

STOCK PILES:

A (t)horny issue

As this edition of *The Horn* goes to press, delegates of the 175 CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) member countries will be meeting in Doha, Qatar to consider over 40 proposals to alter the level of protection accorded to various wild animals and plants. Amongst these proposals is an application from Tanzania to be allowed to sell an existing stockpile of elephant ivory as well as to down-list elephants from Appendix I to Appendix II of CITES and thereby allow for regulated legal trade in ivory. The application is highly controversial and the implications for rhino conservation are hefty.

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CITES is an international agreement between governments aiming to ensure that trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. CITES is legally binding for the parties that have agreed to it, but participation remains voluntary. All but the Southern white subspecies of rhino are listed on Appendix I of CITES. This reflects the imminent threat of extinction faced by rhinos and means that trade in them, and any product derived from them, is prohibited except in exceptional circumstances.

The application presented by Tanzania and Zambia, although not directly related to rhinos and the sale of rhino horn, has the potential to open the floodgates for similar proposals for the sale of rhino horn stockpiles. There are also concerns that approval of the applications will result in an increase in rhino poaching.

Why is the sale of stockpiles of ivory, or indeed rhino horn, so controversial? Those in favour of legalising trade in ivory and rhino horn argue that stockpiles are conservation resources that are simply not being used. Tanzania, for example, has suggested that ever-increasing incidences of human-wildlife conflict between farmers and elephants could be placated by demonstrating the financial value of elephants and that the sale of ivory is an obvious means to do this. Similarly, it has been suggested that South Africa could satisfy the current demand for rhino horn, and indeed a volume double this for the next 10 years, through the sale of existing stockpiles. This could be further extended, it is argued, by allowing the sale of horn harvested from rhinos on game farms. Through the establishment of Central Selling Organisations (CSOs), it is suggested that the market for rhino horn could be controlled and the proceeds donated to conservation.

History paints a less rosy picture. At the CITES conference held in The Hague in 2007, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia were permitted to make one-off sales of ivory similar to those being requested by Tanzania and Zambia at the current meeting. Many argue

that permitted trade stimulates illegal killings. The Kenya Wildlife Service, for example, attributes the increased loss of elephants in 2008 to a by-product of the 2007 decision. There is a very real concern that an increase in elephant poaching will be reflected by an increase in rhino poaching. Current levels of rhino poaching would certainly seem to support this worrying supposition.

Even if it could be shown that one-off sales and regulated trade did not increase demand beyond a level that could be accommodated - and that's a huge if - it seems intuitive that a prerequisite for any kind of regulated sale of rhino horn or ivory would be a comprehensive record of existing stocks. The CITES secretariat requested such information about rhino horn stockpiles from rhino range states at the 2007 meeting with the intention of inviting TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, to review the information. At the point when papers were tabled for the 2010 meeting, only seven parties, two of which were range states, had submitted information. Such a response does not bode well for competently regulated trade. From what little information is currently available, a discrepancy between reported and expected stocks is already discernable. This suggests that significant amounts of rhino horn is outside of legal control and thus vulnerable to undocumented trade. The simple conclusion: control policy is so far inadequate.

To date, seven countries (Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone) have submitted counter arguments to the proposals submitted by Tanzania and Zambia. Strong calls have also been made to the United Kingdom and the European Union to oppose the applications. Meanwhile, the Assam government in India has pledged to burn 1,500 rhino horns from its stockpile: a demonstration for poachers, it says, that rhino horn has no medicinal value. The final decision rests with the delegates of the CITES member countries.

Kenya Wildlife Service rangers display rhino horn confiscated from poachers.

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Given the concerns over their ability to control poaching, we're pleased to report that the CITES applications made by Tanzania and Zambia were rejected.