



let's go legal

With rhino poaching rocketing to new highs, the trade ban on rhino horn clearly isn't working. Perhaps it's time, says **John Hanks**, to completely change our thinking.



JOHN HANKS

After a brief respite, black rhinos are once again a prime target for poachers, even in once-safe havens like the Kruger National Park.

In the late 1960s more than 4 000 black rhinos lived in comparative safety in Zambia's Luangwa Valley; today, there are just 22 in the whole of Zambia, a consequence of the orgy of poaching that started in East Africa in the early 1970s and spread rapidly across the continent. Between 1970 and 1995, the black rhino population fell from an Africa-wide total of more than 100 000 to only 2 410.

A concerted effort to halt poaching helped Africa's rhinos, black and white, to stage a significant and welcome recovery, and by 2009 black rhino numbers had risen to 4 230 and white to 17 475. Today, just four countries – South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Kenya – collectively conserve 95.7 per cent of the black and 98.8 per cent of the white rhino populations.

The bad news is that since 2006 the upturn has been overshadowed by a new outbreak of poaching, most of which is centred in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Killing rhinos has reached a level higher than any other in recent history, and not even the Kruger National Park has been safe. 'These appalling onslaughts indicate that the value of rhino horn is worth risk-taking by criminals on an unprecedented scale,' says John Ledger, the editor of *Environment* magazine.

'The killing of rhinos in South Africa and Zimbabwe is getting out of control.' In stark contrast, Namibia's rhinos have continued to experience a negligible challenge from poaching over the past few decades (see *Africa Geographic*, March 2010).

Most of the poached rhino horn is destined for use as traditional medicine in Asia, mainly Vietnam and China, where the wholesale price is at least US\$20 000 per kilogram. In 1976 the contracting parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) agreed to ban all

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international trade in rhino horn, but despite this – and major efforts to protect rhinos in the field – the illegal trade has continued.

If the trade ban has apparently been so ineffective, why not look at a totally different approach and open up a strictly controlled legal trade in rhino horn? This radical suggestion has been proposed by Johannesburg-based economist Michael Eustace, who points out that South Africa alone could provide 1 500 kilograms of horn each year from rhinos that

have died of natural causes – not a single animal would have to be killed.

'The marketing of this horn could be efficiently regulated through a Central Selling Organisation (CSO), much as De Beers used to have,' says Eustace. 'Horn could be marked and certified as having been legally obtained and sold only to a few licensed buyers. Sales from South Africa alone would raise US\$30-million and would greatly strengthen anti-poaching efforts in the parks instead of these funds going to criminals.' He believes that Asian

large stockpiles of horn from rhinos that have died naturally and could feed controlled amounts into the market to maintain the price at US\$20 000 per kilogram.

A legal trade in rhino horn could also encourage game farmers to harvest it from living animals: no harm is done to the animal, and the horn will grow again at a rate of 800 grams per year. 'At present, farmers want to sell their rhinos because they get no income from them and protecting them is expensive,' says Eustace. 'For every horn you sell on the market, you will save one rhino in the wild.'

The proposed CSO could add this horn to the supply and, as a short-term measure, drop the price until the illegal trade collapses. It could also negotiate the sale of certified 'legal' horn for parks elsewhere in Africa. As legal rhino horn comes onto the market and willing sellers and buyers negotiate the terms of trade, so the incentives for poachers to go to extraordinary lengths – like shooting rhinos from helicopters – are lessened.

Regrettably, banning the trade in rhino horn over the past three decades has been a failure. Trade in horn through a well-regulated CSO that has strong partnerships in consuming countries could well be a better option and deserves serious consideration. ■