



# Yemen strives to end rhino horn trade

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

*In January 1993, Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne paid a 17-day visit to Yemen to follow up previous work for WWF International, and in order to attend a workshop, the first of its kind, to discuss the rhino horn issue. They were able to look back on a gradually improving scene and forward to one of some hope for the future of the rhino in East Africa.*

**I**N THE EARLY 1980S, AN estimated 1,500 kilos of rhino horn were being imported annually into Yemen to make handles for traditional daggers or jambias. The quantity dropped to around 330 kilos a year from 1985 to 1990. During our visit to Yemen in April 1992, we were shocked to learn that from August 1990 to March 1992 over 750 kilos of rhino horn had been smuggled into Yemen. The reason was simple. It had become easier to obtain the horn in eastern Africa and thereafter it was transported to the Gulf and into Yemen. In April 1992, we talked to the Foreign Minister about what could be done about the increased smuggling. One important outcome of this meeting was that Yemen's religious leader, the much revered Grand Mufti, issued a religious edict in May 1992 stating, 'Killing rhinos for their horns, skin or other purposes is

prohibited and not allowed. Therefore, killing the rhinoceros for its horn must be prevented and we must protect its existence and allow it freedom until its natural death'.

In late November 1992, Esmond Martin returned for further meetings with the Foreign Minister and Minister of State about the problem, this time as the Special Envoy for the Rhino for the United Nations Environment Programme. The pressure he exerted on the government and Yemen's concern about the adverse international publicity, resulted in immediate action. On 2 December 1992, the Ministry of Supply and Trade issued a decree stating that from this date domestic trade in and use of raw, unprocessed rhino horn was prohibited and that all horns would have to be registered with the Ministry and marked within 60 days. If a trader registered his

rhino horn within the time period, he could legally possess it, but would not be allowed to sell the horn or make handles out of it. If he had not registered his horn within this period, its possession would be illegal. Later, surprise inspections were to take place, and any unmarked horns were to be confiscated. This decree was a major step forward because prior to December 1992 it was legal to sell and use raw rhino horn in Yemen to make dagger handles.

#### **Sanaa's old souk**

The Sanaa souk is where craftsmen make the traditional daggers, worn daily by many Yemeni men in the north. In January 1993, on our first afternoon of investigations in the souk, despite the decree, we did see three men in two workshops filing new pieces of rhino horn into dagger handles. There were

about ten handles being worked altogether. We recognized the horn by the colour and by the fact that pink sheets of plastic lay beneath the handles to collect the valuable shavings which can be sold to the Chinese or Koreans for medicines. The three craftsmen refused to allow us to take any photographs, which helped to verify the fact that they knew they were using this material illicitly. We did not see new rhino horn being used in the souk again. We counted 57 workshops that were open on that afternoon, and 85 craftsmen making daggers. These numbers were similar to previous counts we had made.

We then interviewed some of the jambia salesmen. Business was slow, they complained, and some were considering giving up the work, as little profit could be made in selling jambias with plastic or water buffalo horn or even camel nail handles, which sell retail for about \$6.5, \$11, and \$21 respectively. In comparison, a new jambia with a rhino horn handle sells for 10,000 to 50,000 rials (\$217 to \$1,087) depending on the handle's size and craftsmanship. What makes it even harder for the salesmen is that most craftsmen who produce expensive jambias with rhino

horn prefer to keep them to sell in their workshops, as they are scarce now. In 1992, out of every thousand new jambias made, less than three would have rhino horn handles. We saw only one retail stall selling new jambias with rhino horn handles on this visit, recognizable as they are a paler caramel colour. Most of the salesmen were offering jambias with old rhino horn handles for sale. These old, darker handles are polished and sometimes attached to new blades, but on the display stands, good jambias are mixed in amongst those with handles of water buffalo horn, plastic, camel nail and even wood, and usually only Yemenis can spot the expensive jambias.

#### Environment Protection Council Seminar

Mr Mohsen Ali Al-Hamdani, Chairman of the Environment Protection Council (EPC), who is also Minister of State, organized an important wildlife conservation seminar held in Sanaa on 26 January 1993. We showed a recently made TVE video on the rhino horn trade. Slides, which we had sent recently to the EPC, were shown with an Arabic narration,

and articles we had written were translated and distributed to the audience, as well as the various new decrees.

The most important aspect of this seminar, however, was that the main family who has traditionally traded in rhino horn attended, and for the first time this family met the conservation community and certain government officials for dialogue. Mohammed, the head of the family, left his seat near the British Ambassador, and took the stand towards the beginning of the seminar. He thanked all the organizations protecting the rhino



Jonathan Scott

and stated that since Yemen banned imports in 1982, not a single rhino horn had been imported into Yemen! He urged the United Nations to protect the craftsmen as well as the rhinos. Esmond Martin gave two speeches about the rhino horn trade, which were both translated into Arabic.

Another valuable outcome of the seminar was the media coverage. Never before had a wildlife issue been given so much publicity in Yemen. We were both interviewed on Yemeni television along with Minister Al-Hamdani for the main evening news. The EPC certainly did their best to make the seminar a success, and as Minister Al-Hamdani said, it marked a hopeful start towards further educational wildlife seminars.

#### Negotiations with the main traders

We spent two afternoons and evenings after the seminar with the main family dealing with rhino horn in their *mufraj*, sitting cross-legged on cushions around the room, in the traditional Yemeni fashion, chewing qat, and drinking sweet tea. We were joined by the Secretary General of the Environment Protection Council,

Hussein Al-Guneid, and the Director General, Ali Awadh Salem, who helped with the discussions and interpreted for us.

In explaining the history of the jambia business, Mohammed told us that his family had been buying rhino horn for over 100 years. Most of this horn was bought from businessmen in Aden up until the late 1960s, and thereafter sent directly to Sanaa. In the 1950s, the family said they used 250 to 300 kilos a year; in 1960 and 1961 (excluding the civil war years, 1962 to 1970), about 400 kilos a year; and in the 1970s, when business boomed, a minimum of 800 kilos annually. From the 1950s to the 1982 import ban, they told us that they sold about half of the rhino horn they bought to the fifty or so other families making jambias. Other materials, mainly water buffalo horn, but also wood and camel nails were also used during this period.

Members of the family explained to us that after the 1982 ban on rhino horn imports, they went to Hong Kong and bought caramel-coloured plastic handles which they attached to their blades and sold for the same price as new jambias with rhino horn. In 1983, jambias with either rhino horn or plastic handles sold retail for about 1,000 rials (\$217) each. The plastic was not strong, however, and it started to bend and crack. Two years later, people stopped buying these jambias. The plastic handles available today are mostly obtained in a roughly shaped form from Thailand and Syria for \$.60 each. This plastic is too orange in colour, shiny and transparent, and the craftsmen can only make cheap jambias with today's handles. The water buffalo horn comes, as in the past, from India: one tonne costs up to 14,000 rupees today (\$482). One family member goes to Bombay or Hyderabad to contact his agent who sends the horn to Aden. At the moment, the family's supplies are sufficient, but as with the shiny plastic, they cannot make expensive jambias with this horn. Camel nails are also cheap. They are bought locally or imported from Saudi Arabia. They are difficult to make into handles, however, as they have to be bent by force or heat and glued together. For this reason, and because of its smell, this material is not popular.

About half, say 50, of the people making jambias today, according to Mohammed, are members or employees of his

family, leaving about 50 others, each with their own workshop. Members of the family have about seven of their own workshops in the souk. These figures tallied fairly well with our counts. Mohammed told us about 500 jambias with all types of handles were made each day, or 3,000 per week, which amounts to 150,000 in a year. This figure is consistent with the annual demand for new jambias we had estimated. The population of what was formerly called North Yemen is about 9 million; with an annual increase of 3.16 percent this population expands by 284,000 a year; therefore about 142,000 males come of age every year, most requiring daggers. We learned that each year 120,000 of these jambias are produced with buffalo horn handles, 25,000 with plastic and 5,000 with camel nail. Mohammed said that just before the 1982 import ban they produced about 1,200 rhino horn handles a year. He confirmed to us that the demand for rhino horn is still strong. At today's import price of 52,500 rials a kilo (\$1,140) for an average-sized horn, if it were allowed and available, Mohammed said he would want to buy 500 to 800 kilos of rhino horn a year (his family would use half and sell the rest to the other jambia makers, as in the past). This therefore, represents the current demand for rhino horn in Yemen at present-day prices.

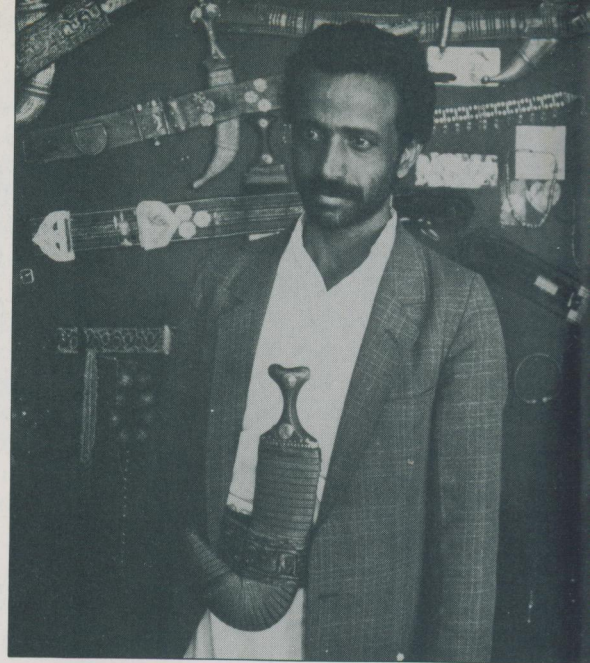
After collecting much detailed information about the jambia industry it was Mohammed's turn to ask us how we could help him. One of his main concerns was what to do with 500 kilos of rhino horn left-overs which he had in store in the souk and could not sell. From a kilo of rhino horn, two-thirds has to be discarded as chips and powder in order to make on average two handles. The craftsmen used to sell this material to the Chinese and Koreans who legally exported it to eastern Asia until Yemen's 1987 ban on exports. Since that ban, Mohammed lamented that he had not found any buyers. The main reason he has not sold his powder and chips recently, however, is because his asking price is now far too high: \$800 to \$1,000 a kilo. This is almost the same price as whole rhino horn because, he said, his waste is very pure and clean. Mohammed requested that the international conservation community should either assist him to sell his waste or should compensate him for it.

Mohammed then asked if the United Nations and World Wide Fund for Nature could help the many craftsmen who had no work because of the ban on rhino horn. While it can take a craftsman one or

two days to make an expensive jambia with a rhino horn handle, the same craftsman can make about five jambias with water buffalo horn handles in just a day. Thus, with little rhino horn available to carve after 1982, fewer workers were needed. Of the 200 or so people making jambias in 1982, after the ban, only about 100 remained, according to Mohammed. Many people are now without work and are struggling to survive. Many started this work when they were very young and did not go to school; they are thus illiterate and cannot now find other jobs. A re-training scheme must be devised and Mohammed said he would talk to the craftsmen and make a project proposal to give to the EPC for possible donor funding. The main trading family has additional income, however. This is because they own a modern blade-making machine producing 500 blades a day which, according to Mohammed, is the only such machine in Yemen. In addition, in 1990, the family imported from Germany and Japan two large computer-run sewing machines to mass-produce belts for the jambias.

Mohammed's third request was for us to find him a suitable high class substitute for rhino horn which would take more time and need greater skill to carve. He gave us a sample of the plastic the family originally had bought from Hong Kong to show us the preferred colour, and we agreed to try to copy it with a stronger, more durable and more heat resistant plastic. He suggested calling it Plastic Number 1 as opposed to artificial or synthetic rhino horn. We were told that Yemenis do not mind what material the handles are made of as long as the handles look and feel agreeable and last for many years. Mohammed asked that once a specific plastic has been formulated and accepted in Yemen, the plastic be then manufactured in Yemen in their own special factory. By producing an expensive and acceptable alternative to rhino horn, the jambia business could again give more employment as more time would be required to complete the superior handles, as well as reducing demand for rhino horn.

Mohammed ended our meetings by stating, 'In front of God, men are responsible for the rhinos' death; we do not want to kill these animals; we will do our best, with your help, to protect the



*This shopkeeper in 'Thula, northern Yemen, wears a fine old jambia with a rhino horn handle.*

rhinos; ' but, he urged again, 'we need to protect the human being as well'.

#### **Major decline in rhino horn business**

We were reassured to learn on this visit, not from our meetings with Mohammed and his family, but from our major informer, that rhino horn imports into Yemen had once more dropped in 1992, probably to their lowest level since 1986. The main trading family told our informer that they had received in 1992 only one 150-kilo consignment of rhino horn. The horns had been smuggled from the East African coast on engine-powered dhows to Oman. A Yemeni living in Oman had brought the horns from Muscat to Sanaa. The main trading family had selected only 30 kilos of the best horn, as the majority was of poor quality. Chinese businessmen bought most of the rest for export.

The main trader told our informer - before our meetings with the family - that he would be pleased to buy a large 4-kilo horn for 60,000 rials (\$1,304) a kilo, but if the pieces of horn were only 10 cm long, he would offer only 10,000 rials (\$217) a kilo. The trader took a bag of about ten pieces of cut rhino horn from under his seat, to show our informer, as an example of this small size. He stated that any rhino horn would have to be brought to him into the souk. His Oman contact had left, but he had a friend in Jeddah who could smuggle it in. He also said he would like to buy leopard and cheetah skins to sell in Saudi Arabia.

Another dealer also offered our informer 60,000 rials (\$1,304) a kilo for a big rhino horn. This man said he had a few uncut rhino horns which he had obtained



Many jambias with old rhino horn handles are for sale in Sanaa's souk for about \$1,000 each.

from Mohammed's family, but as business is bad he is less often in the souk, and farms instead. A further jambia dealer said he did not want any more rhino horn as he obtained all his 'needs' from a friend living near Riyadh who brings it by truck through Sadah in the north of Yemen. He had received enough last year. He said he had sold to this friend 2.5 kilos of rhino horn powder in 1992 for 30,000 rials a kilo. Today's price for rhino horn powder, he said, is 20,000 to 30,000 rials (\$435 to \$652) a kilo, depending on purity.

Another of the larger jambia families told our informer they were searching for a new and more profitable line of work and may have to close down their entire jambia business; they had not been able to buy rhino horn for the past three years and had little work to do. One other main jambia maker had left his business last year due to the lack of rhino horn.

#### Yemen's economic difficulties

In the past decade, inflation has gradually increased in Yemen. In 1983, the Yemeni rial was 4.6 to the dollar. By February 1993 it had risen to around 46. The supply of rhino horn is dependent, of course, on price as well as on demand. In the last 18 months the price of rhino horn has doubled in rials, but in dollars has remained roughly the same.

One of the main reasons for Yemen's recent high inflation rate of around 40 percent has been the sudden human population expansion within the country. Since June 1990, due to the Gulf War, 850,000 immigrants had to return from neighbouring countries to Yemen, and brought large sums of money with them.

Furthermore, the natural population increase is high. To compound these circumstances, more people are moving into the towns, but there are few new jobs. In 1990, 10.5 percent of the workforce was unemployed, but by early 1992 it had risen to 27 percent; the government expects that in 1995, 35 percent or one million Yemenis, will be unemployed, according to the EPC National Report of June 1992.

In order to conserve foreign exchange, the government has been trying to reduce official imports of goods. Smuggling of items, other than basic food stuffs, has amounted to at

least two-thirds of all imports over the last five to ten years, and up to 75 percent in 1992. The 2,000 km land boundary and 2,000 km coastline are difficult to patrol effectively. Yemen is a consumer-orientated society, and now with a fall in overseas remittances from the Yemeni immigrants in the Gulf (from \$1 billion a year before 1990 to \$100 million in 1992), and the reduction of foreign aid due to Yemen's stance in the Gulf Crisis, people are living beyond their means. There has been no per capita growth in the last two years. The country's approximate \$7 billion debt is also very serious. Despite these acute economic problems, certain sectors of the economy are expanding. There are numerous small investments, especially in shops. The country's oil production has been gradually increasing since 1988 and a lot of money has been made by the government from leasing oil concessions. Nevertheless, economic difficulties in Yemen will continue to prevent the country's rhino horn dealers from being able to offer competitive international prices for the world's dwindling supply of rhino horn.

Meeting Foreign Minister, Dr Abdul Karim Al-Iryani, we congratulated him on the new decree banning Yemen's domestic trade in and use of raw rhino horn, and the decree number 240 of 2 December 1992 in which the Cabinet had approved Yemen joining CITES. We reminded Dr Al-Iryani that the registration of rhino horn had to be completed within a matter of days. He fully supported the need for this stock-taking, and afterwards the need for surprise raids on the workshops every month or two.

We told the Minister about earlier meetings we had had that week with members of the Environment Protection Council. The EPC, as a result, had produced a National Plan for funds needed for rhino conservation for the UNEP Rhino Donors' Conference to be held in Nairobi in mid-1993. Two new proposals in the National Plan were a training scheme to help government inspectors identify rhino horn and a bonus system to reward those inspectors who find illicit rhino horns.

#### The jambias of southern Yemen

From 1967 to 1990, South Yemen (more correctly then called the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) had a Marxist government. After the Marxists took over, they confiscated the jambias, knives and guns from the people to prevent fighting. The general public was not allowed to wear a weapon. In order to find out whether the demand for jambias was coming back, following unity with North Yemen in 1990 and a more democratic government, we spent a week in the south.

In the largest city, Aden, even before the 1967 Marxist Revolution, people did not wear jambias, being more influenced by western dress. Most men in Mukalla, the second largest city in the south, owned a jambia then, as did the villagers in the Hadramout, the main wadi running west to east through South Yemen. They were worn daily, however, only by the nomadic Bedu tribesmen. On our visit to Mukalla, we saw a lot of development starting, based on oil, but extremely few jambias. Nearly all we saw were worn by northerners working in the south. We did see some southern jambias, recognizable by their smaller size and different shape. In Mukalla, a group of about six men, whom we passed in the street, were wearing them: they were all Bedu. Apart from the Bedu and some of the older people, no one is really interested in wearing the jambia any more, and there are very few in the area now. About 20 years ago, some of the jambias were sold to Saudis, but some families tended to hide their jambias for their sons to inherit. Since 1990, most young men have been choosing to sell their inherited jambias because they need the money and have no use for them.

We learned that five men (three Bedu and two townsmen) made jambias in Mukalla in the early 1960s and there were two jambia craftsmen in the nearby coastal town of Shihr. In those days, rhino horn was cheap and was brought from eastern Africa to Aden and then

transported along the coast to Mukalla, so not many people bothered with substitute materials. The craftsmen would often make specific designs on the jambias on special request. Most of the craftsmen have since died. Even jambia repair work has to be done today in Sanaa. The few southern jambias we did see in antique silver shops in Mukalla, Seiyun and Tarim, often had rhino horn handles and were priced from around \$140 to \$1,100.

Our visit to the Hadramout was reassuring in the sense that it is unlikely that the demand for rhino horn will pick up significantly in the foreseeable future for the jambia industry in southern Yemen. Nor is it likely that the southerners will require jambias made in Sanaa, especially as the style of jambia is different. The few jambias that are left in the south seem to be enough for the Bedu, now that they are no longer wanted by the townspeople.

**Major strides: efforts must continue**

Major strides forward were made during our January / February 1993 visit to Yemen concerning rhino conservation efforts,

both from within the government and through the media, with help from Yemen's only government wild life conservation organization, the Environment Protection Council:

(1) The main jambia-making family agreed to co-operate with us, if we could in turn help the craftsmen by producing a high-cost material for jambia handles.

(2) The government publicly confirmed its intention to implement its decree prohibiting the domestic trade in and use of raw rhino horn, and the carrying out of a marking system for rhino horns.

(3) The government progressed towards joining CITES.

(4) The media gave much attention to the plight of the rhino and agreed to continue to highlight the problems of the rhino horn trade.

(5) The EPC held an extremely successful seminar on the rhinoceros.

(6) The EPC produced proposals to stop Yemen's rhino horn trade, to be presented for funding at UNEP's June 1993 Rhino Donors' Conference.

The situation in Yemen is once again encouraging, with a major reduction in the rhino horn trade in 1992. In the long-term, the government needs to increase the number of patrol vehicles on the borders, as well as the number of spot-checks for rhino horn in the souk; and more education is needed about rhinos throughout the country in order to reduce the demand for rhino horn. In the meantime, the Yemen government must be congratulated for focussing so much attention on the problem. ●

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The resident Hippopotami have long ruled out the possibility of a swimming pool while the roaming herd of bull Elephant have long ago put an end to any exotic gardens. However indigenous shrubs are plentiful, the meals produced from our charcoal hearth kitchens delicious and wholesome, the staff and management very friendly, all perfectly complemented by the most comfortable of safari facilities.

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