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Rhino baron shifts blame for ‘disappointing’ first horn auction

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As part of the online sale, Hume advertised 264 horns, weighing almost 500kg, to local and foreign buyers on a local website translated into Chinese and Vietnamese.

Image: Reuben Goldberg

South African rhino baron John Hume has lashed out against Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa, blaming her for the “disappointing” results of what was the world’s first online rhino horn auction.

Hume would not disclose how many horns he sold – nor what prices they fetched – during the much-publicised auction, which began on Wednesday and closed late on Friday. Nor did he reveal the identity of the bidders.

As part of the online sale, Hume advertised 264 horns, weighing almost 500kg, to local and foreign buyers on a local website translated into Chinese and Vietnamese.

“The auction yielded fewer bidders and fewer sales than anticipated, but the legal domestic trade has now been re-established and the road has been paved for future sales,” he said in a statement issued by his attorney, Izak du Toit, at the weekend.

He argued that Molewa obstructed the auction from going ahead until the last moment, only issuing a sale permit to him under orders from the High Court the day before the auction was set to begin. This, he said, discouraged buyers from registering timeously.

Hume, 75, a former holiday resorts and property developer from Johannesburg, now owns an 8,000 ha farm in North West province where he ranches and “harvests” horns from his 1,500 rhinos on a regular basis. He says horns are removed without pain or blood, by carefully sawing

them off above the growth tissue plate while the animals are under sedation, allowing them to regrow naturally.

Though he has been vilified by several conservation and animal welfare groups which accuse him of seeking to profit from the rhino conservation crisis, Hume argues that legal horn trading could ultimately prevent rhinos from being poached to extinction.

In his formal statement, Hume said the auction was hampered by having to go to court for an urgent order against Molewa and her department, who “appeared to make every effort to derail the auction and to discourage participation therein”.

“Our client however persisted to enforce his constitutional rights and this resulted in the conclusion of this historical and ground-breaking event. Despite the supposed concerns published by the department prior to the auction and despite the fact that Mr Hume only received the auction permit on the morning that bidding was scheduled to commence, our client achieved what he set out to do more than eight years ago: the establishment of a legal trade in a renewable natural resource to generate desperately needed funding to protect rhino as a species under siege,” the statement said.

Hume would now comply with his reporting duties to the department in accordance with the conditions of the auction permit.

“We do not intend to publish the names of the purchasers or the prices achieved at the auction at this stage, out of respect for the privacy and confidentiality of the purchasers. We however assure the public that all bidders were duly authorised to participate in the auction and were issued with the legally required permits to so participate.

“The fact that very few bidders were willing to sign up for the auction can only be attributed to the unlawful delay in handing over the auction permit and the consequential limited time of less than two days for bidders to register,” he said, noting that “many” of the auction lots were still available via Van’s Auctioneers in Gauteng.

“The department almost succeeded in enforcing the invalid rhino horn trade moratorium, but our client persisted and triumphed. Clearly the demand for rhino horn remains and our rhino are still being slaughtered by the thousands, but as from today a legal and sustainable supply has been established. No longer will rhino need to be killed for their horn. No longer shall the supply come exclusively from dead rhino. From this day live rhino shall become more valuable than dead rhino. Despite government bullying tactics and illogical unsustainable animal rights propaganda, we will continue our fight to bring this dark trade into the light in order to conserve our rhinos,” Hume proclaimed in his statement.

Molewa’s spokesman, Albi Modise, did not respond to requests for comment, indicating a statement could be issued on Monday.