

Coming Into Line

Finally, Yemen appears to be serious about stopping rhino horn imports, write *Lucy Vigne* and *Esmond Martin*.

NOWHERE IN THE WORLD IS new rhino horn so blatantly open for the public to see as in Yemen's capital Sanaa. Along the narrow dusty passages of the bustling souk in Sanaa's old town, beyond beckoning money changers, sacks filled with coffee beans and spices, and rolls of colourful materials glistening with sequins, one reaches the dagger craftsmen in their small workshops deep inside the market. They sit cross-legged all day, filing, sandpapering, drilling and polishing handles. They are surrounded by small mounds of these handles, usually made of water buffalo horn or sometimes plastic. However, an occasional craftsman has two or three larger handles, separate from the rest, which are a slightly paler beige colour. These have been cut from rhino horn and are recognisable to the trained eye.

This illegal trade in Africa's rhino horn continues and is a great threat to both black and white rhinos. Since 1993, Yemen has imported probably more rhino horn than any other country. However, after several years of international pressure on Yemen to join CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna), the president of the Republic of Yemen signed a decree on January 5, 1997, giving his approval for the Yemen government to join the treaty. Then, on April 23, 1997, Yemen's foreign minister signed the final accession document to join the Convention.

This is a great step forward. The government rightly hopes it will open the floodgates for foreign assistance and

funding to help Yemeni officials enforce their ban on international trade in endangered wildlife and wildlife products. Conservationists in East Africa particularly hope this assistance will be forthcoming in order to help stop Yemen's continuing trade in rhino horn.

Although North Yemen banned international trade in rhino horn in 1982, all through the 1980s it continued to import large quantities of rhino horn

on rhino horn trading in recent years, and attention is now being focused on Yemen to do more.

In recent years, quantities of rhino horn entering Yemen have declined. From 1994 to December 1996, a minimum of between fifty and one hundred kilos of rhino horn have been smuggled into Yemen annually, nearly all from Africa. This is the equivalent of up to twenty-five rhinos—seventy-five in the last three years.

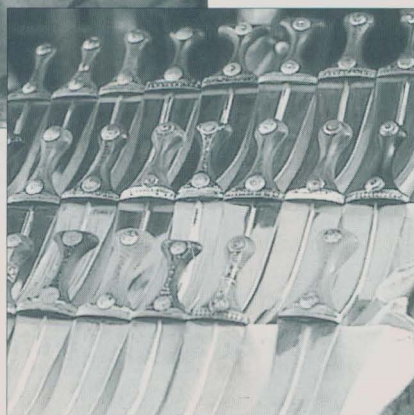
What is the origin of these rhinos? In Tanzania, a rhino was poached in the Ngorongoro Crater in 1995, and two more in 1996. It is possible that a few rhinos have been killed in the Selous Game Reserve, a huge area more than twice the size of Wales with much thick bush where little patrolling occurs. In Kenya no rhinos are known officially to have been poached since 1991, although since 1994 two rhinos have disappeared in the Aberdare National Park and two more around the Maasai Mara. In Zaïre's Garamba National Park, home to the only known wild northern white rhinos, three have not been seen since 1992, presumably poached, and two

A Yemeni man admires a jambiya made of rhino horn in Sanaa's old souk.

Photographs: © Lucy Vigne



Jambiyas with a variety of handles are for sale in Yemen, but rhino horn is always considered the best.



more were poached and their horns taken in 1996. In Sudan's capital Khartoum, traders still occasionally receive new rhino horn, and it is possible that a few remnant rhinos may survive in the civil war-torn south of the country. The majority of rhino horn reaching Yemen probably comes from old stocks held by governments, private individuals and public institutions. There have been several documented thefts of old rhino

from East Africa for making into handles for the traditional Yemeni dagger called a *jambiya*. In 1987 the re-export of left-over rhino horn chips and shavings (mainly to China) was banned, but again not enforced effectively. A prohibition on domestic trade in raw rhino horn by 1992 was similarly never implemented properly. In a country rife with political and economic problems, little has been done to enforce the bans

horns over the past few years; for example, two white rhino horns were recently stolen from the National Museums of Kenya.

Traders in Yemen claim there are many ways to smuggle rhino horn into the country. Popular routes in the last two years have been from Djibouti by ship or dhow to the Yemen coast, particularly to Mocha or Khukhah, and then by road to Sanaa. Cattle boats travelling from northeast African ports also take horns to Yemen, especially to the Mocha area. Ships moving from Port Sudan to Hodeidah have been known to smuggle rhino horn recently. Diplomats in Khartoum—Somalis, Sudanese and Yemenis—have sent horns illegally in their diplomatic bags by air to Sanaa or by ship to Hodeidah. Another easy route is with Muslim pilgrims going to Saudi Arabia. Such pilgrims come from Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and other African countries and they bring rhino horns with them on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina; they sell the horns to traders in Jeddah to help pay for their pilgrimage and the horns are usually then moved overland to Sanaa. Other places of export mentioned by Yemeni traders in 1996 were Kenya,

Ethiopia and Eritrea.

In order to reduce the chances of detection, the horn is often chopped into smaller oblong pieces (roughly the size of a *jambiya* handle) and mixed in with goods being transported to Yemen. A common method is to put the horn pieces into jars of honey. Sometimes the horn is buried in cartons of match boxes or inserted into raw meat. All the traders spoken to in 1996 were still confident that it is easy to move small amounts of rhino horn into Yemen undetected.

The price for rhino horn reaching Yemen has remained stable since 1985 at around US \$1,000 a kilo, even though the supply has been gradually falling. This indicates a decline in demand for rhino horn. Since 1990 the economy of Yemen has been dropping and the living standard of the average Yemeni has fallen. Fewer men can afford to buy *jambiyas* with rhino horn handles today. Richer men choose the older, more valuable ones which sell for about US \$1,400 each; they do not want *jambiyas* with newly-made rhino horn handles—which sell for about US \$285—as these are considered inferior. As the middle class shrinks, the demand for *jambiyas*

with new rhino horn handles is falling; *jambiyas* of water buffalo horn, plastic, camel nail or wood are more affordable, priced from about US \$14 to as little as US \$4.

Nonetheless, this widening gap between rich and poor in Yemen cannot be relied upon to keep demand for new rhino horn down. The restructuring of Yemen's economy in 1996 should lead to an increase in jobs and salaries in the next few years. It is therefore imperative that Yemen's government, having at last signed the final CITES document, receives outside assistance to help it try to end the trade in new rhinoceros horn.

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin are co-authors, alongside Crawford Allan of a new report On a Knife's Edge, detailing the rhinoceros horn trade in Yemen. The report is published by TRAFFIC International and can be obtained, free, by contacting any regional TRAFFIC office. TRAFFIC is a joint programme of the World Wide Fund for Nature and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) designed to monitor international trade in endangered and threatened species.

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