

Saving rhinos

One of the most memorable talks for me at the London Vet Show was by Dr William Fowlds, the Wilderness Foundation Medivet Project Co-ordinator. After starting his career with the UK Medivet veterinary group, he left to become a wildlife vet in South Africa, particularly focusing on the challenges of rhino poaching.

In 2012, he was called out to the Kariega Game Reserve, about 20 km from his home on Amakhala Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape Province. Overnight, three rhinos had been illegally darted using veterinary drugs and the poachers had brutally removed bone, skin and horn with either machetes or axes, leaving the rhinos for dead. One rhino had already died but his struggle to save the other two made headline news.

He showed appalling photographs of the barbaric treatment of these magnificent animals, with gaping holes in their faces. He is passionate about the job that he does. They try to do the best clinical treatment that they can, but the stresses of dealing with these mutilated animals deeply affects them all. He says that they are able to save nearly 10 rhinos per year.

The aim is to screw covering plates into the facial bones, to fix the faces after the horn has been cut off. The problem is that the poachers cut off the horn 2–3 inches below its base, opening into the nasal sinuses, and there is not much bone to screw down to. They need in-field surgical equipment and to be prepared to cope with a 350-kg animal. They have no choice but to euthanase if there are thoracic or abdominal bullet wounds, if the limbs are non-weight-bearing or if the poachers have hacked into the spinal column or cut the Achilles tendons to prevent the rhino from escaping.



There is a massive consumer market for rhino horn, particularly in Vietnam, with their increasingly wealthy population (the so-called Ferrari effect), coupled with an apparent rumour that rhino horn cured a politician's cancer. Made of keratin, rhino horn is more valuable than gold, diamonds and cocaine.

With at least 1300 rhinos lost per year Dr Fowlds says that 2014 was the tipping point, now losing more than they breed.

It will become an even bigger problem if it becomes more fashionable. "Is there a way to stigmatise it," Dr Fowlds asks, "in a similar way to the fur trade?"


This is part of the environmental crime crisis; more and more links are being found to a global network of illegal trade, linked to organised crime and terrorism and militia, funded by wild animals.

Dr Fowlds has travelled to China, Vietnam and the USA to raise public awareness about the scale and horror of the illegal wildlife trade, and has engaged the support of large numbers of influential people, including politicians, Hollywood stars and even Princes William and Harry.

The UK Medivet veterinary group now supports Dr Fowlds and the Wilderness Foundation on projects including treating survivors and raising awareness through education and fundraising.

For more information, visit www.wildaid.org. The story and the extraordinary surgery that was done at the Kariega Game Reserve and the calf that was finally born can be viewed at www.medivet.co.uk/news/medivet-rhino/thandis-story.

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LETTERS AND PERSPECTIVES

The veterinary profession's disgrace

In December 1991, a letter from me was published in the AVJ expressing my dismay at the positive correlation between the feeding of processed pet foods to dogs and cats and periodontal disease.

Since then there has been little change in that situation – in fact it is a thousand times worse.

I now find out that at least four vet schools receive significant funding of one sort or another from major pet food manufacturers. Veterinary faculties at Melbourne, Murdoch, Queensland and Sydney all receive financial 'assistance' from one of these companies.

The situation at Murdoch seems dire – there a scheme called the Multi Project Funding Program is envisaged – with one company

funding the whole thing.

I understand that at least in one case a lecturer in nutrition is a company employee.

Other major companies are involved in this corporatisation of veterinary schools and undergraduates across Australia and no doubt across at least the Western world. The Waltham Research Institute for Small Animal Nutrition in the UK for example is owned and run by the Mars Corporation.

Figures quoted years ago by Waltham indicated that up to 85% of dogs and cats aged at least 3 years suffered from periodontal disease that would benefit from treatment – what they didn't say is that the prime cause of that situation was soft foods; namely, processed artificial concoctions marketed as pet foods.