



Rhino poaching and East Asian policies: Facts and debates

2011-2012 saw the highest levels of poaching and illegal trade in rhino horn in many years, bringing some rhino species towards the verge of extinction in some African and Asian regions. Two of the world's five rhino species, the Javan and Sumatran species (found in Asia), have been reduced to only a few dozen while in Africa, the black and white rhino have been under increasing threat by poachers. With increasing wealth in East Asia, the demand for rhino horn — in use in traditional medicine — is also increasing; Rhino horns can fetch up to US\$ 110,000 per kilogram. The issue is not simply a Chinese one: In South Africa, the number of poachers arrested has included Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese nationals. From this assessment of current challenges in the rhino poaching crisis, largely in South Africa, and a discussion of the possibility of legalising the rhino horn trade, this briefing makes recommendations for East Asian authorities on their role in the crisis.

All five rhino species have been on the endangered and threatened species list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for many years. In 1976, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) listed the rhino on Appendix I, effectively prohibiting international trade in rhino products. Rhino horn have been found to be poached mainly for the Asian markets, particularly Vietnam, China and Thailand (see map of assumed hotspots for rhino horn), where horn is traded illegally and used in traditional medicine. Several Asian cultures hold the unsubstantiated belief that the horn can cure an array of ailments including fever and cancer.

Rhino poaching as an Afro-Asian topic

Rhino poaching is not regarded as a key issue in China; however it may become crucial as a result of the growing need for environmental protection and conservation internationally. Following the international trade ban and signatory to the CITES agreement since 1981, China banned the trade and use of rhino horn in Traditional Chinese Medicine in 1993. Rhino horn substitutes were used successfully to treat patients. Since then, government and non-government organisations have worked to reduce the demand for rhino horns. This however has not curbed high demand, which is spiked by increasing wealth in East Asia.

China is specifically targeted by civil society organisations to do more to assist in the protection of African wildlife. As the majority of the world's black and white rhino species are found in South Africa, the country has become a key target for rhino poachers. In 2011, the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) reported a record number of 448 rhinos poached in South Africa, and in 2012 there has been 588 rhinos poached so far (as of 27 November 2012). The South African Kruger National Park alone has lost 362 rhinos to poaching in 2012.

There are currently five species of rhino in the world: two African species (black and white rhino); and three Asian species (greater one-horned, Javan, and Sumatran rhino) found in South and Southeast Asia. Historically, the current population of rhinos is a conservation success. Between 1970 and 1987, 85 per cent of the world's rhinoceros population was killed due to a demand for rhino products in traditional Eastern medicine and a demand for knife handles (made from the horn) used to make "coming-of-age" daggers for young Yemeni males. Due to this high number of rhinos poached over time, all five species were listed on Appendix I of the CITES convention and considered endangered. In 1976 this led to the banning of international trading of the rhino species as well as a 1987 regulation banning domestic trading. Concessions came later in 1994,

(an Appendix II down-listing for South Africa's white rhino population to allow for trophy hunting and live sales) and 2004 (a similar down-listing for Swaziland and limited black rhino trophy hunting quotas for South Africa and Namibia). Although the ban on trading horn has been in force since then, illegal trading of rhino horn continues today. Some rhino species are close to extinction again: In 2011, the WWF and the International Rhino Foundation confirmed the extinction of the Javan rhino in Vietnam. The Javan rhinoceros is now believed to be confined to one population, less than 50 individuals, in a small national park in Indonesia.

The rapid economic development experienced by China in recent years has further created new challenges and opportunities for the conservation and sustainable use of wild animals and plants, such as snakes, crocodiles, ginseng, tropical timber species, turtles, seahorses and other marine species. From a traditional Chinese perspective, as in many other countries, wild animals are a resource to be exploited, not something to be protected for their intrinsic value. However as more people are able to afford traditional

Box 1: Regulation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

A way of addressing the use of banned wildlife parts for traditional medicine was through the regulation of traditional Chinese medicine practices. Chinese herbal medicine production, distribution, pricing, and utilisation are under the regulations of different government agencies, such as the Chinese State Food and Drug Administration and the National Development and Reform Commission. Although the Chinese government has implemented quality control systems on medical production, such as implementations of the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP), the Good Laboratory Practice (GLP), and the Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP), the quality control in the production of herbal medicine still needs to improve.

Since 1999, TCM has also been under the same registration and licensing procedures as western medicine. In addition to regular training, both doctors and pharmacists are required to do one to three years of residency in a medical institution before taking a national license examination. TCM is a practical study, emphasising clinical experience as well as family lineage. Those TCM practitioners who have studied traditional medicine can also participate in the examination of medical practitioners. However, the complex process and certain requirements of the exam (e.g. some specific western medical science knowledge) prevent some TCM practitioners from getting their licenses. It should be noted that TCM is used globally and thus requires regulations across countries.

medicine, mounting pressure on conservation simultaneously leads to greater environmental awareness.

Enforcement of regulation (see box 1) is crucial on the supply side. There is however also a strong demand side of the problem. The key to success of CITES lies in the willingness of member states to enforce its resolutions. The continued trade of rhino horn illustrates problems with enforcement mechanisms. China, a CITES signatory, remains one of the world's top destinations for illegal rhino horn as reported by the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC).

Wildlife law enforcement in China

Law enforcement of the sale and trade of rhino horn is a major issue in East Asia; however, very few arrests have been made in China, Vietnam or Thailand. In contrast, of the 43 documented arrests of Asian nationals for rhino crimes in South Africa, 24 have been Vietnamese, 13 Chinese and the remainder from Thailand and Malaysia, reports TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network. The Chinese authorities have begun to take some action - China's wildlife law enforcement authorities taking positive steps to tackle the issue through enforcement actions and by holding interagency workshops on the control of illegal online wildlife trade (see table 1 for the WWF Crime Scorecard). The inaugural meeting of China's National Inter-Agencies CITES Enforcement Coordination Group (NICECG) was held in Beijing in November 2011 in order to enhance efforts by China's responsible government agencies to combat smuggling and illegal wildlife trade in China.

In June 2012 Chinese authorities stepped up on the online selling of rhino horn. TRAFFIC reported that 15 of the leading e-commerce sellers, operating in China, have signed a declaration stating that they have a zero-tolerance policy towards their services being used to conduct illegal wildlife trading. This was after TRAFFIC had found 3,389 advertisements for tiger bone, elephant ivory, rhino horn and hawksbill turtle products being offered through 15 Chinese-language e-commerce sites and associated auction websites and chat rooms in April 2012.

To legalise trade, or not?

In Vietnam, rhino horns (including fake horn) are being sold through traditional medicine stores and hospitals. Rhino horn smugglers are now making very high quality fake horns, allowing hunters to sell the real horns at a huge mark-up to black market dealers for traditional medicine and status symbols. Horn is nowadays even stolen from museums and private hunters' homes.

Some experts believe that selling off the rhino horn will halt the need for the black market, as well as bring the value of

Box 2: Rhino trade, the legal way?

Rhino horn trade is regulated by CITES and at present, only South Africa is allowed to export rhino horn. CITES regulations state only the white rhino can be traded legally in South Africa and Swaziland "for the exclusive purpose of allowing international trade in live animals to appropriate and acceptable destinations and hunting trophies." It has been found that only about 15 rhinos are shot in true trophy hunts in South Africa every year, while about 200 are shot each year, in pseudo-trophy hunts where the hunt is solely interested in the horn for selling into the Asian market. The number of Vietnamese awarded permits has decreased after this finding.

Live rhinos have also been exported to various countries from South Africa, especially to China. Over 100 rhinos have been exported to China, some of which cannot be accounted for. South Africa reported exporting 61 rhinos to China in 2006 and 2007, whilst China recorded receiving 117 rhinos from South Africa during the same time (IUCN/SSC report, 2009). The mismatch in numbers clearly illustrates irregularities in the export of live rhino from South Africa.

the rhino horn down. DEA argues that rhino horn stock piles could also be sold to fund further rhino conservation efforts. The call for legalising the trade has, however, drawn much criticism from international conservation NGOs such as WWF, which claim this would set back efforts made to stabilise rhino populations by decades and would only further endanger the lives of rhino - and possibly drive them to extinction. Also, 'legal production' of rhino horn is unlikely to saturate a market that is rapidly expanding due to rapidly increasing wealth in Asia.

A possible legalisation of rhino trade would need a long discussion on the best possible process for the protection of the rhino – instead of the economic gains made by the trading of rhino horn. If legal trade was to become an option, CITES would need to approve a change in the rules, and for that to happen, 66 per cent of the 175 member countries need to vote in favour of the change. A number of issues would have to be addressed, including the identification of a trade partner that will control trade in the country of import and reliable certification and monitoring systems. South Africa has suspended its efforts for the legalisation of rhino horn trade as there is not enough time to prepare the application before the next CITES meeting in 2013.

Botswana seems to generally be going the opposite direction and has announced a complete ban on trophy hunting for any game in 2014 in November 2012.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Need is for a clear commitment of East Asian states to work with African states on environmental protection. Advocacy is apparently achieving effects; it is believed that the negative publicity Vietnam has received recently has spurred some action. Vietnam posted the highest wildlife crime score in the WWF's 2012 Wildlife Crime Scorecard report (see table 1). South Africa and Vietnam – after administrative hiccups – have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that will encompass bilateral cooperation in criminal investigations against illegal wildlife trafficking.

Ironically, the rhino poaching crisis is particularly harmful to China's image, given that talk often is about Chinese traditional medicine. The existing regulation within China does not seem to be the weak point. China is signatory to a

Table 1: Compliance and enforcement scores for destination countries

Countries are scored green, yellow or red in an assessment of their recent efforts to comply with and enforce CITES trade controls for the three species groups.

Green - General progress in key aspects of compliance and enforcement

Yellow - Failing on key aspects of compliance or enforcement

Red - Failing on key aspects of compliance and enforcement

Country	Rhino	Tiger	Elephant
China	Green	Green	Yellow
Thailand	Yellow	Green	Red
Vietnam	Red	Red	Yellow

Source: WWF Wildlife Crime Scorecard 2012

Hotspot of illegal rhino horn trade



number of environmental/conservation regulation, including international agreements. The regulation side is thus very much with the international consensus. Also in place is regulation of Traditional Chinese Medicine which – in theory – is also complying with the above international standards. There are still traditional medicine practitioners who are promoting the product.

Most Asian states legally provide full protection to rhino species under their respective wildlife protection acts. Penalties stipulated in the legislation are generally high, but convictions are few and sentences often lenient. Capturing rhino poachers and traders, and collecting sufficient evidence for successful convictions, has proved challenging. Thus, law enforcement needs to be improved in China.

Law enforcement needs explicitly both, demand and supply side efforts. Therefore, Chinese authorities and NGOs need to create more environmental awareness, not only on the importance of protecting wildlife, but specifically aiming at demystifying the value and power of rhino horn.

Further recommendations need to be made for South Africa, especially in terms of the debate on legalising rhino horn trade. By storing rhino horn, the South African government is attributing value to the product. A look at the example of the trade of elephant ivory might be helpful: Countries like Ghana and Kenya, contrary to South Africa, have burned the ivory found. While legalisation of the trade might initially decrease market value and bring state revenue, longer-term projections of demand need to be made. Otherwise, legalisation might mean a very risky gamble with the survival of rhinos.

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