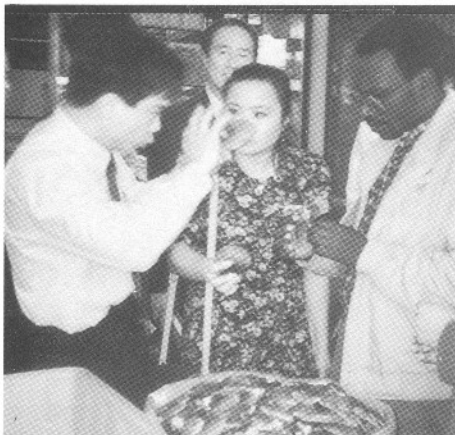


Taiwan, medicine men and the rhino horn

Story by Michael Werikhe



Keith Highley

TAIWAN IS A HIGHLY DEVELOPED island nation with a population of about 23 million inhabitants. Taipei, the capital and also the largest city, is situated in a valley-like setting surrounded in some parts by fairly rugged mountain ranges. These give the city a beautiful backdrop, covered by lush green vegetation which contrasts sharply with the concrete metropolitan area. Taipei is a busy and fast-moving city dotted with thousands of small and medium range industries, making it look like a bee-hive in full production. Taiwan has advanced a great deal and is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, but development did not come easy nor was it cheap. Progress has been achieved at a enormous expense to the environment. There are over a million scooters and just as many vehicles plying the busy roads everyday, year round. Pollution is a big problem and is noticeable even to the weary eyes. On a windless day the air is pungent and heavy smog hangs over the city which then rapidly settles down in the valley, making breathing uncomfortable. Taipei is a city fast choking itself to death with its own success.

I have just returned from a 12 day trip to Taipei and Taichung, the memory of which will linger in my mind for many years to come. My short but hectic stay opened my mind to new depths of understanding and reasoning. I had gone there at the invitation of Earthtrust and Vitalon Foundation to raise conservation awareness through two short walks, which focused attention on the plight of the rhino and other endangered species. I had the opportunity to interact with thousands of Taiwanese people in an effort to inform them that the rhino is fast disappearing in

the wild due to heavy poaching to satisfy the ever increasing demand for the horn. Taiwan is one of the biggest consumer nations of rhino horn in Asia. I painfully tried to look for solutions from the Taiwanese people on how best to overcome some of the most vexing and complex problems affecting the survival of this seriously endangered large mammal. The rhino horn has weathered many a storm in the past 60 million years of evolution and is today arguably the rhino's worst curse as a result of man's greed and ignorance. The fate of these unique and magnificent animals lies in our hands.

In Taipei, I had the honour of meeting Mayor Huang Ta-Chau who participated in the walk and presented me with the key to the city. He also declared November 12th Rhinoceros Day. The walk drew a crowd of between 6-7,000 people from all walks of life, especially youngsters with their parents. Also present was the Chairman of the Council of Agriculture, Sun Ming-Hsien, whose council is responsible for wildlife conservation and forestry as well as combating illegal rhino horn trade and products from other endangered species of wildlife. Later on I met Premier Lie Chan of the Republic of China and discussed with him the grave issue concerning the rhino horn trade in Taiwan. Prior to the walk in Taipei I had also attended another walk in Taichung accompanied by the Mayor of that city and a crowd of 1,500 people. The news media, both print and electronic, covered my visit very extensively. During the course of my stay I must have reached well over 15 million people in Taiwan.

I found the Taiwanese people extremely hospitable and easy to get along

Above; A Taiwanese medicine man explains the uses of a substitute for the rhino horn to Michael Werikhe.

with. I greatly enjoyed the traditional Chinese meals wherever I went. Chinese people are known for their appetites and have an eye for anything that moves; possibly with the exception of insects, anything is fair game to them. It is no wonder that a majority of their native creatures; snakes, mammals, fish and amphibians, are threatened with extinction because of over-exploitation. While in Taipei, I had the opportunity of meeting a number of local NGO wildlife conservationists who shared my concern and pledged to pressurize their Government to make meaningful changes governing the illegal rhino horn trade and other wildlife products from endangered spe-

from their shelves.

As such I did not see any horn or their products on display. My fear is that the rhino horn trade has now gone underground and this could be a tricky situation in terms of monitoring the illegal trade. A number of medicine men I interviewed told me they had stopped prescribing rhino horn as is required by the law, but openly acknowledged that they have registered horns or products in their possession. Taiwan at the moment has more than 1.6 tons of rhino horn, owned by various traditional medicine men. I am convinced beyond doubt that selling of the horn still flourishes under the counter of many traditional medicine pharmacies, despite assurance from the Government that it has been stopped.



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The various high-ranking Government officials and local leaders I met, in my attempt to get them to make a concrete commitment towards imposing a total ban on rhino horn by the traditional medicine community, assured me many times that the laws were being revised and their implementation is subject to approval by an act of Parliament. Meanwhile, as we wait for the outcome, the rhino's borrowed time continues to get shorter month by month. The rhino horn problem unfortunately is much bigger than we think it is and is extremely complex. It demands the highest degree of urgency and attention from the US Government, which has considerable influence in Taiwan. If the forthcoming CITES meeting of March 1994 in the USA fails to come up with a strong resolution against Yemen, mainland China and Taiwan, then we may just as well kiss the rhino goodbye. The rhino horn issue is very grave and must be taken seriously by all who love and respect nature.

In spite of some progress achieved in a few range countries in Africa, such as Namibia, South Africa and Kenya, in building up their rhino population through a combination of effective management and sheer hard commitment, other range states are beset with a host of socio-economic problems, including bad politics and corruption. This, coupled with insufficient international backing, results

in mixed priorities and wrong conservation decisions. The sad fact is that we are continuing to lose rhinos in the wild at an alarming rate; a bad case is Zimbabwe where more than 1,500 rhinos have been slaughtered in less than four years. Botswana runs the risk of being the only country to lose her rhino population twice in this century. Many dedicated men have lost their lives in the line of duty trying to protect our precious wildlife from poachers. Many more will fall to poachers' bullets in the on-going battle to save the last rhino that still exist in the wild. It is a waste that many families will continue to suffer the loss of their sole bread winner in those poor societies in Africa. For how long must this carnage continue before the world sober up to the fact that we are losing a priceless global natural heritage? We will have nobody to blame but ourselves if the rhino becomes extinct within our time. If that happens, no doubt many other species will follow suit too.

I believe Taiwan has the means of putting an end to the use of rhino horn as a mode of treatment by traditional medicine men. The Government of Taiwan, together with traditional medicine men, needs to embark on a serious long term public conservation awareness programme. The medicine men should put great emphasis on herbal substitutes in place of rhino horn powder. Public education is an important weapon, if properly directed, especially if religious leaders are involved in the campaign. I believe this could effectively change people's attitudes and habits.

There are other equally effective short term measures which if simultaneously implemented, could bring immediate dividend to the rhino and other populations of endangered species of wildlife.

These short term measures are:

- 1) Consolidation of all registered rhino horns in one place so as to avoid cheating by unscrupulous medicine men.
- 2) Immediate establishment of a special police unit similar to the South African Endangered Species Protection Unit or the US Fish and Wildlife Service to counter smuggling of wildlife products.
- 3) Stiffening the jail term from the current one year to over five years and imposition of extremely heavy fines. ●

cies. I took time to visit eight schools with a total population of more than 20,000 pupils. I also met a number of traditional Chinese medicine men in Taipei and Taichung, whom I found very accommodating with their views about rhino horn issues, especially on herbal substitutes.

In the company of the traditional medicine men I visited several shops and was shown a wide range of herbal substitutes which were on display in large quantities. The traditional Chinese men informed me that prices of the various substitutes were very affordable to the ordinary man and that the herbs were just as effective in lowering high body temperature usually associated with high fever - a condition believed by many people in South Asia to be treatable with powdered rhino horn. Taiwan's culture still rests on the strongly held tradition that rhino horn has almost supernatural healing powers.

As a result of heavy international pressure directed at Taiwan, mainland China and Yemen, to stop the rhino horn trade, the traditional medicine shops have removed all traces of rhino horn products