to confirm that the items were ivory. Some bragged that their produce was extremely fresh as, according to their sales pitch, if shining a bright light on ivory produces a red tinge, this shows the elephant's blood steeped into the product.

As disturbing as this was, Paul's key mission was to see if it was possible to buy rhino horn. Eventually, after

Main:  
Paul touches  
down in Hanoi  
to launch the  
#Savetherhino  
vietnam  
campaign





Top to bottom: Paul meets with both business leaders and primary school kids in Hanoi; Paul met with several Ambassadors including the South African ambassador; Paul goes undercover in Nhi Khe village and is offered rhino horn and ivory



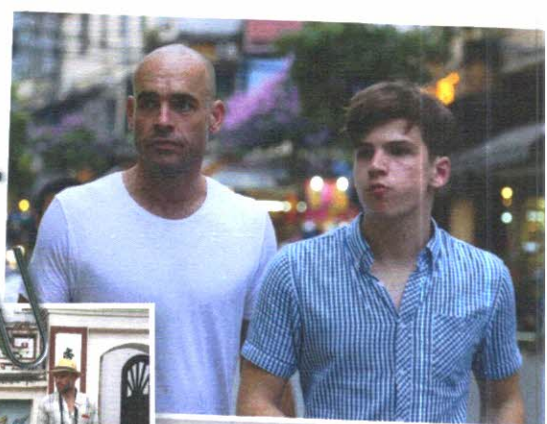
many enquiries and gentle pushing, several shopkeepers confirmed they could get their hands on rhino horn – but at a high price. Horn was apparently not available on the shop premises but, as evidence that they could fulfil our request, they showed us photos on their mobile phones of fully intact horns, placed on scales to confirm weight. We could either purchase a whole horn, or place an order for a specific carving. Several shopkeepers confirmed that they could phone their cousin/sister/uncle, who would then bring the rhino



horn for inspection. Once the sale was agreed, they would arrange delivery of the horn to a location in Hanoi, or even ship the product to China.

Paul is not the typical customer in Nhi Khe, with its Chinese signs and huge number of Chinese symbol carvings for sale. The village is a well-known attraction for Chinese tourists, begging the question why, if the local authorities are aware of what is happening here, why does the village continue to trade, unchecked, in illegal wildlife parts? Paul, of course, didn't get far enough to buy rhino horn. After gathering our evidence, we left the traders, and their wares, behind. To clear the air, Paul and Jake grabbed a football, headed to a nearby field and had a quick game of football. If any rhino horn traffickers were watching that day, they might have been slightly confused by the sight of a six-foot British man shopping for rhino horn and then replicating some of Arsenal's best goals in flip flops and in 90% humidity.

After the realisation of how blatant the rhino horn trade is, Paul wanted to understand more about why some people use rhino horn, so we went to meet with Dr Hong, one of the most prominent traditional medicine practitioners in Viet Nam, and also a qualified medical doctor. Dr Hong explained that in traditional medicine there are many plants that have similar healing effects as rhino horn, but rhino horn is the most potent. It is believed that as rhinos eat a lot of different species of vegetation, the healing effects of all these plants are crystallised into their horns. This was held as the key reason why synthetic or bio-fabricated horn, or even farmed rhino horn, would not be considered to have the same qualities, because the "wild" lifestyle and eating habits is necessary for its power. Dr Hong also dismissed the idea that simply telling people that rhino horn is made of the same material as your fingernails will be effective. Again, this doesn't change the fundamental belief that the rhino's diet and lifestyle is inextricably linked to its perceived medicinal properties.



Right: Paul needed some light relief after finding traders in Nhi Khe village openly offering to sell rhino horn



Dr Hong has spoken out against the use of rhino horn on many occasions, so it was interesting when he explained to Paul that he believes rhino horn does have medicinal benefits. He also believes, however, that the brutality of poaching brings enough bad karma to counteract any benefits of using rhino horn; a view he encourages his peers to advocate.

Paul is a great actor but he is an even better conservationist. He worked tirelessly each day to raise awareness in new audiences in Viet Nam about the problems of the rhino horn trade. The rest of the trip was a whirlwind of school talks, Arrow fan-club events, meeting local business owners, government officials and Vietnamese celebrities, and many more selfies.

This was Paul's first trip to Viet Nam but he managed to see many sides of the country: the friendly and welcoming people, the complex politics, the delicious food, the buzz of the streets and the thousands of motorbikes, and the difficulties being faced tackling the trade in wildlife products – especially rhino horn.

*Paul Blackthorne visited Viet Nam with SRI's Managing Director Susie Offord-Woolley and ENV's Quyen Vu. Save the Rhino has supported ENV since 2012. Since launching the campaign, Paul has become a Patron of SRI.*

### Grants

Since November 2015, **#SavetheRhino Vietnam** campaign raised \$21,884 for ENV's work. In addition to this, since November 2016, we have sent ENV €3,000 from Zoo de la Barben, €9,945 from Zoo-Berlin and Tierpark Berlin, and £6,569 from SRI supporters.