

An overview of the rhino crisis

The plight of the world's rhinoceros species is one that should never have been allowed to happen. Yet, in Africa, the Northern white rhino is virtually extinct, the feisty Black rhino is critically endangered and the placid Southern white rhino has had to be rescued from the brink of extinction more than once; and is threatened again. Their Asian counterparts are facing similar trouble. The Javan rhinoceros is virtually extinct too, the Sumatran rhino is critically endangered and the Indian rhinoceros is vulnerable.

Rhino horn

All of this for their horn, which is used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practices and as handles for traditional daggers called *jambiya* in Yemen. Recent years have seen an upsurge in demand for rhino horn in Vietnam, where powdered rhino horn and water is used as a 'cure-all' tonic. According to TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, it is this particular Vietnamese demand that is the greatest threat to our rhinos.

Rhinos throughout the world are being brutally slaughtered for their horns, primarily by impoverished and marginalised local people, who are being paid ridiculous amounts of cash by middlemen who are employed in large criminal syndicates. These syndicates are mostly impenetrable and well-established and the conduits that horn travels through are the same ones that traffic drugs, humans, weapons, and other contraband.

Ironically, South Africa has a stockpile of an estimated 20 tons of horn in government coffers and private hands, yet we are losing almost 4 rhinos a day. These horns originate from rhinos that have died naturally, from knock-offs (rhinos sometimes knock their horns off in territorial disputes or when transported) and from private rhino owners who have dehorned their rhinos in response to the threat of poachers.

Rhino dehorning is a simple 20-minute procedure that is performed by a veterinarian while a rhino is anaesthetized. The horn is removed just above the growth point and this does not cause the rhino any pain as horn is composed primarily of keratin. This procedure is very similar to you cutting your fingernails or to a vet trimming a horse's hoof.

A rhino's horn will also grow back again, at a rate in excess of 1kg/year for males and 0.6kg/year for females. As rhinos live for 35-40 years, they could effectively produce 8-10 horns in their lifetime or about 60kg of horn.

Yet still, almost 4 rhinos die every day for a single set of horns – a tragic waste of not only one of our iconic Big 5 species but also of a valuable and sustainable natural resource.

Comprehensive research has been documented with regards to the impacts of dehorning and although it is terribly sad that we are forced to remove the rhino's horn, the rhino is fortunate in that it does not have to be killed for its product, unlike tigers, whales, sharks and many other endangered species.

A conservation story

In 1977, rhinos were listed on CITES (Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species) Appendix I, in recognition of the poaching threat that faced them. At the time, White rhinos were only just starting to recover from yet another brush with extinction due to injudicious hunting and poaching practices. It is estimated that there were less than 200 White rhinos left in South Africa in the 1960's. Thanks to the concerted and dedicated efforts of a small team of conservationists in Kwazulu-Natal, these rhinos were protected and allowed to increase. When the numbers had improved, the rhinos were reintroduced to national reserves (most notably the Kruger National Park, where they had become locally extinct) and private game farmers were encouraged to buy rhinos for a nominal price and conserve them on their land.

Innovative and hugely successful methods of transporting rhinos allowed for rhinos to be distributed all over South Africa and even to other African countries and zoos throughout the world. The late Dr. Ian Player, who spearheaded this "Operation Rhino" and his colleagues, recognised the risk in keeping all their 'eggs' in one basket.

CITES trade ban

Under the CITES Appendix I listing in 1977, no trade in these animals or their parts was allowed. In 1995, the White rhino was down-listed to an Appendix II species for South African populations as the numbers had recovered well and this amendment allowed only for live animals to be traded and for hunting trophies to be exported. Unfortunately, the White rhino in South Africa was the only rhino population that recovered and did not decline.

So did the trade ban help?

Although South Africa's White rhinos have recovered well, let's look at the other species of rhino, since the trade ban was declared:

- When Black rhinos were listed as Appendix I animals in 1977, there were still more than 50 000 left. Today, they are critically endangered. Africa lost 96% of her Black rhinos between 1970 and 1992.
- The Northern white rhino is all but extinct today, much like the Javan rhinoceros.
- In **Swaziland**, the "Rhino War" lasted from 1988 - 1992, during which time this country lost 80% of its rhino population to poachers.
- In **Mozambique**, the rhino is all but extinct.
- In 1992, **Botswana** had less than 20 White rhinos left and the Black rhino was locally extinct
- In **Tanzania**, numbers of both species of rhino have declined drastically over the past 50 years. There were approximately 10 000 Black rhinos here in the 1960's and by 1984, there were only 3000. *6 years later*, in 1990, there were less than 100 Black rhinos left in Tanzania.
- There were about 20 000 Black rhinos in **Kenya** in the 1960s. Today, there are less than 1 000.

Rhino poaching figures in South Africa rarely reached double figures prior to 2008, but this is not because the trade ban was effective. This was because other African states were having their rhino populations decimated to feed the demand.

20 years ago in 1992, a number of African rhino range states proposed a legal, controlled trade in rhino horn, as their rhino populations were being decimated for this demand. Their proposal was rejected and the following suggestions were tabled to combat the poaching scourge:

- * A trade study of the market in horn was to be undertaken
- * Education and awareness campaigns were to be launched in consumer countries to warn them of the effects of this demand and to negate the medicinal effectiveness of horn
- * The media was to be harnessed to assist with these campaigns
- * Offenders were to face severe punishment, law enforcement was to be enhanced and better anti-poaching measures were to be implemented

Even today, various NGOs, individuals and animal rights movements call for these measures to combat rhino poaching. Although all of these measures are necessary, they are not the solution.

We are facing a large and ancient Eastern demand that is fed through an inaccessible and cut-throat Black market and we have no sustainable means to ensure the protection of our rhino species.

In order for trade in horn to be legalised, rhino must be down-listed by CITES. A down-listing proposal may only be submitted at the CITES Convention of Parties (CoP), currently held every three years. This proposal must achieve a two-thirds majority in favour vote from the 176 member parties in order to be passed. Hence the rhino poaching crisis is a global one.

A parallel

The Vicuña of South America – related to the llama - is another animal that was poached to the brink of extinction by the people that surround it, for its beautiful wool. This wool is one of the finest fibres in the world and there was a massive demand for it in European fashion houses. Local, impoverished communities were killing these animals, skinning them and selling the entire pelt to middlemen, who sold them on to buyers in Europe. In the early 1960s, there were less than 5 000 Vicuñas left in the world.

In the 1970s, concerted efforts by conservationists kept the only remaining Vicuña population safe in Peru and even managed to increase their numbers very slightly. The Vicuña was listed as critically endangered. In the 1980s, an Italian fashion designer

recognised the absurdity of the situation – these animals were facing extinction for a product that could be harvested from them without having to kill them – and launched the “Shear the Vicuña to save the Vicuña” campaign.

Together with conservationists and government support, these diverse sectors reinstated the traditional *chaccu*, where Vicunas were corralled by local communities, sheared and immediately released back to their highland habitats. At the same time, CITES accepted a proposal to down-list stable populations of Vicuña, in order to allow for the trade of their wool. The income generated from these sales went back to communities and to the conservation of the animal. With the communities incentivised to protect their livelihood instead of poach it, Vicuña numbers soared over the next few years. They were reintroduced to their former range states of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, where similar principles were applied. Today, there are more than 350 000 Vicuñas in the world, its status is ‘Least Concern’ and continuous poverty alleviation allows for ever-greater Vicuña protection – an undisputed conservation success story.

The rhino solution

We believe that legalising international trade in rhino horn is the solution to the rhino crisis.

If horns were sold through a central selling organisation in a controlled, ethical market, the benefits would be far-reaching:

- Consumers will have the option of buying the product from a legal, ethical, controlled source. This will undercut the grossly inflated Black market prices and will reduce poaching levels.
- If national parks and private reserves are generating a new sustainable income (national parks could sell horns from rhinos that have died naturally) rhino protection and conservation will increase. With these sectors incentivised to breed and conserve rhinos, rhino numbers will increase.
- Legal trade will alleviate poverty by introducing sound principles of Community-Based Natural Resource Management into rhino conservation areas. By devolving ownership rights of wildlife back to currently marginalised communities, their quality of life will be improved, they will become involved in wildlife management and poachers will be ousted, as they threaten community livelihood.
- Legal trade will encourage biodiversity by creating habitat. Community trust lands that are being used for injudicious cattle grazing areas will become natural rhino habitat. National and private conservation areas will have the means to increase these areas.
- Legal trade is a conservation-based solution to the rhino crisis
- Legal trade will not threaten rhinos as rhinos do not have to be killed for their horns. In fact, very few rhino guardians will ever want to kill their rhinos.
- Legal trade will allow us to keep rhinos in Africa, where they belong. About 150 live rhinos have already been sold to China and it is surmised that these rhinos have entered experimental horn-harvesting programs.

Rhinos are one of Africa’s natural resources. On a continent fraught with poverty, hardship, famine, drought, war and starvation, we should be looking to increase our natural resources at every opportunity. The rhino is a flagship species for principles of community stewardship, poverty alleviation, conservation areas and wildlife success stories.

We desperately need the rest of the world to sit up, take notice of the complexities of the poaching crisis, recognise South Africa’s rhino conservation success in the past, spread this message and hear our solution.

Thank you.

Tanya Jacobsen

Team Member - RhinoAlive

Website: www.rhinoalive.com

E-mail: tangowjuliet@gmail.com