



Some people argue that legalising the horn trade would raise money to spend on protecting the animals with armed guards, such as here in Zimbabwe.

DOOR LEFT AJAR FOR TRADE LEGALISATION

SOUTH AFRICA HAS ABANDONED A MOVE TO REOPEN THE RHINO HORN TRADE, BUT WITH POACHING STILL CRITICALLY HIGH, PRO-TRADERS ARGUE IT'S THE ONLY SOLUTION. JAMES FAIR REPORTS.

On a visit to Vietnam in 2011, the wildlife trade investigator Karl Ammann made a discovery that, he argues, fundamentally changes the debate on legalising the international trade in rhino horn. Evidence his undercover team unearthed shows that middle-class Vietnamese and Chinese are not only buying powdered

horn as a cure for cancer – for which it has consistently been shown to have zero effect. They are also purchasing ‘trinkets’ such as rhino horn bangles, prayer bead bracelets, libation cups and horn tip signature seals, and they are prepared to pay \$4,000 for a single worked item weighing 40g – equivalent to \$100,000 per kg. On that basis, a single

rhino horn weighing 5kg is potentially worth \$500,000. Returning to the workshop at a later date, Ammann’s team was told it could not keep up with the demand for bangles. The discovery suggests that the demand-reduction campaigns being carried out in China and Vietnam are tackling the wrong problem in concentrating on rhino horn’s use in Traditional

Chinese Medicine (TCM). “Artefacts now sell for \$120 per g, while the TCM product, which is shavings swiped from the workshop floor, is \$20 per g,” Ammann said. “So the TCM component is a by-product now.” That said, campaigners suggest this shows that the “rhino horn is not medicine” message is working, and that criminal syndicates are having to target new user groups. But there is another problem. At a retail level, 90 per cent of the horn sold in TCM shops is fake and derived mainly from water buffalo horn, so increasing the supply of the real thing through legalisation is unlikely to have much impact. “Where might demand level out and how many horns would it take to stabilise prices or bring them down?” Ammann said.

The issue of whether the trade in rhino horn should be reopened is a fraught business. Poaching has rocketed from an average of 15 rhinos a year in South Africa between 2000 and 2007 to 1,175 in 2015 – an increase of nearly 8,000 per cent in eight years. Most conservation groups welcomed the announcement

“POACHING OF RHINOS HAS ROCKETED FROM 15 TO 1,175 A YEAR – AN INCREASE OF NEARLY 8,000 PER CENT”

in April that the South African government is not pursuing a submission for legalisation to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) conference being held in Johannesburg this autumn. Save the Rhino International said that though some groups would criticise the decision because trade could theoretically generate income for rhino protection, it was the right one. “So long as any doubt remains about the viability and regulation of a legalised trade, we believe it is better to be safe than sorry,” said director Cathy Dean.

SWAZILAND SURPRISE But hot on the heels of the Pretoria decision came a surprise announcement from Swaziland, the tiny kingdom sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique. It has asked CITES “to permit a limited and regulated trade in horn which has been collected in the past from natural deaths, or recovered from poached Swazi rhino [sic], as well as horn to be harvested in a non-lethal way from a limited number of white rhino in the future”.

Trade would be regulated by a private concern called Big Game Parks, which is also Swaziland’s CITES Management Authority. With wholesale (as opposed to retail) prices at an estimated \$30,000 per kg, it has calculated that trade would allow revenue spending to protect the country’s rhinos of \$1.2 million per year. The significance of the Swaziland proposal is not in the amount of horn that would be released onto the market – 20kg a year – or in the number of rhinos that should be safer as a result: just 73. In any case, the consensus is that it has little or no chance of getting through. “We don’t think the proposal has any chance of passing at CITES,” said Adam Welz of the campaign group WildAid. “We believe that it has been put forward as a ‘trial balloon’ so that pro-traders can see where the ‘enemy fire’ is coming from and know more for next time.” Cathy Dean of Save the

WHAT'S A RHINO WORTH?

\$1,000 in 1980
VALUE OF A SINGLE, PRIVATELY OWNED WHITE RHINO

\$29,783 in 2011
VALUE OF A WHITE RHINO

\$62,049 in 2015
VALUE OF A SINGLE TROPHY-HUNTED RHINO IN SOUTH AFRICA

5 kg AVERAGE WEIGHT OF A SINGLE RHINO HORN
\$36.5K per property
ANNUAL COST OF PROTECTING RHINOS FROM POACHERS ON PRIVATE LAND

6,300 NUMBER OF WHITE RHINOS IN PRIVATE RANCHES
\$100K ESTIMATED RETAIL VALUE OF RHINO HORN MADE INTO A BANGLE OR BRACELET

ESTIMATED WHOLESALE VALUE RHINO HORN PER KG

\$20 COST OF SEDATING A RHINO AND CUTTING OFF ITS HORN
\$30K

Rhino agreed: “We believe that avid pro-traders in South Africa encouraged the Swazis to put it forward,” she said.

Instead, the proposal’s significance will be in how many countries support it and whether this encourages South Africa to push for legalisation at the CITES conference in 2019.

RHINOS IN PRIVATE HANDS

Private game ranchers and landowners play a major part in the conservation of white rhinos, especially in South Africa. More than 6,300 are held on at least 330 private farms, roughly one-third of the global population.

In 2009, when rhino poaching was escalating, they formed the Private Rhino Owners Association (PROA) in order to lobby for the ban on the horn trade to be lifted.

PROA chairman Pelham Jones said that the current trade ban, coupled with anti-poaching and education work in Africa and demand-reduction strategies in Asia, is not working.

“There is not a private reserve in the country that has not lost a rhino,” he said. “I’ve been

on the crime scenes with the farmers and seen breeding cows, their bodies grotesquely bloated, their horns cut off and their calves lying by their sides – that’s what we have to deal with.”

PROA’s argument is that not only would legalisation provide funding to beef up security on their farms, it would also reduce the value of rhino horn. “If it was more freely available, would it be \$60,000 a horn? No, it would come down. We say the ban is driving demand – take it away, and end-users will wonder what the big deal is. They will see it makes no difference to their lives, and move on to something else.”

RHINO HORN ECONOMICS

Adam Welz of WildAid says bringing down the price of rhino horn is vital, but otherwise vehemently disagrees with the pro-trading lobby. “People talk about security, but unless you remove the incentive for guys to take rhinos, nothing will change,” he said. “People in South



Vets cause a rhino no pain when they take its horn, and remove the incentive for poachers to kill it.

Africa are desperately poor and will risk their lives for what may seem like pennies,” Welz added. “They’re earning £5 a day, and along comes a guy who says, ‘I’ll rent you a rifle – shoot me a rhino, and I’ll pay you R50,000 [\$3,300] per kilogram.’ For a rhino horn weighing 5kg, that’s at least five years’ income.”

The arguments rage. Pro-traders use the example of the drugs trade to demonstrate that legalisation doesn’t necessarily lead to an increase in demand and that prohibition doesn’t stop demand either. Other wildlife, they point out, has gained from

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT SECURITY, BUT UNLESS YOU REMOVE THE INCENTIVE TO POACH, NOTHING WILL CHANGE”

being commercially exploited by game and trophy hunters. Conservationists don’t deny this.

But there are flaws with these arguments, said Welz. First, if drugs – for example – are legalised, then it’s easy to up the supply to match demand, but rhinos can reproduce at a rate of roughly 6 per cent a year, and there’s little you can do to increase this artificially.

The second problem is that ‘farming’ wildlife such as kudus, and then charging someone to come and shoot them, pays just enough to stop a landowner from growing crops or keeping livestock. But rhino horn is worth so much that the incentives for illegal and unsustainable exploitation are too great.

“If it pays, it stays,” says Welz. “If it pays too much, it goes.”



Bracelets made from rhino horn sell for thousands of dollars.



Four rhinos were killed at Lalibela Game Reserve in South Africa in 2012 at a time when levels of poaching were soaring throughout the country.

Top: Pete Oxford/naturepl.com; bracelets: Karl Ammann; bottom: Nerissa D’Alton/Gallo Images/Alamy