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Escalation of rhino poaching in South Africa: is the trade ban approach working?



By Michael † Sas-Rolfes

Rhino poaching is on the rise in South Africa and threatens to undermine the country's remarkable conservation track record, which is grounded in principles of sustainable use. Eager to maintain this success, many South African conservationists now wonder whether the rhino horn trade ban is the problem rather than the solution.

In the year 1900, the southern white rhino was on the brink of extinction, consisting of a single small population in the Zululand region of South Africa. Today it is the world's most abundant rhino species, accounting for more than two thirds of the global rhino population. This is due to the proactive approach toward rhino conservation adopted by South Africa in the 1960s: The first step was to establish new populations through translocation, in both public and private protected areas; next was to allow regulated legal commercial trophy hunting. Legislative changes to recognize private ownership rights over wildlife combined with the establishment of an auction-based market pricing system for live animals created economic incentives for private landowners to embrace rhino conservation and breeding, and provided a valuable source of income to state protected areas who sold off their excess stocks.

By the year 2000 South Africa's white rhinos were thriving, with numbers and prices steadily increasing. South Africa's black rhino population was also growing steadily, and in 2004 CITES approved limited quotas for trophy hunting this species too (as well as in Namibia, which has adopted similarly successful approaches to rhino conservation). Whereas South Africa and Namibia sheltered a small fraction of the continental black rhino population in the 1960s, today they account for some 75% of the African population of close to 5,000 animals.

Unfortunately, the black market price of rhino horn in Asia also co-incidentally started to increase around that time and, without a legal supply channel, the market sought ways to find horn from the most significant remaining source. At first horn was obtained by buying it legally on the domestic market from non-lethal sources (and then exporting it illegally) or by way of Asian nationals posing as legitimate trophy hunters to obtain legal CITES permits to export horns as trophies. Once the South African government became aware of this, it responded with several restrictive measures: an onerous permitting system was

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introduced to monitor all rhino-related transactions, limitations were placed on Asian hunters and exports of live animals to Asian countries, and a moratorium was placed on the domestic trade in rhino horn.

These measures were followed by a rapid escalation in illegal killing. Prior to implementation (until 2007), South Africa lost about one or two rhinos per month to poachers. However, from early 2008 poaching levels accelerated dramatically and have continued to do so ever since. Here are the sobering statistics: 2008 – 83; 2009 – 122; 2010 – 333; 2011 – 448. At the time of writing a further 216 rhinos have been lost this year – if this rate is maintained, the figure will reach some 600 for 2012. Although Asian consumers do not seem to differentiate between horns of the two species, most of the animals poached are white rhinos as they are far easier to locate.

The methods used to poach rhinos are of an unprecedented level of sophistication and involve international organized crime syndicates. Measures to combat poaching include increased spending on conventional anti-poaching patrols and increased law enforcement efforts as well as selective dehorning or horn dying and poisoning. To date, none of these has been effective in arresting the poaching onslaught (which has also affected Zimbabwe and Kenya).

Private owners are increasingly concerned about security risks and this has stifled growth in the market. The National Parks Board will not sell any live rhinos this year. Sources of rhino-related income are dwindling and security costs to both public and private landowners have increased dramatically. If the rate of poaching continues to increase, South Africa's rhino population will start to decline, with serious broader economic and conservation consequences.

Many South Africans feel that implementing the CITES trade ban approach, far from being the solution, is part of the reason for the recent poaching crisis. Accordingly, there are calls to investigate more carefully whether South Africa's successful sustainable use model could also be applied to a carefully regulated legal trade in rhino horn. Existing legal horn stockpiles are already substantial and growing as private owners increasingly dehorn their animals. Unlike elephant ivory, rhino horn can be obtained both non-lethally and renewably and the potential legal supply source easily exceeds existing illegal levels of harvest.

The South African government has adopted a cautious approach on the issue of legal horn trade but is willing to consider all options. There is an urgent need for more carefully considered research on the issue.

Michael 't Sas-Rolfes is an independent conservation economist based in Cape Town, South Africa. He has worked extensively on issues relating to trade in endangered species and institutional arrangements and incentives relating to biodiversity conservation and protected area management. A former member of SASUSG, Michael has recently resumed active involvement with SULI after an extended break from conservation-related work.

Photo: Black rhino in Etosha National Park, part of Namibia's thriving population. Credit: Michael 't Sas-Rolfes

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