

# Exploding Some of the Myths About Rhino Horns

THERE is presently great concern about the future of the rhinoceros in Africa. In Uganda, Northern Tanzania and Kenya, where rhino populations have been relatively well documented, their numbers have decreased by an estimated 90% since 1970. The main reason for the sharp decline in rhinos is due to the tremendous demand for rhino horn abroad. In an attempt to learn about the foreign markets for rhino products, we have been to North Yemen, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Thailand and India. In the course of our research we found that many of the commonly-held Western beliefs about rhinos and their horns are incorrect.

**MYTH No. 1:** *The Chinese use rhino horn as an aphrodisiac.*

The major Chinese use of rhino horn is as a fever-reducing drug. Sometimes the Chinese also take scrapings of rhino horn which they steam in water for the purpose of relieving headaches, to "cleanse" the liver and pancreas and for treating patients with heart trouble. Occasionally an ointment is made from rhino horn to cure skin diseases. The Chinese have never used rhino horn as a "love potion", nor do they do so today.

Instead, the Chinese, who wish to increase their sexual performances, buy dried tiger penis and testicles, which they place in a bottle of brandy for up to six months. They drink some of the resultant potion just before engaging in sexual activity. The dried sexual parts

by Ian Parker and Esmond Bradley Martin

of the male tiger are the most common of the aphrodisiacs made from animal products for use in Hong Kong, Singapore, Macao, Taiwan and Thailand. They are dried and packaged in mainland China. People can buy them for between \$17 and \$78 in a traditional Chinese pharmacy. Whether or not they are all "genuine" is a matter of conjecture. Other available aphrodisiacs in South East Asia include dried deer penis and testicles, dried geckos, and snake blood, mixed with snake gall bladder (prevalent in Taiwan).

**MYTH No. 2:** *Rhino horn is ground down to powder in Africa and then sent to traders in Asia for sale.*

In recent years shavings, but not powder, from carved rhino horns have been re-exported from North and South Yemen to mainland China, but these shavings constitute only one-tenth of the annual supply of rhino horn, and they do not appear for sale in the Chinese traditional pharmacies of South-east Asia. Their main use is as additives to low-cost drugs for general purposes in mainland China.

In Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand (all major rhino horn consumers), dealers do not buy rhino horn powder. Once ground down, the fibre is a pale greyish colour and may be difficult to distinguish from a powder made from water buffalo or even cow

horn. Since the Asian wholesalers are usually not experts on rhino horn, they are especially wary of the possibility of being tricked by substitutes. Moreover, traditional pharmacists in South-east Asia always produce in front of their customers the horn itself and make scrapings from it only at the time of the sale.

**MYTH No. 3:** *The price of African rhino horn is equal approximately to the price of gold.*

The price of African rhino horn has always been far below the price of gold in the Twentieth Century. In the 1930s the wholesale price of a kilo of East African rhino horn was about \$7, whilst the price of gold was \$35 a Troy ounce. In the 1940s the price of rhino rose to \$8 a kilo, whilst the price of gold was \$926 a kilo. In the 1950s East African rhino horn continued to increase in value to \$21 a kilo; in the 1960s its price was \$24 a kilo, a small fraction of the value of gold then. During the latter 1960s and in the 1970s East Africa supplied more rhino horn to the international market than any other geographical region, and the demand for it began to soar in 1976, when the wholesale price for it jumped from \$32 the previous year to \$105. It was then when the North Yemenis began buying huge quantities. In 1977 the price almost doubled again, to \$190, and in 1978 the price rose to \$300. Towards the end of 1979 the wholesale price of rhino horn reached \$675 a kilo—a 2,000 per cent increase in only five years. During this same period, gold increased from \$105 a Troy ounce (or \$2,778 a kilo) in July 1976 to \$850 a Troy ounce (or \$22,487 a kilo) in early 1980. Thus, in January 1980, when gold was at its peak, rhino horn was worth only three per cent of gold's price.

**MYTH No. 4:** *Only the horn of the rhinoceros is of economic value.*

Although the wholesale price of African rhino has increased 21 fold since 1975, the dried skin per animal is even more valuable. The average African rhino carries about three kilos of horn (presently worth \$2,025 in total), but the average mature rhino (either black or white) can produce 100 kilos of suitable dried hide which is in demand in Asia for its medicinal properties (used mainly for treating skin diseases). The one hundred kilos of dried hide are now worth \$18,000 on the wholesale market in South-east Asia.

People do not often realise that the same is true in respect of the African elephant, which produces on average of 30 square metres of dried hide worth about \$3,240 wholesale; the major use of this hide is for the manufacture of luxury leatherware in the developed world. The ivory, on the other hand, is usually limited to approximately 15 kilos per African elephant, which in December 1979 was worth about \$1,050 wholesale, or about one-third the value of the dried hide.



(Left)—A typical medicine shop in Hong Kong where potions containing rhino horn are on sale. (Photo: E. Bradley Martin)

Compared with the elephant, the rhino is far more valuable: \$21,000 vs \$4,300. These figures exclude the marketable meat of the animals. In addition to its hide and horns, other parts of the rhinoceros are in demand today for medicinal uses in Thailand, Burma and Nepal: the stomach, urine, dung, dried blood, hoof and bone. However, aside from the hoof, these exotica are difficult to obtain and there is some evidence that because of their scarcity the demand for them may be declining.

**MYTH No. 5:** *The Chinese buy most of the available rhino horn today.*

From 1972 to 1978 the Arabs of North Yemen purchased and consumed more rhino horn than any other country in the world—about 40 per cent of all the horn which reached the world market. The horn imported into North Yemen has only one use; it is carved into handles for daggers called “jambias”. From 1972 to 1978 the North Yemen demand for rhino horn was responsible for the deaths of approximately 8,500 rhinos.

The Japanese and South Koreans purchased about 13 per cent (or one tonne) of the available horn during this recent seven-year period. Taken together, the North Yemenis, Japanese and Koreans were responsible for about 53% of the world's imports of rhino horn.

Of course, the Chinese, both on the mainland and overseas, do purchase large quantities of rhino horn, but theirs is definitely less than half of the world's total. It is difficult to quantify how much they consume because Thailand and Indonesia are also importers and the percentage of horn consumed by the minority Chinese in these countries cannot accurately be estimated since Thais and Indonesians also use it.

The consumption of rhino products is common in India, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, North Yemen and South Yemen; and rhino products are probably also used in some other Asian countries as well because of their long-standing importance in traditional Chinese pharmacology.

For over 2,000 years Asians have made use of rhino products for treating a multitude of ailments.



(Above)—This shopkeeper in Udaipur, India, proudly displays an ornamental shield made of rhinoceros hide.

(Below)—Label on a Chinese medicine bottle.

# 犀羚解毒片

RHINOCEROS & ANTELOPE  
HORN FEBRIFUGAL TABLETS

适应：感冒、发烧、头痛咳嗽