

South Africa's online rhino horn auction is a devastating setback

Legal or otherwise, rhino horn auctions send mixed messages and do nothing for conservation

South Africa's High Court in Pretoria recently authorized the first domestic online auction of more than 500 kilograms of rhino horn. A private rhino breeder challenged the constitutionality of the country's ban on rhino horn trade, and ultimately won the case.

AWF is firmly opposed to the online rhino horn trade, since the auction sends mixed messages to the marketplace and does not help conservation efforts. Legalized ivory trade in the past has proven ineffective in stemming poaching efforts, and there is widespread concern that rhino horn could flood the illegal market.

INADEQUATE CONTROLS

The South African Minister of Environmental Affairs has maintained the sale would be monitored and that all horns would be required to stay in the country, but monitoring the sale is nearly impossible. AWF does not believe that any adequate mechanisms exist at the local, national, regional or international level to control the trade.

"Given a rhino's slow reproduction rate, the decline in the continental population and the high value and demand for horn, there is no realistic scope for achieving a sustainable balance between production and supply," says Philip Muruthi, AWF vice-president for species protection.

In 2016, more than 1,000 South African rhinos were slaughtered, for the fourth year in a row. Poachers brutally hack off the rhino's horn, fueling the demand in Asia, where ivory is

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BELOW: Two black rhinos at Ol Pejeta Conservancy.

coveted for ornamental carvings and traditional medicine.

Rhino horn is made from keratin, and has no medicinal or healing properties. From 2007 to 2014, South Africa poaching rates grew exponentially, representing a 9,000% increase.

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

AWF is proud to support the Ngulia Rhino Sanctuary, a stronghold for the remaining black rhino population, by equipping the sanctuary with fences, ranger uniforms, equipment and camera traps. The black rhino is critically

endangered and faces constant threat from illegal poaching, habitat loss, climate change and human-wildlife conflict. Legalizing domestic rhino horn trade would complicate law enforcement efforts and create confusion around what constitutes legal vs. illegal horn.

The court decision undermines the global ban on rhino horn trade and could fuel increased trafficking and poaching. AWF stands firmly against domestic ivory trading and will continue to support conservation efforts to protect this majestic species.

—Megan Berman



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