



Photo: Anthony Hall-Martin

LEGALISE

the horn of Africa?

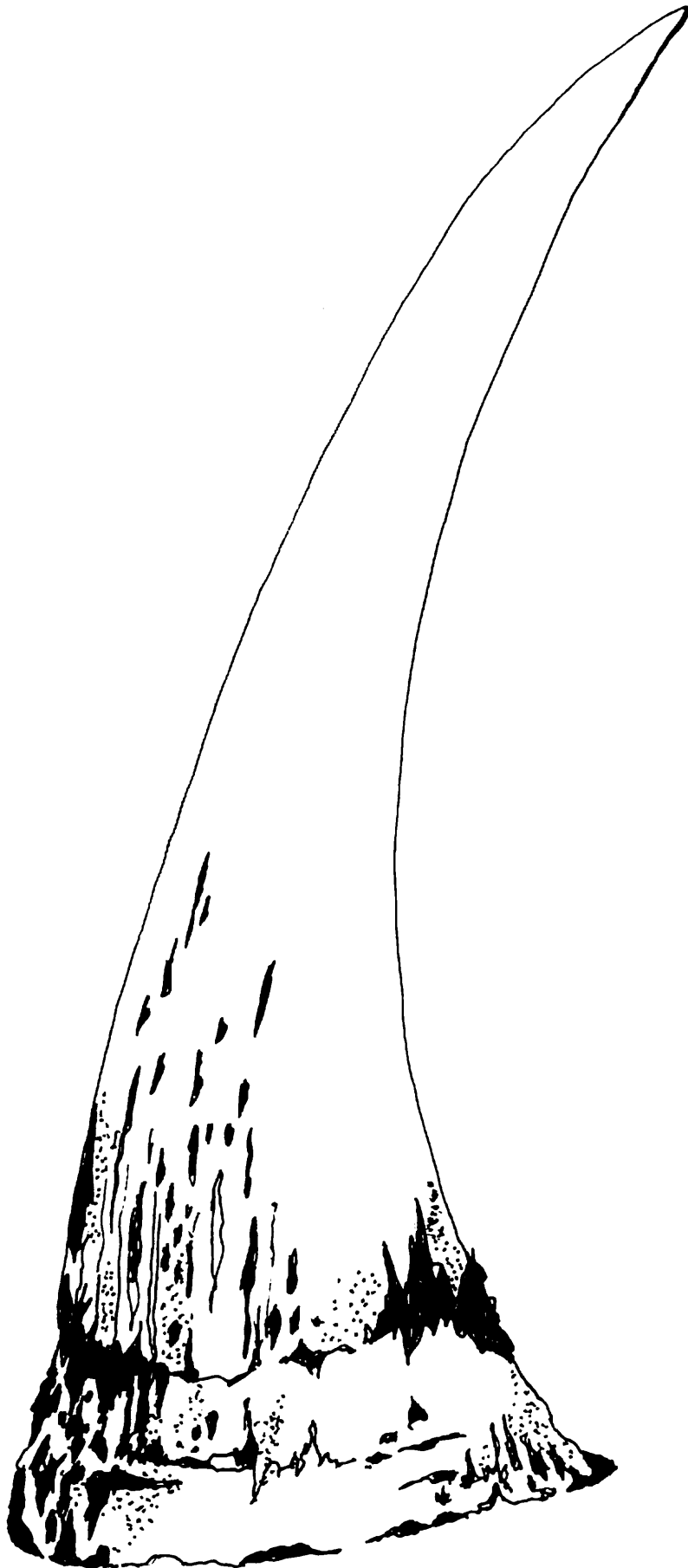
Banning trade in rhino horn has failed to prevent decimation of rhino populations. Perhaps it's time to consider what a legal trade might achieve.

Trade in rhino horn and associated products has been banned for the past 15 years. When the ban was implemented there were 15 000 rhinos throughout Africa; today, there are fewer than 3 000. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the ban has failed. Concerted efforts by the World Wide Fund for Nature and other organisations to convince south-east Asians to abandon use of the commodity in favour of substitutes do not appear to have been successful.

Is it realistic to think that this trade – and belief in the products, in spite of scientific rejection of their medical value – can be curtailed? They have existed for literally hundreds of years. We assume that because conservationists in Africa and the Western world recognise the plight of the rhino, the East should automatically do so as well. But perhaps we are barking up the wrong tree.

Certainly the issues are complex. Concern for

the rhino on the ground is real. The fight to combat poaching rages back and forth daily. I learnt only recently that one rhino a week is poached in Matusadona National Park in Zimbabwe and gunfire can be heard nightly. The rhino war is being fought over a broad front and the people on the ground are doing their best against great odds. A recent major crackdown on a huge rhino syndicate, involving the confiscation of 110 horns valued at R7 million by the Endangered Species Protection Unit of the South African Police, resulted in the arrest of four men. The horns were neatly packed in boxes, labelled "sweets, gifts and clothing", destined for Taiwan. They would have been mailed over the post office counter. Simple as that. The arrests took place in Johannesburg and neighbouring Sandton and were the result of nearly a year's work on the part of the police.



Where does one begin? Clearly, killing poachers is not the solution, although strong measures are necessary: poachers are capable of fighting back and are extremely determined, for the rewards are great. But a dilemma exists, for one is dealing often with people who are on the wrong side of despair. Their priority is only survival and the welfare of their families, not conservation. Altering the poachers' situation in order to bring them onto the side of conservationists is rapidly being recognised today as being vital. In the case of the black rhino, however, it is in many instances already far too late. Their numbers are too low to afford us the time to gain the confidence, respect and involvement of rural communities adjacent to the game reserves and national parks that are home to the rhino.

Recently, the Natal Parks Board made reference to the legal sale of rhino horn and announced that an approach had been made to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to sound out world opinion. An article in the Endangered Wildlife Trust journal of June 1990 by economist Mike 't Sas-Rolfes suggested the following:

"With a legal market for rhino goods, most other problems could be resolved. The park boards could auction off supplies of horn collected in the past. Small amounts could be sold at a time, to keep the market partially satisfied while gaining maximum prices (it would be foolish to attempt to 'flood' a market of that size about which relatively little is known). This would facilitate the gradual commencement of rhino horn production."

He further stated: "An unrestricted market in rhino goods and services would provide society with an optimum number of live rhinos in game reserves, rhino horns and rhino trophies. All that is required is a legalised market and the recognition and protection of private property rights to rhinos by government."

In June 1989 at a workshop convened by the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources and attended by a number of senior members of various government conservation bodies, a resolution was adopted requesting the Rhino and Elephant Foundation to take the initiative in investigating the viability of legal trade in rhino horn, in order to try to rationalise the present unacceptable situation whereby rhinos are being poached heavily for exorbitant profits. It was felt that



Photo: Esmond Bradley Martin

consideration should be given to the organised and controlled selling of rhino horn and rhino products to end users.

There will be serious hurdles to cross. Opinion among the conservationists is obviously coloured by the evils of the trade in rhino horn, ruthless wicked middlemen, dangerous poachers, and a supposedly uncaring south-east Asian community of millions of people who don't know the blunt end from the sharp end of a rhino, and who don't seem to care whether the animal becomes extinct or not. If rhinos were to become extinct or so reduced that the only ones surviving were under such tight security as to make it impossible to obtain the horn, users would lose out in the end, no matter what.

Is it therefore unthinkable to have a legal trade in rhino horn, if it means survival of the species and a lessening of poachers being blown away by automatic weapons as well as a reduction in the immense cost of protecting rhinos? Remember, everything else has been tried and found wanting.

Whose rhinos are we talking about anyway? Look at the present situation. South Africa protects 20 per cent of all black rhinoceros in Africa and 90 per cent of all white rhinoceros. *Seventy per cent of all rhino on the continent are under protection here.* South Africa's populations are arguably now in sufficiently good shape for sustainable use to be made of them. White rhino are already available for hunting purposes. Many trophy animals are

shot each year, which contributes to a growing rhino hunting industry. These trophies, together with natural mortality from the large, wild population, are the source of production of several hundred kilograms of rhino horn each year, which at present cannot be traded. However, because of the enormous financial gains which could be generated by a legal trade in rhino horn and be ploughed back into rhino protection and management, the issue of South Africa asking CITES for a dispensation to sell its rhino horn under controlled circumstances may now be very relevant.

Rhino horn is held by various state conservation authorities, arising from natural mortalities, poaching and confiscation, and there is also a horn supply, held by private landowners who possess white rhino. While in current quantities these sources would not flood the market, one is talking about a regular legal supply. To this end, communications should take place with the sellers of rhino horn in the Far East, with a view to establishing direct legal and controlled marketing links which could lead to eliminating middlemen and poachers, with the proceeds going to conservation.

It surely is not in the best interests of rhino horn traders to see the rhino become extinct. I believe that they too, given the option, would become involved in finding a lasting solution



ART AND THE ENVIRONMENT

the Hong Kong connection

ANTHONY HALL-MARTIN



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