

## Traders accused of beating ban on rhino horn

**R**HINOCEROS HORN is still widely available as a medicine in South Korea despite international efforts to ban the trade, according to a new report from the World Wide Fund for Nature. The Japan office of TRAFFIC, the wing of the fund that monitors international trade in endangered species, delivered the report to the Korean government last month. It contradicts earlier surveys which suggested a dip in sales of rhino horn. *NBS*

Two lucrative markets exist for the horns of the 11 000 rhinos left in the world today. One is for dagger handles in North Yemen. The other, which WWF says is harder to control, is the widespread demand for rhino horn as an ingredient for traditional medicines in south and east Asia. South Koreans are particularly enthusiastic consumers, buying horn medicines for conditions ranging from mental disorders to stomach ulcers though not, as widely supposed, for impotence.

Pharmacists make up the medicines from well-defined formulae, following recipes with up to 30 ingredients. The most popular medicine, *chung shim won* balls, a complex blend of ingredients wrapped in gold leaf, is prescribed for rheumatism, paralysis, epilepsy and fever. A batch of 100 balls, the usual quantity sold, contains 8 grams of rhinoceros horn.

Although South Korea has never joined the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), it tightened controls on rhino horn from 1983. In 1986, it banned all imports. However, TRAFFIC says the ban is ineffective because it did not control stockpiled rhino horn, so there is no way of policing the trade or distinguishing newly imported material from that which has been stockpiled already.

The fund's evidence suggests that large quantities of rhino horn are still entering the country. Previous surveys, carried out for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, had found that sales were declining. But the TRAFFIC team in Tokyo believes that these studies may have been flawed because pharmacists tend to deny to foreigners that they handle rhino horn.

TRAFFIC's team tried a less direct approach. A Korean researcher posing as a customer asked clinics for medicines for a sick relative living in Japan, describing symptoms for which rhino horn medicines are normally prescribed. This allowed the pharmacist to make the first suggestion of rhino horn. The

team surveyed 111 pharmacies in five cities and found that 71 had either pure horn or medicines containing it for sale. In the capital, Seoul, rhino horn was available in almost all the clinics surveyed.

The team also found that it was available in seven clinics that had denied stocking it to the IUCN's survey. The retail price for rhino horn was about \$4410 (about £2800) a kilogram, about three times what it was before South Korea banned imports. TRAFFIC believes that at least some rhino horn on sale dates from old stocks imported legally into Korea. Between 1970 and 1983, South Korea imported 2857 kg of horn. By far the largest supplier was Indonesia, whose rhinos are among the rarest animals on Earth. Other large quantities, presumably from African rhinos, arrived via Japan, Singapore and Thailand.

The report suggests tackling the trade in two ways. First, it urges the government in Seoul to register all existing stocks of rhino horn and set a deadline for banning the sale of any products containing it.

The other approach is to find alternatives to rhino horn in traditional medicines. An attempt to substitute material from the horns of water buffalo has failed, with people buying only if they cannot afford "the real thing". The WWF plans to fund research at a Korean university to see whether rhino horn has any distinctive pharmacological properties, and if so, to find replacements.

This approach carries the slight risk of boosting the horn's credibility as a medicine. John Hanks, head of elephant conservation at the WWF, sums up the present opinion of horn's medicinal value: "You'd do just as well to chew your fingernails."

20 Michael Cross, Tokyo