

# Conservation news

## New rhino conservation project in South Africa to understand landowner decision-making

Africa is facing a rhino-poaching crisis, largely driven by increased demand for rhino horn in Asia. This problem has received international attention and there have been general calls to invest more in anti-poaching efforts, increase enforcement of legislation against illegal trade, and develop projects to reduce demand in consumer states. In addition, two state conservation agencies responsible for protecting the largest populations of rhinos in South Africa have called for the legalization of trade in rhino horn. Following the 16th Convention of the Parties to CITES this suggestion was supported by the South African Minister of Environmental Affairs, who argued that legalization of trade 'is the right direction' as it could reduce poaching pressure and raise funds for conservation. This suggestion remains controversial but current attempts to predict the impacts of legalizing trade are hampered by a lack of information on the incentive structures that underpin rhino conservation in South Africa. Working together with partners we have recently developed an online system that aims to address this by monitoring factors influencing the decision-making of the owners of private reserves.

The importance of South African private reserves is often neglected in debates over rhino conservation but a quarter of South Africa's 20,700 rhinos are found on private land, more than the combined rhino population of the rest of Africa. Moreover, the country's success in conserving rhinos has been in part because of early recognition that involvement of private landowners would increase the availability of land, funding and expertise. This is why the state conservation agencies have long championed the role of private reserves by creating financial incentives for stocking rhinos, based on generating revenue from tourism, trophy hunting and live sales. This has helped increase the country's rhino population by 130% since 1997. Moreover, this increase continues, despite a 23-fold increase in poaching incidents over the past decade last year's poaching rate of 3.2% of South Africa's rhinos was less than the natural population growth.

Unfortunately, this annual rate of poaching continues to grow—reaching 4.3% of the population for the first 5 months of 2013—moving closer to the tipping point where rhino numbers would start to fall. However, the indirect impacts of poaching could be more critical for rhino conservation if they undermine the financial incentives for stocking these species on private land. This is because private reserves risk losing their animals, bear greater enforcement costs, and face increased economic uncertainty through changes in the market value of live rhino. This could seriously affect land

available for rhinos and anecdotal evidence already suggests some private reserves no longer wish to stock them. Such a move would also affect state agencies that rely on selling rhinos to the private sector as an important source of conservation revenue. It is significant, however, that this evidence is anecdotal. Although conservationists have developed increasingly sophisticated means of monitoring rhino numbers, there are no equivalent coordinated systems for understanding the critical human element underpinning the success of rhino conservation in South Africa. Thus, we lack reliable data on these trends, and can only speculate about how legalizing trade in rhino horn would change the incentive structure.

Funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, we have started working together with the Private Rhino Owners Association and the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group to develop a system to monitor factors influencing decision-making by owners of private reserves. This system is based on an online questionnaire that includes sections on: About you, About the reserve, Reasons for stocking rhino, Incentives and barriers to stocking rhino, and The contribution of private reserves to rhino conservation. The system will be launched in May 2013 and should provide a wealth of data to help understand this crucial aspect of rhino conservation.

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## Demand for rhino horn declines in Yemen

For decades, conservationists have been wary of Yemen's pivotal role in the trade in rhino horn. The oil boom in the Middle East in the 1970s caused a massive influx in remittances to Yemen and a huge demand for rhino horn to make handles for the traditional curved dagger, the *jambiya*. Demand for rhino horn rapidly resulted in the obliteration of rhinos in much of central and eastern Africa. Since the 1980s we have visited Yemen regularly to monitor the trade, encourage law enforcement and support the use of substitute materials to replace rhino horn.

Since 2008, however, kidnappings of foreigners and a breakdown in law and order in Yemen have meant that no conservationists went to check on the use of rhino horn, despite rising rhino poaching in Africa. However, after the revolution that started in 2011 a new President was elected in February 2012 and we were able to return in November 2012. We learned that the political crisis had made it easier to smuggle rhino horns, mostly from Kenya via Djibouti and