

## The fate of rhino horn

Action is required to cut demand for rhino horn in Yemen, in the Middle East. The demand in Yemen, where horn is made into handles for traditional daggers (jambiyas) continues to threaten Eastern Africa's rhinos.

**Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin**

Since the 1980s we have been trying to reduce demand for this horn in Yemen and to curtail the smuggling of rhino horns into the country. We have had considerable success since then, but pressure on Yemen has not been maintained nor has it been adequate enough in recent years.

On our recent visit, we learned that the price of rhino horn has risen in Yemen by about 40% from 2002 to early 2007 to around US\$1,700 a kilo wholesale, with some horn pieces selling for as much as US\$3,000 a kilo. This is because demand has risen due to the fast increasing population in the country (3% p.a.), and because most men in the northern half of the country have at least one jambiya. The majority have new handles of water buffalo horn. If they can afford it, many will choose a prestigious second-hand jambiya with a rhino horn handle. Only a few new rhino horn ones are made today due to the scarcity of the raw product, but even a tiny amount traded has a huge effect on the small numbers of rhinos in Eastern Africa. The growing middle classes who are seeking these jambiyas are putting increased pressure on the last surviving rhinos.

Most craftsmen make jambiyas in the old souk of Sanaa (Yemen's capital city), a tradition that has not changed for centuries, and there are more craftsmen working than ever, producing hundreds of jambiyas a day. Perhaps a handful are made of new rhino horn each month, unbeknownst to the authorities.

Realising this trade continues, with information on rhinos being poached in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Kenya in the last four years, we gratefully received funding from the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria to visit

Sanaa in early 2007. It was important for us to increase public attention regarding the continuing rhino horn crisis. We therefore had meetings with four Ministers, including the Mayor of Sanaa, and three ambassadors (from the UK, US and ND) to ask for their support. Also, we tried to improve CITES implementation and to reduce smuggling. We had helpful meetings with senior officials from the Coast Guard, Customs, Army, Navy and Police, partaking in a special workshop on security.

A major part of our work in Yemen was an education campaign focusing on wildlife conservation, especially for the rhino. We received permission to produce billboards that were displayed at both the big zoos of Sanaa and Taiz. These zoos attract thousands of people a week. The pictures were labelled in the Arabic language and the displays included a religious edict that we had obtained earlier in Yemen stating that it is against the will of God to kill rhinos for their horns.

We also wrote articles and met professors at Sanaa University and teachers at the more prestigious schools to encourage them to cover in greater detail in their curricula the rhino horn issue. It is the young of today that need to be discouraged from buying rhino horn in the future.

Having re-ignited attention in Yemen on the rhino horn problem once more, after a slack period of four years, it is imperative to maintain a high profile on the subject. International organisations also need to keep up the momentum, such as by regularly encouraging Yemeni officials to reduce trade and demand for new rhino horn. It is about time scientists discovered a material that could replace high quality horn for the craftsmen to carve. There should also be a small amount of international funding always readily available for updating information on the rhino horn smuggling in Yemen to keep officials updated. The successes of short term projects often collapse when the work comes to an end, and this must be avoided in this instance with regular monitoring and support to the government of Yemen.



**Top to bottom:**  
New jambiyas of water buffalo horn for sale

The main gates of the old Sanaa city, where jambiyas are made in the old souk

Old rhino horn jambiyas for sale

IMAGES: LUCY VIGNE