

Sounding the Horn

Our concerns around the UK trade in rhino horn antiques

Background

In recent years there has been a lot of interest in the UK trade in antique elephant ivory, leading the Government to recognise this trade is detrimental to wild elephant populations and should be banned.

A law with some exemptions is now being brought into UK legislation to stop the trade. With similar conservation issues for rhinos, we wanted to find out more about the UK trade in rhino horn antiques and if there was an impact affecting rhinos across Africa and Asia.

We carried out research to see if items were in fact true antiques, if the international trade laws were highlighted before sale, and finally, if the UK trade could be laundering modern rhino horn.

Key findings

- 300** Number of individual items described as **'definitely', 'probably' or 'possibly' rhino horn item offered for sale** (with 80% described as **'definitely'**)
- 323** number of **rhino horn lots offered**
- 268** number of **rhino horn lots sold**
- 12** **main categories** of rhino horn antiques
- 51** **number of auction houses** offering rhino horn antiques in 2017
- 58** number of lots whose **description included the weight**
- £30** **lowest price achieved** for a rhino horn auction lot in 2017
- £65,000** **highest price achieved** for a rhino horn auction lot in 2017
- £1,287,855** **Total sale price achieved** for rhino horn auction lots in 2017

What we did

The 12-month Survey followed auction house sales of items described as 'definitely', 'probably' or 'possibly' rhino horn via three online platforms, as well as sales by Bonhams, which sold 32 items through its own system.

The Survey did not include items sold by antique dealers, antique shops or private sale, nor sales on the wider internet. We documented how lots were advertised, which auction houses were selling them, and the sale outcome.

Our thoughts

"It seems possible that the UK antiques trade is being used to launder rhino horn, whether pre-1947 but not worked, or even modern horn.

"Identifying bogus, recent or upcycled items requires significant expertise, which varies from auction house to house, and/or routine pre-sale scientific testing, which does not currently take place.

"The Survey has revealed worrying loopholes and trends that we consider render the trade open to exploitation."

Main concerns

- No radiocarbon-14 dating was done, to our knowledge, to verify that items offered for sale were pre-1947
- No DNA testing was apparently carried out
- Expertise in identifying suspect items will be limited if the auction houses only sees one or two rhino horn items each year
- In some cases, the working of rhino horn lots appeared minimal or crude
- CITES issues and export regulations were inconsistently flagged
- Four auction houses advertised some lots in Mandarin; 17 stated the weight of the rhino horn
- Proper vetting of rhino horn antiques is limited
- Rhino horn lots being sold at substantially less than the 'grind-down' value
- 34 of the 51 auction houses in the Survey appear not to be members of professional associations that work hard to promote and improve best practice
- Formal investigation of suspect items is hampered by lack of local experience, resources, professional input, technical back-up and time



We noted some unusual, crudely worked items, and necklaces with beads looking similar to those made from modern rhino

horn and seized in shipments from South Africa to Hong Kong and China in 2017



Antique items may be 'upcycled', with original parts of e.g. wood or buffalo horn replaced with recent, carved rhino horn. Antiques

trade sources tell us the number of walking sticks and libation cups on sale has increased since 2010, that some walking stick handles look modern, or fit poorly with the shaft. We identified a number of these in the Survey



Taxidermy trophy rhino heads may be fitted with convincing resin replica horns and the unworked but pre-1947 original horns

smuggled out of the UK by unscrupulous sellers or buyers



Pre-1947 rhino horn antiques may be used as a cheap source of ground-down rhino horn. Cheap rhino horn items will be

worth more by weight as rhino horn powder than as whole antiques

What we're doing next

- **Consultation with stakeholders:** auction houses, antique dealers, trade associations, policymakers, legislators, regulators, enforcers and other NGOs
- **Further research and monitoring:** our Survey has provided evidence-based information about the types of items being sold, the prices they command, and auction-house practice/policy. It also provides a baseline for future monitoring.
- **Immediate 'best practice' improvements:** changes within the current system that do not require UK legislation
- **Strengthening current controls:** these will take longer to develop and implement, and/or require changes in legislative guidance, including the introduction of a 'Lifetime Passport' for rhino horn antiques and consideration of a ban (with exemptions) on the sale of rhino horn items