

# Conservationist Esmond Bradley Martin on saving the rhino



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**I**n 1992, Esmond Bradley Martin was appointed United Nations Special Envoy for the Rhinoceros and tasked with meeting with heads of state to impress on them the need to take action to protect the endangered mega-herbivore.

The rhino's dilemma was its 'horn' – a pack of tightly matted hair growing on the pachyderm's forehead. It is made up of the same stuff as human hair and nails.

Twenty-five years later, Martin still insists that saving the rhino depends on political will and the seriousness of leaders. The king of Nepal personally called for the protection of the rhino. The leaders of India and Kenya followed with similar calls.

Standing beside his collection of hundreds of rhino figurines gathered over three decades, Martin is the face behind bringing international attention to the illegal trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory.



PHOTO BY: ESMOND BRADLEY MARTIN

Tall and lanky, with his trademark shock of white hair, Martin realized there was a huge illegal trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory from poached animals when he arrived at the Kenyan coast to carry out research for his PhD in the 1960s. Accompanied by his wife Chryssee, the couple was in their 20s.

Since then they have worked together, along with Lucy Vigne and others, publishing many scientific papers. The Martins highly acclaimed coffee-table book published in 1982, *Run Rhino Run*, received rave reviews as the first lavishly illustrated book with a single aspect -- trade in a species that has been on the planet for the past 60 million years.

### EARLY YEARS

Martin's involvement with the illegal trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory is unusual. Both topics are so wide. This article focuses on the illegal trade in rhino horn, leaving out elephant ivory for another time.

"I'm a geographer, not a zoologist," states

**FOR OVER THREE DECADES, MARTIN IS THE FACE BEHIND BRINGING INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION TO THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN RHINO HORN AND ELEPHANT IVORY.**

**TOP: Anna Merz, a major supporter of rhino conservation in Kenya, is seen here with her orphaned black rhino, Samia, which she hand raised for three years.**

**LEFT PAGE: When it is available, water attracts black rhinos, perhaps more for wallowing than drinking. Black rhinos can go for extended periods without water, obtaining their requirements from plants.**

Martin. "I left the USA in 1966 for my PhD at the University of Liverpool in England because it had one of the largest number of English-speaking staff members working in Africa in one department at the time in the world." The department was geography.

"For my field work I chose Lamu because I saw that it was where the least amount of academic work had been done, but because of instability in the area, I was given research clearance for Malindi. It was not until later that I was able to work in Lamu. My thesis was on the economic history of Malindi with comparison to Lamu."

No one had ever done an academic study on the economy of the ancient ports which was largely based on the dhow trade. Martin's interest originated from the 2,000-year old manuscript written in Greek, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. It is the first written document mentioning the East African ports, and the earliest written reference to the trade in rhino horn and elephant ivory on the East African coast.

"Chryssee and I got more intrigued with the dhow trade after visiting Tanzania, Iran and the Gulf States. They were dealing in illegal products -- people, rhino horn, elephant ivory and other stuff.

"The premise of our book, *Cargoes of the East*, was that if the dhow trade was operating in legal items, half of the dhows would be out of business in the western Indian Ocean."

Watching the dhow trade in the late 1960s

## CONSERVATION

and 1970s, the Martins saw thousands of illegal immigrants from India and Pakistan being carried on the dhows and smuggled into the Gulf States. From the East African ports the dhows sailed away with other smuggled items -- the best quality mangrove poles from the Rufiji Delta, rhino horn and elephant ivory from poached animals to the Arab-Asian countries.

"It was very exciting looking at smuggling because very few academicians get involved in it. It's extremely challenging because you are looking for who the people are - like the traders and poachers, the markets, the networks, the prices. It's a culture."

What started as a PhD thesis morphed into a life-long career for the Martins.

### RANGE OF RHINOS

"You cannot generalize rhinos," says Martin, in response to my question, if rhinos are facing extinction due to poaching.

"There are five species of rhinos in the world. The two species in Africa are the black and the white. Of the black, currently there are 5,200 and the white number 20,000. In 1900, Africa had

**BELOW: When trotting or galloping, the tail of the black rhino is invariably held away from the hind legs. Frequent dust baths cause black rhinos to take on the colour of the ground where they live. This rhino in Amboseli typically matches its surroundings.**

over a 100,000 black rhinos with the southern white close to extinction. "The lowest point for black rhinos was in 1994 with 2,400 surviving. The population doubled until two years ago. Since then the population has remained roughly the same.

The southern white rhino is a success story. From a handful surviving at the start of the 20th century, the numbers have been increasing due to concentrated management efforts. The northern white rhino, a subspecies from the war-torn regions of Central Africa, is however on the brink of extinction.

An estimated 1,134 southern white rhinos were poached in 2015.

"There are many reasons for this," continues Martin. "In 2012 and 2013, the price of rhino horn on the wholesale market in China and Vietnam was \$65,000 per kilogramme. Since then it declined by half because of a glut in the market -- but not for the poachers." They are still in business.

Seventy-five per cent of the poachers in and around South Africa's Kruger National Park, where most of Africa's rhinos occur, are mainly from neighbouring Mozambique. Extremely poor with few options of income, crafty traders exploit them by organizing the poaching, aware that the park is heavily understaffed with 500 rangers instead of the recommended one ranger-per square-ten-kilometres in the 19,485-square-kilometre park.

Coupled with high level corruption, the horns are smuggled into Mozambique, where there is

**65,000**

Estimated number of black rhinos in Africa in 1970

**1,342**

Estimated number of rhinos poached in Africa in 2015



PHOTO BY MOHAMED AMIN



PHOTO BY: INTERNATIONAL RHINO FOUNDATION

little law enforcement, and shipped out from Pemba island (not to be confused with the Tanzanian Pemba).

“Another factor is that the Chinese population has increased in South Africa and Mozambique and they are involved in the illegal trade. Money and corruption drive the trade.”

### **GROWING ECONOMIES**

The economies of China, Vietnam and Laos are the fastest growing in the world today, expanding by six per cent per annum.

“When I was in Vietnam 27 years ago, I only saw one rhino horn. Now you will find lots of rhino horns in Laos and Vietnam with the main buyers being mainland Chinese. It’s a traditional part of Chinese culture and the main uses are for

**The Sumatran rhino is one of the rarest large mammals in the world, with probably less than 100.**

medicinal purposes and the making of jewellery and small ornaments. Rhino horn has very rarely been used as an aphrodisiac in Asia.

In Mumbai, India, some people in the Gujarati community used rhino horn in a paste to rub on an erect penis to make the erection last longer.

In Thailand, it is the penis of the very rare Sumatran rhino which is used as an aphrodisiac in traditional medicine. Although there’s almost no documentation of this, Martin challenges anyone to give him evidence that it’s not true.

“In China, rhino horn has been mostly used to lower fever,” states Martin.

### **RHINOS RUNNING OUT OF TIME**

The two rarest species are the Sumatran and the Javan rhinos.

Martin talks about the Sumatran. “There may be 100 left in the wild, nobody knows. They are in mostly four fragmented groups on the two islands of Borneo and Sumatra.” Few and spread far apart, finding mates is a problem. Very few survive in captivity.

“The Sumatran rhino is the largest mammal in the world which may disappear soon. And

**THE ECONOMIES OF CHINA, VIETNAM AND LAOS ARE THE FASTEST GROWING IN THE WORLD TODAY, EXPANDING BY SIX PER CENT PER ANNUM.**



there's little being done about it while large chunks of indigenous forests are being cleared for palm oil plantations. The Sumatran rhino is in crisis because there is inadequate money and commitment to save it. "It really annoys me that there is so little conservation attention given to this species," says Martin. According to him, the remaining Sumatran rhino should be caught and translocated to a safe, large area and protected.

The other is the Javan rhino. "There are 62 but they are breeding. It shows some hope but there is a downside to it. The entire population is in only one location in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park."

Heavily guarded, the entire population could be wiped out by a disease or worse still by the active Anak Krakatau volcano, the deadliest in the world. When it erupted in 1883, some 36,000 people perished and it has been the loudest sound ever recorded in history. The park lies on the western tip of Java island.

### HANKERING FOR HORNS

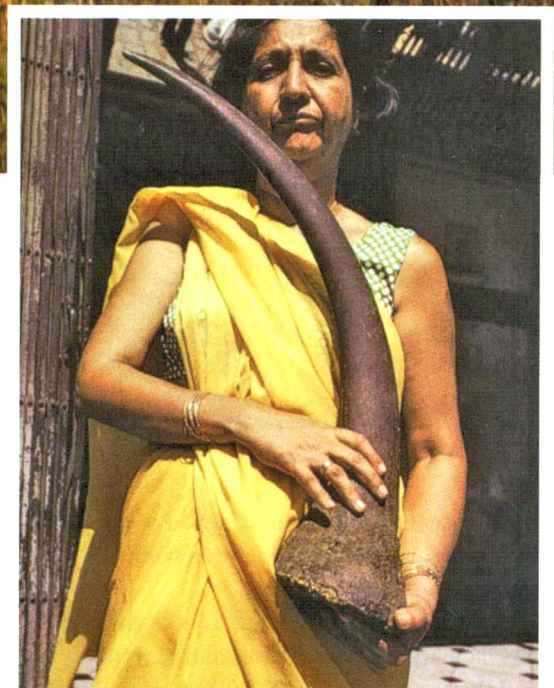
The preference is for the Asian rhino horn. Asians believe that the active ingredients are more concentrated in Asian rhino horns -- which are smaller than the African ones.

### SUCCESS STORY FOR ONE ASIAN PACHYDERM

Fewer than 100 of the Indian greater one-horned rhino remained in the early 20th century. Today there are 2,900 in India and 649 in Nepal, thanks

**TOP: One of the greatest conservation success stories for rhinos is the increase in the numbers in Kaziranga National Park, India, from under 20 animals in 1912 to 2,500 today.**

**RIGHT: Although in the 1980's less than one percent of all the rhino horn sold was used as an aphrodisiac, horns like this horn, held by a Gujarati woman in the muslim Pydhoni area of Bombay, were ground into powder and mixed with herbs for that purpose.**



to strict protection from Indian and Nepalese wildlife authorities.

"It's one of the two greatest success stories in rhino conservation. It's all down to good management and the fact that the two heads of state took a personal interest in rhino conservation," according to Martin.

In the last three years only one rhino has been poached in Nepal, yet the country is one of the poorest in the world.

"In India, a country of 1.3 billion people, rhino, elephant and lion populations are increasing," continues Martin. "How do you explain that in such a populated county?"

He explains after a pause.

At independence in 1947, the two political families -- the Nehrus and the Gandhis -- took keen interest in wildlife conservation. Even today,

the National Board for Wildlife is chaired by the country's prime minister. "The commitment has to come from the top."

There are no major Chinese gangs dealing in rhino horns in India and Nepal. Automatic weapons are difficult to obtain and Indians have strong local conservation NGOs, a vibrant free press, and 90 per cent of the tourists to the national parks are locals.

"These animals are part of their culture," says Martin. They are revered and the Indians have a completely different philosophy from someone like Mugabe in Zimbabwe with his famous statement 'if wildlife pays, it stays'. It is the opposite of Nepal's outlook to wildlife.

Although one of the world's poorest countries, the Nepalese government closed down all the lodges in the Chitwan National Park recently despite losing revenue from tourism. The argument is that the park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a stronghold for the pachyderms and the big cats -- hence the protected area must remain intact for the wildlife. Tourist accommodation is offered just outside the park.

### KENYA'S RHINOS

With an estimated 1,120 rhinos in 2015 -- 680 indigenous black and 440 white originally from South Africa -- Kenya's population is increasing with only 11 poached in 2015 and 10 in 2016. Hard hit in the early 1970s when rhino numbers crashed from about 20,000 to 500 in the early 1990s, rhino numbers are now on the increase thanks to the public and private sectors working together, putting in more resources into the protection of the pachyderm, stiffer jail terms of up to 20 years, improved intelligence gathering and fines of millions of Kenya shillings for poachers and traders.



PHOTOS BY: ESMOND BRADLEY MARTIN

**RIGHT: A black rhino is translocated out of Nairobi National Park into Tsavo National Park Kenya in 1996.**

### A PERSON FOR THE RHINO

"It all comes down to management. If you want the animals, you just have to come up with a management plan and follow it through," states Martin. "I want to see these animals protected, especially the Sumatran -- it's top priority. And find a second home for the Javan."

"I would like my old job as the UN rhino envoy to be taken over by someone and for the person to go and meet the number one person -- the head of state in each of the rhino range states and consuming countries to improve conservation of these animals. Such an approach should not fail."

He has Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe as reference. When Mugabe lamented that there were not enough resources to adequately protect Zimbabwe's rhinos, Martin suggested raising the entry fee into national parks from about one US dollar to 10 for foreign visitors. It was done in a few months.

But demand for rhino horn remains with hawk-eyed poachers on the fence-line watching for an opportunity to strike. ●

**BELOW: A scientist inspects a collection of rhino horns held by the Kenya Wildlife Service in Nairobi, Kenya.**

