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The rhino debate

The rhino debate continues. In the first issue of *SULiNews* Michael 't Sas-Rolfes described the increase in rhino poaching in South Africa where rhinos are hosted on both state and privately owned land, suggesting that a fresh look be taken at the possibility of re-opening international trade. The article provoked considerable interest and we have therefore invited follow-up contributions from Colman O Criodain of WWF and Mike Knight, Chair of the African Rhino Specialist Group of IUCN/SSC. Colman focuses on enforcement problems relating to illegal trade in one country, while Mike explains more of the background as well as the dilemmas facing rhino conservationists and calls for a balanced and creative approach. If others wish to offer different perspectives on this burning issue they are invited to contact the Co-Editors with a view to the debate being rounded off in issue 3.

[Read Michael 't Sas-Rolfes' article from *SULiNews* Issue 1](#)

Rhino poaching – a contribution to the debate

By Colman O Criodain

This is a response to Michael 't Sas Rolfes's article in Issue 1 of *SULiNews* describing the increasing loss of rhinos in South Africa from poaching. WWF agrees broadly with his description of the current situation in the country but we do not agree that resuming trade in rhino horn is the appropriate solution at this time.

We are not ideologically opposed to consumptive use of wild animals: in fact, we are committed to the principle of sustainable use. Nevertheless, we do not believe that the answer to a species conservation crisis always lies in easing trade restrictions, any more than we believe that that the solution always lies in curtailing trade. The realities are more complex and they vary according to the biology of the species concerned, the prevailing legislative and enforcement regime, and the demands of the market.

South Africa did not achieve recovery of its rhino population by simply liberalising ownership and hunting laws and leaving it to the market to do the rest. Such



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very modest easing of the laws as did occur was a calibrated response to an initially strict regime that was yielding progressive results.

The other factor in this success was the pressure placed via CITES on consumer countries that were implicated in illegal trade. China banned trade in 1993 and has repeatedly stated that it has no plans to modify this ban. Yemen took steps more recently to curtail the market for traditional rhino horn daggers.

What is now putting South Africa's achievement at risk is the emergence of a new consumer market in Vietnam (1), a country that is failing to take even the most minimal steps to curtail that market, having lost its last rhino in 2010. It is this market that is driving poaching, thus increasing private owners' security liabilities. Herein lies the core problem. With Vietnam as the only likely market, and with enforcement there so conspicuously lacking, there is no reason to have faith in the premise that poaching and illegal trade would not continue. Rather, the existence of a poorly regulated legal market could facilitate laundering of illegal horn. A comparable situation can be found with ivory markets in Thailand, where an exemption for trade in ivory originating for domestic elephant - without any accompanying burden of proof - has allowed open trade in ivory of illegal African origin, a fact acknowledged in discussions in CITES (2). It has been argued that the existence of a legal supply would be sufficient to divert consumers from purchasing illegally sourced horn. However, the case for this has not been adequately substantiated. It depends, inter alia, on whether or not traders seek to charge a premium for the legal product or to try and undercut the illegal product; in the latter case it also depends on whether or not they are successful. Therefore, the option of allowing legal trade is a risky one compared to the alternative, which is to exert pressure on Vietnam to enforce its own laws and its obligations under CITES, including via the threat of sanctions.

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(1) Milliken, T., Shaw, J., Taylor, R.D. and Turton, C. (In prep.). *The South Africa - Viet Nam Rhino Horn Trade Dynamic: A deadly combination of government lapses, private sector greed and Asian crime syndicates*. TRAFFIC, Cambridge.

(2) Milliken, T., Emslie, R.H. and Taludkar, B. (Eds.), (2009). *African and Asian Rhinoceroses – Status, Conservation and Trade; A report from the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN/SSC) African and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups and TRAFFIC to the CITES Secretariat pursuant to Resolution Conf. 9.14 (Rev. CoP14) and Decision 14.89*. See: <http://www.cites.org/eng/cop/15/doc/E15-45-01A.pdf>

The rhino dilemma

By Mike Knight

The letters by Michael 't Sas-Rolfes and Colman O Criodain reflect the polarized debate buzzing around the rhino community. As Chairman of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group (AFRSG), my role is to remain independent, yet promote the debate towards seeking sustainable conservation management solutions for our African rhinos. All too often simple solutions are being advocated for this otherwise complex issue. Under the current escalating rate of poaching of a relatively low resource base (rhino population size), we will need to be bold and assertive to conserve these magnificent creatures. We ultimately need to do what is best for rhinos, irrespective of ideological leanings. Crucially, we need a shared vision and objectives for rhinos that virtually everyone can agree on, such as the need to have growing rhino populations, part of an economically viable wildlife industry, gaining full benefit from the species, with a reduced illegal demand and black market prices for horn, and less of a poaching threat to our living rhino populations.

At the start of 2011 South Africa was conserving a total 20,700 rhinos, or 75% of the wild rhinos on the planet. Despite poaching the population is growing by



around 5% per annum. The country is therefore a crucial stakeholder in this debate. The provision of surplus rhinos from state-run Parks to the private sector, from the late 60's onwards, was aimed at sharing the conservation burden, and finding homes for surplus rhinos that needed to be removed to prevent established populations becoming overstocked – which is currently the case with the state reserves. On the back of supportive legislation, sustainable use of white rhinos (via sport and trophy hunting which started in 1968) and the advent of the first wildlife auctions in late 1980s saw rhinos realize their true commercial value. Prior to this, the provision of animals from the state at highly subsidized low prices resulted in perverse incentives that saw no growth in the private rhino populations. These economically valuable private rhino populations now conserve an extra two million hectares of land and habitat, hosting a range of plant and animal species, – a broader positive conservation outcome.

The increase in poaching has coincided with soaring rhino protection costs and general risks, so much so that members of the private sector have started disinvesting in rhinos. Providing further incentives through allowing a trade in horn, on the back of the current sales in live rhinos and limited trophy hunting, is being increasingly advocated in South Africa as a possible way to combat and reduce poaching; whilst creating an enabling environment for private rhino conservation to encourage an expansion of range and numbers of rhinos on to both private and possibly also community land and sustainably achieve rhino conservation aims. Others, however, have cautioned that controls would need to be in place at all stages of any such trade to prevent the development of a parallel illegal trade which could threaten rhino populations in other range states. It has also been argued that opening a trade in horn might potentially stimulate a growth in market demand, putting even more pressure on our populations, while others have argued that demand could be influenced by raising prices as necessary. It is important to state that thus far no potential trading partner in south east Asia has as yet put its head above the parapet in support of such an idea. In line with current policies, the demand reduction approach (through enhanced legislative controls, increased law enforcement, awareness etc) has been advocated and implemented. Some suggest that this has not seen a respite on the loss of Africa's rhinos and that new approaches are desperately needed. Some point to how the demand reduction and substitution campaigns with threats of sanctions successfully reduced horn use and trade in the 1980s in other SE Asian countries, and suggest that similar attempts should be made in Viet Nam.

We thus sit with a dilemma. Do we expand an obviously successful conservation model, built on good protection and a sustainable use philosophy, into an uncharted and potentially large trade environment? Or do we stick to a conceptually simpler approach of demand reduction with law enforcement, with its huge costs and disincentives for private and community rhino owners, all set on top of a relatively small international rhino population? What is required is a rational risk-benefit assessment of a number of different management interventions on the delivery of a shared vision and objectives for rhino conservation. Given the international, cross cutting complexity of the issue, it requires the involvement of a wide diversity of skills and knowledge. This assessment needs to be undertaken in source and consumer countries to tease out the relevant local and universal principles affecting delivery on the shared vision. We also need to be adaptive in our approach, and accept the fact that we learn most by trying.

While the process of dialogue and review of pros and cons of alternative rhino conservation options in South Africa has started, I call for this exercise to be urgently undertaken elsewhere, as time is not on our side. It is important to accept that there will more than likely not be a single solution to this complex issue but rather a suite of management options best suited for local circumstances. Accepting this is critical, even if it runs contrary to one's conservation philosophy. In conclusion, whatever approaches are advocated, it should not detract from the fact that the conservation of rhinos still depends upon good-old fashioned protection, monitoring, biological management of free-ranging rhinos, adequate application of controls of illegal trade in consumer countries, with sufficient incentives and funding to successfully protect and grow rhino numbers and range into the future. Let us get these right, for the sake of rhinos.

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Photo: Black rhino in Etosha National Park. Credit: Michael 't Sas-Rolfes

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