

RHINO HORN: FACTS AND MYTHS

FACT: In the last 20 years, over 85% of the world's rhino population has been slaughtered by poachers seeking rhino horn to sell in the international marketplace.

MYTH: The primary market for rhino horn is in the Far East where it is used as an aphrodisiac.

FACT: Today, the Taiwanese are importing rhino horn at wholesale prices of \$2,000/kilo for African horn, and \$20,000/kilo for Asian horn.

For the past 12 years, an American geographer named Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin has been examining illegal rhino horn trade throughout the world and working to stop it. In the process, he has become the world's leading expert on the subject, uncovering previously unknown facts, and debunking time-worn myths.

Rhino horn has long been used as an ingredient in traditional Asian medicines. It was listed as a cure for "intoxications and delirium" in the Divine Plowman's Herbal, a Chinese book of remedies dating back about 2,000 years. Its status as a healing agent has remained intact over the years with traditional medicine practitioners, and today that is still its primary end-use. Though it is used primarily as an ingredient in fever-reducing medicines, it is also thought by some to have healing powers for ailments as diverse as high blood pressure, insomnia, nose bleeds, epilepsy, hysteria and flu. The use of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac has been greatly exaggerated. The truth is that less than 1% of all rhino horn is sold for sexual enhancement purposes, and India is the only country where it is marketed for that particular use.

A recent scientific study conducted in Hong Kong showed that large doses of a solution containing rhino horn were indeed effective in lowering the temperature in fever-induced rats. This was a surprise to conservationists who have long contended that rhino horn had no real medicinal qualities. Interestingly, in that same study, the horn of saiga antelope, water buffalo, and cattle were shown to have the same or similar fever-reducing capabilities. This information should certainly add credence to the move currently afoot encouraging the use of rhino horn substitutes wherever possible.

In 1975, 110 countries joined together to ban international commercial trade in endangered species through an agreement known as CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). In 1987, the CITES parties agreed to extend that ban to domestic trade, as well as international trade.

Curbing the demand for rhino horn is the only way to effectively put a dent in the international black market, and stopping both domestic and international trade in horn is imperative if the demand is to be decreased. The key to decreasing the demand for rhino horn is to encourage the use of substitutes. This, together with effective government enforcement of trade bans, registration and monitoring of existing horn stockpiles, and improved protection and management of wild populations, has already led to some major success stories in rhino conservation.

For example, after Japan joined CITES in 1980, its rhino horn imports dropped from 800 kilos/year to virtually none. This dramatic change was made possible because of governmental urgings to use saiga antelope and water buffalo horn substitutes. New, effective rhino horn trade policies and the use of substitute products have also made significant changes in other former market strongholds such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Macao, Burundi, and the United Arab Emirates.

Another success story has occurred in Yemen into which over 40% of the world's available rhino horn was imported in the early 1980's for use as dagger handles. The carved rhino horn dagger handles had become a status symbol in that small Arab nation. Today, pre-existing rhino horn dagger handles sell for a high premium on the secondary market, but Yemen imports virtually no new rhino horn. Thanks to tough government trade laws, as well as a sagging economy, Yemeni men now buy dagger handles carved from water buffalo horn, camel nails, and plastic.

There are currently only four remaining countries in which the illegal trafficking of rhino horn and other rhino products remains a lucrative business: China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. But, small inroads are gradually being made in some of these areas as well. China, the world's largest manufacturer of rhino horn medicines, has been importing rhino horn since the eighth century when its own native rhino population

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became decimated. Today, about 650 kilos of rhino horn are used for medicinal purposes in China each year. In 1989, when China finally succumbed to the international pressure to register its existing stock of rhino horn, more than 10 tons of rhino horn was counted. So desperate are China's medicine factories for the precious horn, that they have begun buying up valuable antique rhino horn carvings to grind down into powder form to be used in medicines. On the positive side, some medicine companies are starting to use rhino horn substitutes on a limited basis. Also, the Chinese government has taken a step towards controlling the rhino horn medicine trade by requiring a permit in order to export it.

In Taiwan, where government rhino horn trade bans exist but are unenforced, Asian rhino horn is more sought-after than ever before. Wealthy Taiwanese are buying Asian horn for investment purposes and paying retail prices of up to \$60,000/kilo for it. A ray of hope can be found in the fact that in 1990, Taiwan finally registered its rhino horn stockpiles, and the current plan calls for limiting trade to registered stock over the next three years, and then banning all domestic trade completely after that.

The proverbial "bad boys" of rhino horn trade are South Korea and Thailand, where unregulated domestic and international trade still runs unchecked. In 1988, 80% of Asian medicine clinics in Seoul carried products containing rhino horn. South Korea refuses to register rhino horn stocks or to join CITES. Thailand, on the other hand, remains one of the leading rhino horn marketplaces despite being a party to CITES. Today, rhino products such as horn, skin, nails, penises, and dried blood are readily available in Bangkok.

It is obvious that although there have been many positive aspects in the world arena of rhino conservation recently, the state of the rhino today remains both a good and bad news story. Recent clampdowns on rhino horn exports out of Africa have put additional strain on the demand for horn from the three Asian species. This, combined with the belief that medicinal powers are more concentrated in the horns of the smaller Asian species, has led to skyrocketing prices paid for Asian horn on the black market. This, in turn, has led to a sudden increase in the incidences of poaching of previously stable populations of the greater one-horned rhino in India and Nepal. Poachers there have also developed more effective poaching methods, including electrocution with electric wires and poisoning. This tragedy points out why the key to effective

rhino conservation measure lies primarily in decreasing the demand for, rather than the supply of, rhino horn products.

[The information in this article was taken from Esmond Bradley Martin's keynote address at the San Diego Rhino Conference, and from a WWF Campaign Report entitled Stop the Rhino Horn Trade, April 1991.]

AAZPA ANNOUNCES FORMATION OF RHINO TAG

The Wildlife Conservation and Management Committee of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums recently approved the formation of a Taxon Advisory Group for rhinoceroses. TAGs are designed to provide coordination, structure and assistance to species survival plans. The Rhino TAG includes SSP programs for the greater one-horned, the eastern and southern subspecies of black, the southern white, and the Sumatran rhino.

Generally the objectives of the rhino TAG include:

- * establishing a regional management plan for rhinos which focuses on the efficient use of existing resources, the development of new resources, and the encouragement of effective relationships with other regional programs;
- * developing strategies for the support of *in situ* conservation efforts through increased communication and interaction among SSP institutions, range country managers, NGOs, and field scientists;
- * identifying research priorities and assisting in the development and implementation of an aggressive research program with specific objectives in those areas of greatest concern;
- * maintaining current information on the status of all captive and wild populations; and
- * assessing the implementation of the various rhino SSP masterplans and providing assistance wherever possible.

While not yet complete, the membership of the Rhino TAG will include the species coordinators and regional studbook keepers, and specialists from the zoo, field, and academic communities. Additional advisors will be appointed for specific projects. The Chairman of the group is Robert Reece, species coordinator for the white rhino SSP.