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After ivory, a legal rhino horn trade will only cause harm

February 10, 2012

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 - [Climate Changing Refrigerants](#)
 - [Ozone Destroying Substances](#)
- [Global Ocean Race](#)
- [Habitat Destruction](#)
- [Illegal Wildlife Trade](#)
 - [Birds](#)
 - [Cetaceans](#)
 - [Elephants](#)
 - [Rhino](#)
 - [Tigers](#)
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The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is an international agreement signed by 175 governments, including one of the world's major markets for illegal wildlife products – China.

The international trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn is forbidden under CITES and, after a brief respite from poaching during the 1980s and '90s, populations of both species started to recover (some would say because of the international ban).

However, poaching has begun to steadily escalate once more across Africa. In 2002, over six tonnes of illegal ivory – the single largest haul since the 1989 ban was put in place – was seized in Singapore and marked the beginning of the continuing, and increasing, numbers of large seizures of illegal ivory, most of them destined for China and the Far East. South Africa, in particular, has seen an uncontrollable wave of poaching of rhino for their horns, believed to be the panacea for all manner of ailments (but without a shred scientific proof) in the Far East. In 2011, South Africa lost more than 440 rhino and the slaughter continues.



This year, to date, we're looking at one being taken every day.

Staggeringly, in some quarters, the argument is still being made that creating a legal trade in rhino horn is the answer to this appalling situation.

After several years of polarised discussion and debate, CITES in 2008 granted China approved buyer status in the controversial sale of stockpiled ivory from Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Proponents of sustainable utilisation argue that a legalised, controlled trade in specimens of naturally deceased, managed and culled elephants can be used to flood a market and thereby lower demand, so reducing illegal trade and easing pressure on wild populations of endangered species.



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Setting aside for a moment considerations that a 'legal' stream of ivory and rhino horn serves only to confuse consumers while also stimulating demand, for such a mechanism to work there must be stringent controls in place to regulate the trade, such as validating the source of any products, strong enforcement against illegal trade making poaching a high risk / low return activity, and transparent corruption-free management of market prices for legal products. China claimed it could implement "rigorous" regulations and controls against illegal trade and ensure no illegal ivory could enter the market.

Two years after the stockpile sale took place, EIA investigations in 2010 and 2011 revealed that, far from flooding the market with legal ivory to reduce demand, up to 90 per cent of ivory on sale came from illegal sources and prices of legal ivory had increased to as much as \$7,000 per kilo. In effect, the results of EIA's investigations show that instead of stemming the poaching by satisfying the demand, the sale of the stockpiles has simply fuelled the demand for illegal ivory. These findings have subsequently been supported by research and investigations conducted by independent consultant Esmond Martin and the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

So, in a nutshell, the sale has only made matters worse: the demand in China remains high and growing, spurring massive increases in the poaching of elephants. The illegal ivory simply gets laundered onto the market under cover of the 'legal' ivory.



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Turning to rhinos, the species that has already teetered on the brink of extinction once in the past 30 years, and is now in the throes of a new onslaught

The last serious rhino poaching crisis, in the 1980s and early '90s, had a devastating effect on rhino populations in Africa and Asia but the current crisis has an added dimension not seen before – the involvement of organised criminal syndicates in countries which are neither range states nor major consumer markets. This suggests the demand for rhino horn is currently at an all-time high.

All manner of talks are underway to address this situation, but the killing continues and a country that prides itself on its wildlife resources, enforcement and anti-poaching is at a loss. So the solution being advanced to stop the poaching is ... that's right, to legalise trade. Unbelievable.

With China's success in gaining approved ivory buyer status at CITES, talks are now taking place to discuss the possibility of introducing a similar mechanism for legalised trade in rhino horn along the line of the 'successful' ivory model.

Because the legalised ivory trade has, after all, been such a roaring success – but only for the illegal traders.

China again seems to be the principal market yet it has spectacularly failed to fulfil its promises and commitments; implementation of its ivory regulation and control system is, at best, dismal. If China cannot implement a control system designed specifically to address the problem (while at the same time satisfying demand), how on Earth can it even be considered as a suitable



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candidate for introducing a similar system for rhinos?

One area in which China *has* undoubtedly excelled is in winning agreement at CITES, convincing the parties it has the capacity and will to regulate legal wildlife trade, in particular of ivory, bears and farmed tigers, without detriment to wild populations.

And yet the evidence speaks to the contrary. China has not remotely demonstrated adequate commitment or investment in the kind of enforcement required to end illegal trade, something which requires an intelligence-led, and inter-agency approach to tackling organised, international criminal syndicates.

Opening up trade has demonstrably not worked for elephants. Who could be so naïve or so wilfully blind as to imagine it will work for rhinos?



Mary Rice
Executive Director

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Posted on: February 10, 2012 by eia

12 Responses

1.



[Wildlife Lover](#) says:
February 10, 2012 at 7:15 pm

EXCELLENT work, EIA! Good to see more international wildlife organizations speaking out against the unfortunately expanding movement to

out against these attempts to legalize the trade. The self-centered group of individuals pushing for this in South Africa obviously are not aware that there are, in fact, 3 other rhino species that live outside of Africa, AND are, indeed, far more endangered than both the black and white rhinos. If the trade was legalized, we should fully expect to see all 3 Asian rhinos wiped off the planet in a matter of just a short time, as it would open all sorts of avenues for illegally obtained horns to be laundered. That hardly seems like a fair trade off, nor a "solution" to the ongoing rhino crisis.

[Reply](#)

2.

EIA: After ivory, a legal rhino horn trade will only cause harm | Asian Elephants Today says:
February 13, 2012 at 3:49 pm

[...] Source: Environmental Investigation Agency [...]

[Reply](#)

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eia says:
February 17, 2012 at 2:50 pm

Thanks for helping to spread the word

[Reply](#)



Henry says:
February 13, 2012 at 5:14 pm

Thank you, diywild has undertaken to petition the South African to place a moratorium on the current Trophy Hunting of Rhinos in SA. In September 2011 the South African government published a draft ammended policy of the current trophy hunting law which is much the same as the "old" law with the only difference that only one Rhino to be hunted per person both local and overseas hunters per year. What a joke instead of 100 hunters we will have 1000 so-called hunters from China, Vietnam and any other eastern country because they can export, with CITES permit, the "TROPHY" with horns to their country as long as the horns are micro chipped, how stupid do they think people are? Diywild have been approached by other organizations not to proceed with our petition due to the "sensitive" issues surrounding the private owners of Rhino (who mainly keep Rhino for the trophy hunting industry) and the SA goverment so-called willingness to stop Rhino poaching! We will not stop our petition campaign, because the only people that are doing something about the poaching is NGO and the ordinary man&woman in the street who cares about the survival of an specie and not the value (money) attached to the Rhino or any other specie. We will stop the TROPHY HUNTING OF RHINOS in SA. We need all the people of the world to support the African Rhino because we are merely the castodians of the Rhino they belong to all of us on planet earth. Henry

[Reply](#)

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eia says:
February 17, 2012 at 2:52 pm

Well said, Henry – and the very best of luck with your petition in adding to the groundswell of public opinion again the exploitation of these magnificent and sadly endangered creatures.

[Reply](#)



Rodney says:
February 16, 2012 at 5:54 pm

I cannot agree with you as the total emphasis on awarding permits to control the trade is being placed directly in the hands of those who are controlling and abusing the market. Under Dr Ian Player, sustainable utilisation proved to be totally effective compared to Leakes total disaster, but the monotoriums placed on the trade have effectively pushed up the prices to such an extent that reward far exceeds the risk. As to "Flooding" the extremely limited market is ridiculous, as this "product" supposedly used for its medicinal value is used more as a status symbol for those who can afford it as a medicine per say. Controlled marketing from the source with controlled auctions to pre approved buyers and conditions for re education and warnings to the end user, would ensure the system is not abused as apposed to CITIES irresponsible actions which has ensured in awarding permits to people whos only interest is to make money and promote the "medicinal" value. The real victims here are the end user and the game farmer at the expense of the rhino. CITIES actions failed dismally in Africa and is quickly descimating the rhino in South Africa as it did in the rest of Africa under the guise of doing "the right thing" . It is easy to protect oneself under a veil of emotion but extremely difficult to accept reality....the only way to stop this slaughter is through supply and demand while a re-education program must be implemented similtainously.

[Reply](#)

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eia says:
February 17, 2012 at 2:49 pm

This philosophy of a sustainable controlled legal trade is clearly NOT working for ivory; rhino horn is even more lucrative and the rhino even more threatened, and there's no unequivocal evidence to indicate that allowing a 'legal' trade in rhino horn would be anything but a disaster for the species.

Game farmers are only victims insofar as they are not allowed to cash in further on this highly endangered species. Bear in mind that the original aim of these ranches was to rescue the rhino – strongly suggesting a conservation initiative which has been successful but has now created a monster in pursuit of the money.

CITES does not fail – it is the parties to CITES who fail.

We agree regarding the importance of awareness-raising and re-education, but by the time any meaningful change has been achieved by this route, there will be no rhinos left to discuss.

[Reply](#)

5.



Jean Marie says:
March 22, 2012 at 9:37 pm

This is exactly what we are writing to CITES about. This is option 1 on the agenda. Out of option 99. We are drafting a proposal to CITES after now becoming clear that China are going to addressing CITES to have the ban lifted. This in turn will then give All other African nations there trading partner.

We must not allow this to happen. We also have this petition below

Please sign and share as we are going to be sending this with the drafted dossier to CITES come September 2012

<http://www.change.org/petitions/say-no-to-c-i-t-e-s-lifting-the-ban-on-rhino-horn-trade>

[Reply](#)

6.



[Ann](#) says:

March 23, 2012 at 6:21 pm

International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICWC), CITES, INTERPOL, UNODC, the World Bank and the World Customs Organization (WCO), World Trade Organisation what are their responses to these kind of research? I wish they had an interactive platform where the ordinary citizens of this world would also pass across our views!!! Am tired of greedy hunters especially from the south lobbying and getting their way with CITES!!!!

[Reply](#)

7.



[Margot S](#) says:

March 24, 2012 at 3:04 pm

Thank you EIA for taking such a firm stance against rhino horn trade. We will need much support and lobbying to counter-act the pro-traders who employ lawyers and all sorts of devious means to promote their aims, which are to expand their bank accounts although they pretend to be rhino conservationists. This entire increase in poaching has been manipulated to architect the demise of rhino in the wild and increase rhino farming or ranching. These are iconic wild animals and need absolute protection until we can break through the barrier of ignorance in the Far East, most of whom don't even realise that rhinos are killed for their horn. More than that – rhinos are becoming extinct because of their unreasonable and insatiable demand for this rare product. Investors have identified a large market and a rare commodity so the stage is set (so they think) for huge profits. The SA Govt is complicit in this so we need EU countries and anyone else to lobby against this short-sighted movement. THE BEST WAY TO PROTECT RHINO IS TO LOBBY FOR THEM TO BE MOVED ONTO CITES APPENDIX I FOR CRITICALLY ENDANGERED. Please help us in our effort to do this. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

8.

[After ivory, a legal rhino horn trade will only cause harm | Outraged SA Citizens Against Poaching](#) says:

April 4, 2012 at 3:29 pm

[...] Source: Environmental Investigation Agency [...]

[Reply](#)

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[Caroline M](#) says:

September 19, 2012 at 2:53 pm

Thanks EIA, you are doing excellent work.

[Reply](#)

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