



# ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST MYTH-BUSTING SERIES

Rhino poaching and trade in horn



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Since 2008, the range states for rhino populations have been hard-hit with a massive upsurge in the poaching of rhino for their horns. Governments, the private sector and civil society organisations have been called to action to address the drivers of a crisis that may spell the end of a number of rhino populations – and even species – if not urgently halted. In the decade that has since passed, different factions have been formed in the conservation community, the media, governments and the public, all clinging to the belief that their perspective, and the rhetoric that surrounds it, are in fact, fact, or the only facts. The EWT uses credible information, sound research and a strong conservation motivation to underpin our perspective on the rhino poaching issue, as well as all other conservation challenges. In this edition of the EWT's myth-busting series, we offer some clarity on the facts and the fiction surrounding rhino poaching and the trade in rhino horn.

In 2017, the South African government lifted the moratorium on domestic rhino horn trade, effectively allowing for permitted sales of rhino horn within the borders of the country. This action deepened the confusion among many people, both locally and abroad, around the issues pertaining to the trade in rhino horn. The different perspectives on the trade in rhino horn have often led to polarisation of the conservation sector, fuelled by statements on social media and in the press, which have further confused the public who are desperate to see our rhino conserved. The EWT considers the conservation of wild and free-living rhino as a priority and, within this context, would like to set the record straight on some of the misconceptions.

**Myth 1. NGOs that do not support a legal horn trade are “animal rights activist organisations” and are opposed to the sustainable use of natural resources.**

When it comes to sustainable use, not all natural resources are created equal. Different species face different threats, and the risks posed by the consumptive use of these species or their components must be closely interrogated and backed up by sound research and scientifically rigorous data, before a decision to use them, or how one can sustainably use them, can be made. Wildlife trade can only be considered to be sustainable if that trade has no negative impacts on the persistence of wild populations and, in fact, it should positively contribute towards the security of free and wild populations. Benefits should be equitable and fair and sustainability is defined in terms of the species' role in its ecosystem and natural habit. NGOs and other organisations who apply this approach to wildlife utilisation are in fact responsible and ethical and cannot simply be dismissed for whatever their stance on other issues may or may not be.

**Myth 2. The rhino horn trade ban failed so we need to legally trade in rhino horn; what we are doing is not working so we must try something new.**

To say that the trade ban has not worked is simply not true; the ban was put in place in the 1970s and poaching was low (generally less than 20 rhinos per year) until 2008/9 when poaching started to spike. We do not know what the



situation would have looked like if there was no ban in place. It is acknowledged that bans alone are not enough to address any form of illegal trade and it is human nature to create black markets and break laws. Trade bans need to be supported with measures that strengthen our ability to tackle transnational organised crime, which include improving the security of our borders and ports, improving the capacity and resources of law enforcement agencies and the judicial system, understanding the drivers of consumption and the markets, supporting large-scale demand reduction in the consumer countries and creating higher value for the live animal, in its habitat, than for its body parts in the trade system. Trade bans can only be as effective as the systems put in place by countries to address all elements of the trade; when these are aggressively applied, bans can and do work. It has been proven that consumers are less likely to use products which are known to be illegal, so whilst trade bans do not kill demand, they assist in managing it by clarifying in the minds of consumer that the product is illegal, and assisting law enforcement agencies by supporting instant apprehension and arrest.

**Myth 3. Conservation NGOs benefit from the rhino poaching crisis through an increase in donor income and therefore have no real incentive to see the crisis abated.**

*Bona fide* NGOs with strong, credible track records, which are working to conserve rhinos are

administered under the principles of good governance and transparency – their financial records are publicly available, they undergo annual external audits, and they do not receive personal benefits from funds raised for rhinos. Importantly, they spend money on project activities and not personal assets, and must fulfil rigorous reporting requirements to donors to demonstrate impact. As they usually do not own rhino, they cannot benefit from any moneys spent on rhino conservation. Public Benefit Organisations are subject to stricter scrutiny than private and commercial entities, and they remain one of the safest avenues for concerned members of the public to contribute to rhino conservation.

**Myth 4. Trade in rhino horn is a “silver bullet” that will stop the poaching of rhinos and save them through providing a cheap legal source of horn or by flooding the market.**

As with trade bans, legal trade is also no silver bullet. There is no evidence to support the claim that trading in rhino horn will disrupt the illegal market or reduce market demand in any way. The suggestion that a legal trade in rhino horn will address the poaching of rhino, makes a few tricky assumptions. Firstly, it presupposes that the consumers of horn are willing to use captive-bred rhino horn as a substitute, or that wild horn will not be preferred over captive horn. However, a recent study of rhino horn consumers in Viet Nam<sup>1</sup>, found that most users prefer horn from wild and free living rhino. Secondly, it assumes that the supply of captive-bred rhino horn will be enough to meet the international demand for horn; this is difficult to determine given that very little is known about the rhino horn market and how elastic it may be once rhino horn is freely available. Finally, it suggests that legally produced rhino horn will be significantly cheaper than illegally acquired horn; however, no pricing data have ever been released from legally sold rhino horn, so it is not possible to support this assumption.

**Myth 5. NGOs cannot contribute to rhino conservation because they do not own rhinos and are “armchair scientists/conservationists”.**

A key benefit of **not** owning rhinos is that NGOs have no vested stake in the outcome of any particular management strategy. Many of the NGO staff working on rhino conservation in South Africa and elsewhere have postgraduate and doctoral degrees and have decades of experience working in the field with rhino, stakeholders, government, poachers and civil society. They continue to increase their knowledge and skills base by attending conferences and workshops, publishing their data and experiences in technical or peer-reviewed journals and speaking publicly generate awareness. This extensive knowledge base contributes significantly to rhino conservation.

<sup>1</sup> MacMillan, D., Bozzola, M., Hanley, N., Kasterine, A. & Sheremet, O. (2017). Demand in Viet Nam for rhino horn used in traditional medicine, International Trade Centre, Geneva, Switzerland.

Furthermore, to our knowledge, no conservation NGO staff member has ever been investigated for, or faced allegations of, rhino poaching and none are under suspicion of alleged wildlife misdemeanours. It is interesting to note that the studies often cited by pro-traders were in fact undertaken by research institutes and NGOs, none of which own rhinos.

**Myth 6. Allowing trading is the only way to reduce the poaching of wild specimens.**

Proponents of a legal rhino horn trade state that trading in horn produced from captive bred animals will prevent the poaching of wild rhinos. There is no evidence to support this statement and, on the contrary, legal trade has not worked in the past with other threatened species. To demonstrate, in Asia, tigers were bred in captivity for decades to supply the demand for their bones in medicinal use in the East. Despite this, poaching of wild tigers continues and the captive breeding has, in fact, been identified as detrimental to the wild populations through laundering of and increased demand for wild bones or 'the real thing'. As a result, the captive breeding of tigers for supplying this trade is currently being shut down. In South Africa, Abalone is produced in captivity to supply the demand as a food item, yet Abalone poaching is rife and the species is under substantial threat in the wild due to this poaching. Cycads are also cultivated in captivity as ornamental plants, yet we have lost three South African species in the wild in recent years due to illegal harvesting, despite there being a legal source of the plants. The Vicuna from South America is often presented as a species for which trade has worked to conserve the species. However, the opening of a limited legal trade was quickly followed by the laundering of illegal counterparts. There is no evidence to suggest that rhinos will be any different. Legal trade in some species does indeed support their conservation but again, the case must be made on a species-specific basis with hard evidence and data, without which, it is imperative that the Precautionary Principle is applied.

**Myth 7. All private rhino owners are a united group that support the legal trade in rhino horn.**

The pro-trade voices among the private rhino owners are the most vocal and visible, but this does not mean that all private rhino owners support a legal trade in rhino horn. Many have expressed concerns

about the legal trade in rhino horn and its impact on their wild populations. Assuming that all private rhino owners are one homogenous group that want to trade in horn is like assuming that all NGOs are anti-trade or animal rights activists.

**Myth 8. South Africa has the capacity to properly track legally-produced horn and differentiate it from illegally-acquired horn.**

There is substantial concern that it is not possible to keep track of all legal horn and to distinguish it from illegal horn due to capacity constraints,

resource shortages and the inability to even detect, let alone sample, all rhino horn leaving the country. This offers opportunities for the possible laundering of illegal horn through the legal channel. This may further incentivise poaching and put increased pressure on the already strained law enforcement and compliance sectors. It has also been demonstrated that, in consumer countries such as China, the availability of a product implies the legality of the product and it is not feasible to suggest that the illegally sourced or traded products will be identified once they leave the supply country.

The EWT firmly supports the ecologically sustainable use of wildlife when it leads to the improved conservation of wild and free living species in their habitats. Any use of a species and/or its components must benefit the persistence of this species in the wild, which must be supported by evidence in order for a trade-related decision to be rational and meaningful for conservation.

We do not believe that the intensive farming of wildlife for their parts equates to sustainable use, and we are concerned about the growing trend towards the commodification of wildlife in South Africa. Only when utilisation practices make tangible, positive benefits to wild populations, natural systems, and the people of South Africa, can they truly be considered sustainable.

We recognise that different role-players have divergent views and opinions on the trade in rhino horn (and other wildlife), and we appreciate that debate is important for interrogating and addressing the complex issue of wildlife trade. There are new publications and evidence emerging every day and we welcome the input of science as a means of informing excellent conservation practice.

