



To legalise or not to legalise?

In theory, a heavily controlled legalised trade in rhino horn could help meet the Asian demand for rhino horn and generate much-needed funds for conservation. In reality, there are many concerns about the viability of a legal trade and its implications. I wanted to take a closer look at the debate.

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Those in favour of a legal trade argue that the current ban on trade is not working – rhinos are being poached almost every day. Trade in horn has simply been driven underground. A legalised trade would take control of the trade away from criminal syndicates.

There are economic points...

Flooding the market would reduce the price of rhino horn and reduce incentives for poachers. It would give rhinos a tangible monetary value that could translate into increased incentive to protect them, creating a revenue stream that can be ploughed back into conservation. (What pays, stays.)

Rhino horn is a renewable resource

The horn grows throughout the rhino's life and can be obtained without killing the animal. Regular dehorning would result in the reduced availability of horn to poachers. Surplus black and white male rhinos in South Africa and Namibia would, in the main, no longer need to be culled or sold for sport hunting, as they are now, because they would remain valuable for their horn production (non-fatal consumptive use). Finally, studies show that there are few, if any, welfare issues to consider when dehorning rhinos.

Those against a legal trade say that since authorities cannot police the current ban

They would not be able to control a legal trade and prevent it from laundering illegal horn. Techniques such as DNA fingerprinting are developing, but the scale of the task, should trade be allowed, is beyond current capabilities.

They argue that the illegal wildlife trade would always undercut legal operators because the costs are lower (poaching is cheaper than running a national park). CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) demands proof of legal acquisition of rhino horn if it is to be sold (under certain circumstances, some items can currently be sold). As many of the existing stockpiles include horns of unknown origin, which can't be sold, they are therefore less abundant and the projections for income are over-ambitious.

The impact of one-off sales and trade has not yet been properly evaluated

Legal trade may stimulate more demand. There are only around 28,000 rhino in the world and a potential market of 1.5 billion users in China, Vietnam and other East Asian countries. A legal trade would also require down-listing of rhino species/populations, and this could be dangerous.

It is inconsistent to support a legal trade while attempting to reduce demand by dispelling traditional beliefs about the medicinal qualities of rhino horn.



There needs to be an effective and transparent channel by which the proceeds go back into conservation to benefit rhinos.

Finally, it may be difficult to explain why some people/countries are allowed to dehorn rhinos and profit from that, while others may not.

So where are we now?

South Africa has commissioned a series of studies on rhino horn trade issues. If a proposal to legalise trade does go forward, it would probably be considered by CITES in 2016. The time required to put in the necessary foundations for legal trade in rhino horn could take up to 6–10 years. Do we have that much time?

SRI supports the sustainable use of wildlife and believes that rhino conservation efforts will only succeed if rhinos have an economic value for humans, whether through fatal (e.g. trophy hunting) or non-fatal consumptive use (e.g. horn harvesting, photographic safaris, live sales). But this does not necessarily mean we will support a legal trade in rhino horn. Our Trustees are currently seeking advice and answers.

Tell us what you think

Email comments to info@savetherhino.org with the heading 'Rhino horn-trade?'