

LETTERS



The illegal horn trade has contributed to the decline of white rhinoceros populations.

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Protect white rhinos by legalizing horn trade

The conservation of rhinos has generally been a success story: Southern white rhinos have increased from a few dozen 100 years ago to more than 20,000 in 2011 (1). Initially, population increases were hailed as an outcome of the international trade ban on rhino horn, established in 1977 and enforced by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (2); however, increased poaching has led numbers to fall again in recent years. This long-standing policy, in which countries without rhinos impose bans on rhino-holding states, has not worked (3). Legalizing the rhino horn trade would improve conservation success.

Rhino numbers had already increased before the ban was established, particularly in areas where private rhino guardianship was allowed, such as in South Africa (4). Roughly half of the world's white rhino population is privately managed today, providing important ecosystem services (5). However, since 2010, demand for white rhino horn and large-scale poaching activities have increased (6). Since then, white rhino numbers have decreased by roughly 1000 per year (7). By 2021, international poaching syndicates had surmounted every conservation countermeasure as horn

prices exceeded gold prices in international illegal markets (8).

Facing insurmountable security costs and the loss of personal safety, rhino guardians are now giving up their custodianship (9). At the same time, state rhino sanctuaries, such as Kruger National Park, have decided to continuously dehorn rhinos to deter poaching, with limited success (10). The high number of deaths has destroyed the rhinos' social systems and changed their behavior (11).

Rhino horn is a renewable resource that grows like fingernails. To protect white rhino populations effectively, the international trade of rhino horn should be legalized and carefully monitored, including the tracking of each sample sold. Legal trade—the preferred option of horn consumers (3)—will derail international trafficking syndicates (12) and enable essential private rhino guardianship. Legalized trade provides the best chance for the future of white rhino populations (3, 12).

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Legal rhino horn trade: A thorny proposition

Between 2019 and 2023, 26 of the remaining 70 Javan rhinos were poached by two organized groups that have evaded authorities for years (1). In the first half of 2024, 229 South African rhinos were poached for their horns (2), destined for illegal markets as traditional medicine or status symbols. These incidents, driven by the illegal horn trade's entanglement with organized global crime syndicates (3), put rhino species at risk of extinction. Maintaining and enforcing the international ban on the rhino horn trade remain crucial for wild rhino preservation.

Advocates of legalizing international rhino horn trade suggest that a legal competing market could offset illegal trade by providing financial incentives to farm rhinos and harvest their horns painlessly at regular intervals (4). However, this approach carries substantial and unpredictable risks that could expedite the extinction of rhinos (5). Wildlife farming has had inconsistent results among other species (6). Farmed crocodile products, for example, have successfully replaced wild crocodile products because farmed products are cheaper to produce and are perceived as better by consumers. By contrast, when farmed stocks of bear bile became available, demand for the product grew. Cartels exploited the expanded market, and pressure on wild populations increased (6).

In addition to the risks posed by wildlife farming, a legal rhino horn market could increase demand, provide opportunities for money laundering, and complicate law enforcement's ability to distinguish legal sources from illegal sources (7). Moreover, high corruption levels increase the risk of diverting legal schemes to illegality (8). Current illegal rhino horn demand already far exceeds the potential legal supply and is projected to grow as wealth increases in consumer countries (9). Demand for rhino horn is