

Survey of Wildlife Products for Sale in Saudi Arabia

With particular emphasis on rhino horn

Esmond Bradley Martin

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia covers about 80 per cent of the Arabian Peninsula, with a total population of about 13 million people, including several million expatriate workers. In addition, and during the annual Hadji period especially, hundreds of thousands of foreign Muslims come on a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Some of these people have, over the past ten years, imported a great variety of wildlife products into Saudi Arabia. These include rhino horn dagger handles, ivory carvings and crocodile skin objects, along with a diverse assortment of live animals for pets: antelope Bovidae, Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*, Leopard *Panthera pardus* and even kangaroo Macropodidae. Also, relatively large quantities of raw elephant ivory from the Sudan, and rhinoceros horn from eastern Africa, were imported to Saudi Arabia, in particular Jeddah, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, almost none of this horn and ivory remained in the Kingdom, but was re-exported to North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic)¹ and the Far East (Parker and Martin, 1983 and Martin, 1987).

The present report does not discuss in detail Saudi Arabia's possible position as an entrepôt for wildlife commodities, but instead describes some of the wildlife products and wild animals for retail sale within the Kingdom. The study is based on a survey carried out by Mohamed Altoraf of the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, and the author, in December 1988, in Riyadh, Jeddah, and a selection of places in the south-west of the Kingdom: Ad Darb, Jizan,

Khamis Mushayt, Najran and Sabya. It is not a comprehensive survey of the country, as the cities in the east of Saudi Arabia were not visited owing to lack of time. However, most wildlife products and exotic pets are sold in the capital, Riyadh, and in the large cities located in the west of the country owing to their close proximity to Africa, from where many of the animals and goods originate.

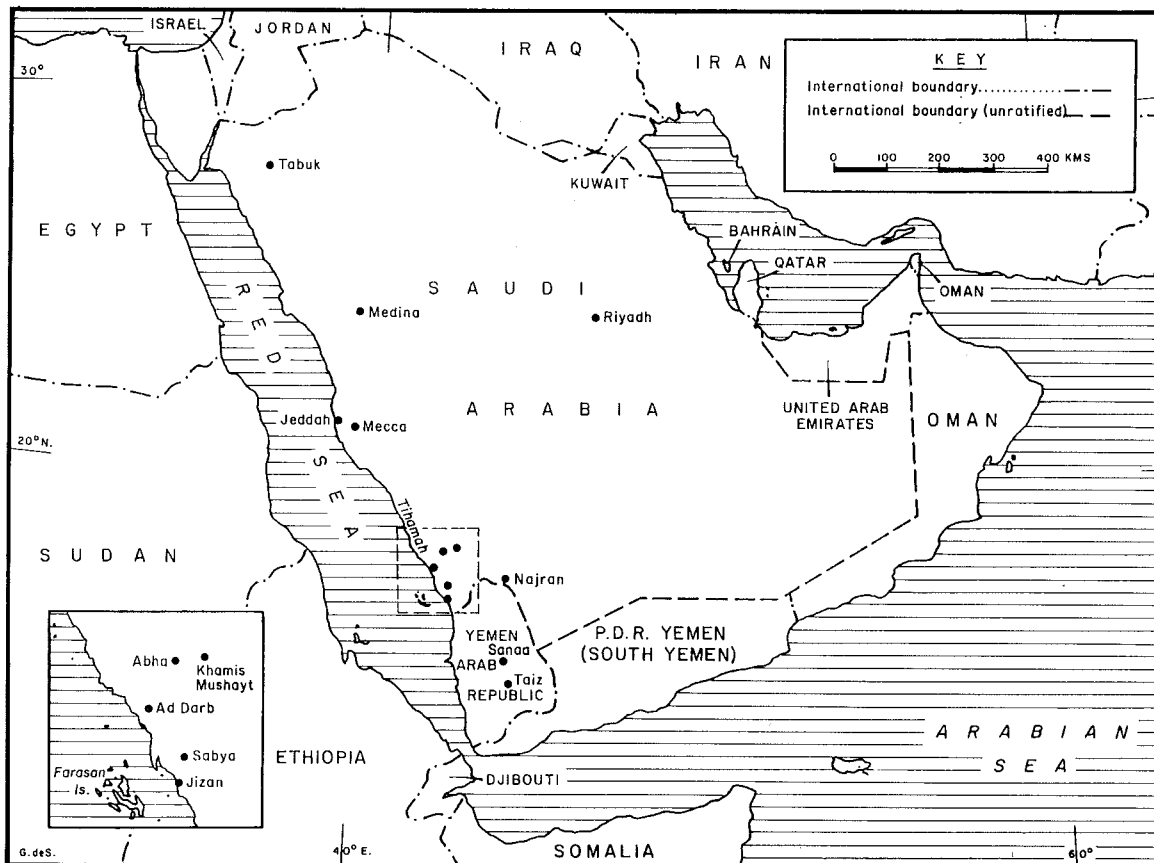
METHODS

All the main markets and shops selling wildlife products on a retail basis were visited, and interviews were carried out; again, owing to lack of time, some outlets in Jeddah and Riyadh could not be investigated. However, it is considered that the results of the survey provide a general overview of the types of wildlife commodities and exotic pets being sold in Saudi Arabia in late 1988.

BACKGROUND

There are no published data on the recent wildlife trade of Saudi Arabia. Perhaps the first reasonably detailed survey of Jeddah was carried out in November 1980 by John Grainger, currently employed by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development. Dr Grainger visited the twelve curio shops on King Khalid Street, the main area where wildlife commodities are sold. He found 13 rhino horns (probably originating from Tanzania) in one shop alone, nine Leopard skins, 24 civet skins, 15 raw African Elephant *Loxodonta africana* tusks, an assortment of Reticulated Python *Python reticulatus* and rock python *Python* sp. skins, snakeskin handbags, worked ivory items, and Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis* and elephant hair bracelets. Most of these items originated from Africa

Map of Saudi Arabia showing towns covered by survey



¹Since this article was written the former North and South Yemen have formed a single Yemen state.

and had been brought by poor African Hadjis, mainly from Sudan, in order to fund their stay in the country. Dr Grainger was told that most of the rhino horn was sold to North Yemenis who took them back to their country to make handles for daggers, or 'jambias', where they are traditionally worn by men as a symbol of manhood. During a survey carried out by the author in the early 1980s, Yemeni traders in Sanaa, North Yemen, confirmed that Jeddah had indeed been a place from where they obtained rhino horn. Dr Grainger believes that perhaps a small amount of rhino horn may have been sold in herbalists' shops in Jeddah, which also offered for sale deer Cervidae antlers, dik dik *Madoqua* sp. horns and dried skinks Scincidae for medicinal purposes (Grainger, 1980 and Grainger, pers. comm., 1988).

Further surveys were carried out in Jeddah by Dr Grainger and Mohamed Altoraiif during the period 1984-1987. By 1986 there were fewer ivory items for sale than previously, and no rhino horn. The managers of the curio shops said that the Hadjis were no longer offering them rhino horn. Still fewer wildlife products were for sale a year later, the reason given for this reduction being the tighter controls enforced by the Sudanese authorities, particularly with regard to rhino horn and elephant ivory. However, antique daggers with rhino horn handles made in the Yemens were being offered for sale in Jeddah; this was also the case in Khamis Mushayt, but nobody was actually carving rhino horn there, as they had been doing in 1985. At Tabuk, a variety of wildlife products made in Thailand was being offered for sale, including ivory carvings, snakeskins, snakeskin purses and crocodile skins (Altoraiif, pers. comm.).

1988 SURVEY

Riyadh:

The main area to find wildlife items in Riyadh is in the Sofat district of Deerah, one of the old sections of the city. Of the nine antique shops visited, five offered daggers with rhino horn handles at prices ranging from US\$750 to US\$1870. Most of these daggers had been brought to Riyadh by Yemenis. Others came from Najran, in the extreme southern part of the Kingdom, where many of the residents are ethnically Yemenis. Most of these daggers are purchased by Bedus and by foreigners, especially Americans and western Europeans. The only other animal products seen in Riyadh were one fox *Vulpes* sp. skin and an Ibex *Capra ibex* horn.

Dr Graham Child, an adviser to the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, and his colleagues, observed an assortment of unusual wild animals being offered for sale in pet shops in Riyadh, and elsewhere in the Kingdom (see Table 1). Although antelope and gazelle are popular as pets in Saudi Arabia, they are usually caught by wealthy family members or their agents and brought directly to the owners' farms, and do not pass through pet shops. Sudan has been a popular place to capture wild animals for Arabs in Saudi Arabia (Nolte, 1986),² and Mali has recently supplied this country with Dama Gazelle *Gazella dama* and Ostrich *Struthio camelus* (Newby, 1989).

There appear to be fewer wildlife products for sale in Riyadh than in Jeddah. Aside from the strategic position of Jeddah to Africa, the source of many of these products, Hadjis rarely go to Riyadh. There is also still a large European and American population in Jeddah who purchase wildlife commodities. The more prestigious hotels in Riyadh, such as the Intercontinental, Sheraton, and Riyadh Palace, sell no wildlife products, which is not the case in Jeddah.

Table 1: Live animals offered for sale in Saudi Arabia in 1988

	Origin	US\$
Dorcas Gazelle	Sudan	1336
<i>Gazella dorcas</i>		
Mountain Gazelle		1336
<i>Gazella gazella</i>		
Farasan Gazelle		1600
<i>G.g. arabica</i>		
Ibex		
<i>Capra ibex</i>		
Vervet Monkey	Côte d'Ivoire	270-455
<i>Cercopithecus aethiops</i>		
Hamadryas Baboon	Saudi Arabia	535
<i>Papio hamadryas</i>		
Dik dik	Somalia	600
<i>Madoqua</i> spp.		
Llama		535
Lama sp.		
Sand Gazelle		270
<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>		
Ostrich		
<i>Struthio camelus</i>		
Leopard		
<i>Panthera pardus</i>		
Kangaroo		4680
Macropodidae		

Source: Dr G. Child and author

Jeddah:

Jeddah, being one of the major ports on the Red Sea and the commercial centre of Saudi Arabia, continues to stock the largest selection of wildlife products in the country. Eleven of the 12 curio shops visited in the previous surveys contained wildlife products. Ivory commodities were some of the most common items for sale, the majority having been carved in the Sudan, with a few pieces made in Nigeria and India. The quality of these carvings was the poorest the author has seen anywhere in the world.

Also for sale in these shops were whole snakeskins, and other reptile products (see Table 2) whose quality of workmanship was also very poor, and may explain why the turnover was not brisk.

Antique daggers with rhino horn handles represented one of the few wildlife commodities of quality for sale. These ranged in price from US\$1870 to US\$8000 and were purchased mostly by Yemenis, Omanis and Saudis. Ivory and skins, on the other hand, were mostly purchased by North Americans and Europeans. In one fashionable carpet shop, a well-tanned leopard skin from Afghanistan was on sale for only US\$160, perhaps an indication of the dwindling demand for such items. In 1987, the proprietor of this shop refused two quality leopard skins from a Sudanese trader, because he did not think he could sell them. One particular shop often patronised by Sudanese traders offering ivory and even rhino horn, was offered a horn in 1986 for US\$432 a kg. A few other shops sold wildlife products, mostly from the Sudan, but few products or unusual wildlife was being offered for sale at the old market (souk) and the various pet shops visited.

South-west:

A survey was carried out in the south-west of the country to ascertain whether the Yemeni population there made rhino horn dagger handles. In Abha, the administrative capital of Asir province and the southern region, there were no workshops making daggers. However, in Khamis Mushayt, 27 kilometres north-east of Abha, and probably the largest city in the south, there were 15 workshops (plus one man working on the pavement), where daggers were being repaired and

²Nolte reported that foreign Arabs were offering 1000 Sudanese pounds (US\$430) in 1986 for the export of live specimens of young Ibex and Barbary Sheep *Ammotragus lervia* from the Red Sea Hills of Sudan, and that hundreds of Dorcas Gazelle were officially sold each year from the West Omdurman area, greatly depleting the population.

assembled, and dagger belts being made. Eleven of these establishments, were making and selling dagger belts and five were repairing, assembling and selling daggers. There were also four merchants selling 'jambias' spread out over pieces of cloth on the pavement. The workshops are small, with one or two craftsmen, usually Indians and Yemenis (most of whom are Saudi Arabian citizens). The craftsmen do not import raw rhino horn, but instead bring new and old rhino horn handles already carved and shaped in North Yemen and simply assemble the ready-made handles by fastening them tightly onto dagger blades. The prices of ready-made rhino horn handles varied according to size: the largest one seen in Khamis was US\$1070; older daggers with rhino horn handles sold for between US\$855 and US\$1875. Wood and Water Buffalo Bubalus bubalis horn were also used for handles.

Najran has 27 small 'jambia' workshops which are located in two single-storey buildings, and as stalls next to the buildings. Fifteen of these workshops repair daggers and 12 manufacture dagger belts. Until 1934, Najran was part of North Yemen and consequently more people here (though still less than ten per cent) wear 'jambias', than elsewhere in the Kingdom. Saudis almost never wear daggers of any type today, although a few do still repair old ones to wear, or import new cheap brass daggers from Syria; these are worn in the Khamis Mushayt and Najran areas. As in Khamis Mushayt, no rhino horn dagger handles are actually carved in Najran, but imported, along with blades, from North Yemen. It is not clear whether daggers were actually made in Khamis and Najran over the past few decades. There is no doubt,

however, that daggers are still repaired and assembled in Najran. Most are now made out of Water Buffalo horn imported from India, some of which are inlaid with coins. The quality of the daggers is superior to those in Khamis, with the most expensive rhino horn handles (with silver scabbards) selling for up to US\$5356; the cheapest rhino horn dagger handles sell for US\$400.

In the relatively poor and undeveloped coastal city of Jizan, dhows continue to bring cargoes containing ivory and snakeskin items originating from Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Daggers are not assembled here, although some people, mostly ethnic Yemenis, wear 'jambias' daily. Daggers are assembled in the highlands of North Yemen and Saudi Arabia, areas with a mainly Arab population, not in the coastal zone which has a high African population, originating mainly from Ethiopia.

No wildlife products were seen for sale in the smaller neighbouring towns of Sabya and Ad Darb.

CONCLUSION

From the survey of the Kingdom's major cities, Saudi Arabia does not appear to be a significant outlet for the retail sale of wildlife species, and it would seem that there were fewer wildlife products for retail sale in 1988 than at the beginning of the decade. Unlike in neighbouring United Arab Emirates, where ivory factories were established in the late 1980s consuming large quantities of raw ivory smuggled out of Africa, no ivory is carved at all in Saudi Arabia. There are, however, still some imports of endangered antelopes and other rare animals and birds from Africa, although most of these are for private collections.

Saudi Arabia is not a Party to CITES and, until 1987, there was no legislation controlling the imports and exports of rare wild animals or their products, aside from general quarantine restrictions. In 1987 the newly created National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development initiated a licensing system. From July 1987 to the end of 1988, about 100 import and export permits had been granted, 70% of which were for parrots (mostly African Greys Psittacus erithacus). However, there are at present no real enforcement regulations nor wildlife inspectors, and consequently many people simply avoid applying for licenses to import or export wildlife. To rectify this, the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development has drawn up a comprehensive wildlife bill which will hopefully become law in the near future. Then, the Government of Saudi Arabia may consider joining CITES.

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Table 2: Survey of wildlife products in twelve tourist shops on King Khalid Street, Jeddah, December 1988

Commodity	Country of origin	Retail US\$
Ivory:		
Small rings/key chain with carved elephant (4 cm)	Sudan	3
Small ball necklaces	Sudan	13
Plain bangles	Sudan/Nigeria	20-53
Knife (22 cm)	Sudan	27
Old bangles/twisted bangles	India/China	32
Tusk (35 cm) with 6 carved elephants	Sudan	112
Tusk (47 cm) with 8 carved elephants	Sudan	320
Polished tusks (40 cm)	Sudan/Nigeria	120
Reptile products:		
Snakeskin wallets/belts	Nigeria	4-16
Snakeskin handbags	Nigeria	21-75
Whole snakeskin	Nigeria	27
Cobras (stuffed)	Thailand/ Philippines	27-40
Stuffed snake and mongoose display	Thailand	120
Handbags <u>Crocodylus niloticus</u>	Egypt	210
Lizard belts	Egypt	21
Daggers:		
New (plastic handles)	Saudi Arabia	13
New (rhino horn handles)	Saudi Arabia	1070
Antique (rhino horn handles)	N. Yemen/ Saudi Arabia	1870-8000
Misc.:		
Antelope head	Kenya	1176
Buffalo <u>Syncerus caffer</u> skin handbag	Sudan	13
Ibex <u>Capra ibex</u> horn	Africa	53
Serval <u>Felis serval</u> skin	Africa	67
Stuffed crocodile (130 cm)	Sudan	348
Leopard <u>Panthera pardus</u> skin	Afghanistan	160

Source: Survey carried out by the author.