

Rhino Horn

An Asian American's View



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It is no secret to anyone in conservation that a sudden and astonishing spike in rhino horn demand and the concomitant rhino poaching have transpired in the last few years. This unforeseen development coincides with fantastic rumors originating from Vietnam touting, among other things, rhino horn's cancer curing properties and Asia's growing wealth to afford the placebo at almost any price. At this current trajectory, it is not unreasonable to assume that wild rhinos in Africa will become extinct under our watch. All this, based on rumors? Apparently so! According to investigative sources, rhino horn demand from Vietnam, an insubstantial factor in the past, has soared to perhaps 75% or more of the current worldwide demand.

On the supply side, African governments, landowners and communities are fighting a good fight on the ground. Vehicles, guns and planes are employed in anti-poaching.

Blood is being shed on a daily basis. But often, penalties against poaching are mild, and steps to boost them have been slow. And in the real world of cold harsh economics, efforts to curtail supply seldom lead to desired reduction in consumption.

Surely then, it's about curtailing demand. Aside from working with Asian governments to strengthen their law enforcement, the conservation world has, rightly so, begun to focus its efforts on a Public Relations/education campaign in Asia against rhino horn use – mainly by targeting traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and by “glorifying” the creature. Success has been elusive: TCM is a confounding target due to its many different facets (the current demand surge does not appear to be driven by “traditional” TCM) and the typical rhino horn user doesn't give a hoot about the creature. In any case, the campaign has been a “Western” effort (even if it deploys Asians) and thus dismissed by the largely provincial audience.

As for TCM it is, at least in China, considered a legitimate, scientific and regulated medical profession and not to be confused with “folk medicine” still practiced by some there. In folk medicine, anything goes, but TCM in China is strictly regulated by the Ministry of Health, which bans the use of wildlife products banned by CITES (including rhino horn). Numerous other Asian countries have, over time, adopted and modified TCM into their own versions, and unfortunately in many cases folk medicine creeps in. What would be better described as TAM (traditional Asian medicine) then is a morass. However, the conservation world should not attempt to stigmatize

all TAM. Legitimate practices willing to forego and repudiate CITES-banned products could be viewed as an ally.

As for the typical rhino horn user, I feel like I know him. Born and raised in Korea, I remember older relatives who went beyond the basic Korean version of TAM to embrace mythical powers of animals based on anthropomorphic views. Incidentally, all of these folks had two things in common: they couldn't care less about animals and they were exceedingly xenophobic. It is naïve to think that conservationists can suddenly change their attitudes now by showing photographs of an armed anti-poaching team mourning over a hacked up rhino (do such photographs depicting the game's high stakes in fact magnify the mystique?). Attempts to publicly shame have only induced resentment.

There is one particular message that might be effective, however. It's one that tells the truth. And the truth is this: rhino horn demand is being fueled by con artists, not by TCM or TAM, per se, in Asia.

Before rhino horn was banned in 1993 by the TCM regulators in China, it was prescribed for its alleged fever reducing qualities – for treating relatively benign illnesses – and nothing more (rhino horn's efficacy in reducing fever is questionable, and in any case, there are much more effective and cheaper alternatives available, even within TCM). It is only obvious that the recent cancer cure rumor is being circulated by those involved in the illegal rhino horn trade. In any commodity that experiences a parabolic rise in price, hoarding becomes the norm as dealers learn that they can squeeze more money out of the trade by holding on to the commodity a bit longer. This turns into



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“some individuals and organizations with little understanding of the essence and modern development of TCM misinterpret and exaggerate the medicinal properties of rhino horns. Such misinterpretation shows little respect for the TCM profession and medical practices, and is harmful to rhino conservation efforts”.

This is the message that needs to circulate in Asia: “You are being conned! Who do you think is spreading the cancer cure rumor? It’s the rhino horn dealers! Such a rumor is a slap in the face to TCM, a 3,000 year-old art of healing!” Not all of us may care about endangered animals, but avoiding being a foolish victim of a con is culture-indifferent.

I digress here... talk of legalizing the rhino horn trade has been gaining ground recently. On the surface, it makes a lot of sense. You don’t need to kill a rhino to get its horn, and the horn grows back. A capitalist by nature, I love the idea on the surface. The money can go back into conservation... I get it. Here is the problem though... if a simple false rumor can stimulate demand for a body part of an endangered species, where could this go? Where does it end? I personally think it a tricky precedent (Doesn’t it legitimize a false rumor? Wouldn’t owners/governments be incentivized to go along with the myth? Where is the “education” in that? See bear bile trade.), but this missive is not about the legalization debate. No matter which side of the legalization debate you are on, we all still need to squelch the loot/hoard/whisper lies business model of wildlife products.

The end game surely must be about curtailing demand. The good news is there is a logical argument that should strike at the brain of the rhino horn user (thus far, the West’s target has been his heart) – that they are being defrauded by rumor-mongering criminals and others “on the take”. No need to “educate” them with photos of beautiful rhinos or bloodied, murdered ones. The trick is to have the effort come from within (note my “xenophobic” comment earlier).

Anybody from Asia willing to raise his/her voice? ●

a positive feedback loop, an upward spiral, if you will, as hoarding results in higher prices and higher prices beget more hoarding. In fact, at these price levels, I doubt many use rhino horn to merely lower their body temperature. The rhino horn cartel has in essence successfully shifted the product to a whole new target audience – the stuff of dreams for a corporate marketing executive. Loot, hoard, whisper magical properties about your commodity, repeat... it’s a phenomenally profitable, though wretchedly criminal, business model.

Interestingly, this is the view of a TCM organization which happens to

be a staunch ally of conservation... The American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine (ACTCM), together with the Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, declared publicly last year that, “there is no evidence that rhino horn is an effective cure for cancer and this is not documented in TCM nor is it approved by the clinical research in traditional Chinese medicine”. The statement further acknowledges that the use of rhino horn in TCM (traditionally for fever reduction in various disorders) was banned in 1993 following an international trade ban, and substitutes were subsequently used successfully to treat patients – and that