

TO TRADE or not TO TRADE

Zimbabwe's proposal for increased ivory trade will be one of this year's hot issues at the CITES meeting in June. By **JULIENNE DU TOIT** and **MICHELLE NEL**

It's starting to look as if a scrap to rival the one at Kyoto in 1992 is about to break loose over elephants and ivory at the CITES meeting in June this year.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries of Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana are united in their proposal to begin trade in ivory again. South Africa is not asking for a downlisting for itself, but supports the three SADC countries.

Theoretically, they could have had a sympathetic ear from the same countries that broke out the champagne when trade in ivory was banned in 1989. Many Western governments, including the US and Britain, are becoming increasingly sensitive to accusations that they are held hostage by animal rights groups.

They are far more receptive now to the idea of harvesting and trading in wildlife products to raise money for conservation.

Sheer statistics were also on the SADC countries' side. Elephant numbers have risen

**Meanwhile,
back at the
farm . . .**

**EDDIE KOCH AND
BARRY JAMES** watch
a disgruntled rhino
lose his horn.

FOR WILLIE, the outcome of the next round of squabbles about whether or not to trade in rhino and elephant products will decide if it was worth all the pain and indignity of having his horn cut off.

Willie, a white rhino bull who belongs to a rich farmer and lives on his estate just north of Pretoria, underwent the unpleasant experience recently because his owner wanted to prove a point.

It happened early one morning in December last year. Willie had retreated into a thick copse of bushes on the game farm east of Cullinan. "Well, wouldn't you also hide away if you were going to have your horn cut off in public?" quipped his owner, Sakkie van Niekerk.

"I'm going to take it off," he explained, "to put it in a bank, and we members of the African Rhino Owners' Association (AROA) are going to push for the trade in horn to be legalised. You know, if you ban something you push it underground. If you legalise it, you can control it."

That said, Van Niekerk jumped into his chopper with his consulting veterinarian in the passenger seat, whipped up a cloud of dust, and headed for the copse where the hapless Willie was hiding out.

About half-an-hour later they returned and told the assembled throng of journalists they had located the bull, darted him ▶



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steadily in southern Africa to about 150 000, despite culling. The SADC countries are saying that they have successfully curbed poaching and their elephant herds increasingly conflict with farmers and villagers. Those people need a financial incentive to conserve elephants.

But in February, a secret United Nations report on Zimbabwe's "grossly inadequate" enforcement of its own ivory trade laws threw the SADC proposal into jeopardy.

According to respected London-based journal *New Scientist*, the draft report details large commercial shipments of ivory, in breach of Zimbabwe's own laws, even though it exempted itself from the 1989 ban. Technically, Zimbabwe can export even large quantities of ivory, but it is illegal for any CITES member to import ivory. And since 1990, Zimbabwe itself has only issued export permits for up to five pieces of carved ivory destined for the recipient's "personal use". Yet sales of ivory are soaring.

The Zimbabwean Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (DNPWLM) holds over 28 000 tonnes of ivory from



Left and right: A key point of contention is how best to stop poaching: outright bans or resource management?

poached or culled elephants. Between 1992 and 1995, sales averaged 3.6 tonnes a year. In the first nine months of 1996, though, 10 tonnes were sold.

The CITES team reported that large amounts of raw, semi-worked and worked ivory from the stockpile are being sent around the world, and that dealers are bypassing the law by stamping the shipments with "personal use" permits. Last year commercial shipments were exported to Japan, South Africa, China, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia

and the US.

A delegation headed by DNPWLM director Willas Makombe reacted angrily to the report's linking of the recent rise in sales of stockpiled ivory to mismanagement or lack of trade controls. Makombe said any "shortcomings" which occurred last year were due to lack of funds and staff vacancies which are now being filled.

what is CITES?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement which forbids commercial trade in species listed on Appendix 1, while allowing controlled trade via permits for species listed on Appendix 2 and 3.

It is an initiative of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and it came into effect in 1973. There are 135 signatories worldwide, and all 12 Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries have ratified it.

CITES has three Appendices:

APPENDIX 1: Lists over 600 species facing extinction (including African elephant, cheetahs, leopards, black rhinos and whales) and prohibits trade. Exceptions are made for research or trophies from recreational hunting.

APPENDIX 2: Lists species that are being monitored for sustainable utilisation which may be traded with permits. (Examples include hippopotamus, Nile crocodile and all wild cats.)

APPENDIX 3: These species are listed by individual countries wishing to monitor trade levels and may be traded with permits. Botswana and Mauritius have listed species on this appendix.

CITES is administered by the CITES Secretariat, and assisted by the World Trade Monitoring Unit (WTMU) and Trade Records Analysis of Fauna and Flora in Commerce (TRAFFIC).

This year, the 10th Conference of the Parties to CITES will be held in Zimbabwe and organised by the Zimbabwean government. More than 20 South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) will provide support as part of a team of 72 NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) from southern Africa.

More than 2 000 delegates are expected in Harare in June, including many indigenous communities from all around the world.

The South African delegation will include representatives from central and provincial government. National Parks Board, NGOs and provincial nature conservation bodies will also be invited to nominate candidates.



South Africa is supporting SADC in its elephant downlisting proposal, but its main efforts will go into pushing for an amendment to the Appendix 2 listing of white rhino to allow trade in rhino parts. But it wants a zero export quota – in other words, South Africa voluntarily agrees not to trade until adequate controls are in place. (The black rhino will remain on Appendix 1.)

The South African delegation says the sustainable use of white rhino through live sales and sport hunting – allowed as a result of the 1994 CITES downlisting to Appendix 2 – has already contributed immensely to the survival of this species.

There are now 7 095 white rhinos in this country, with numbers growing steadily every year, and 437 in other countries.

Rhino range land now exceeds 100 000 sq km.

White rhino hunting alone generated a gross turnover of R100 million last year, and this increased income helped strengthen rhino security programmes and game management and, very importantly, gave economic incentives to the private sector to maintain and expand wildlife land.

The South Africans are also arguing that poaching is concentrated in areas with poor management (not the case in this country), and that the effectiveness of protection is shown by the increases in the rhino population.

For proper monitoring and trade control, the horn of different types of white rhino would have to be distinguishable. Scientific tests called "neutron activation analysis" and "radio isotope analysis" would allow the source area of the horn to be checked.

"The Rhino & Elephant Foundation (REF) believes that if a legal trade is possible – subject to stringent controls – every responsible agency should consider it," says Clive Walker, chairman of REF. "We addressed the issue of trade in rhino at a special meeting convened with the African Rhino Owners Association (AROA) two years ago. There was general

with a powerful sedative and that we could now all proceed down to his hide-out to witness the amputation.

We jumped into a convoy of four-by fours and, directed by Van Niekerk with a walkie talkie in the chopper, it wasn't long before we came across the magnificent beast staggering through the bush.

The bull dropped almost pathetically on to his side and, while the game rangers pushed the animal on to his knees so that his rib cage would not be crushed by the sheer weight of his torso, the vet used a giant white bandage around Willie's gigantic head to blindfold him.

Out of the back of Van Niekerk's bakkie came a chainsaw. He flipped the ignition switch, tugged at the starter rope. Five minutes later, with shavings of the dense keratin that rhino horn is made of lying around his face, Willie was without his horn. And Van Niekerk's colleagues were cracking jokes about how much fun they would have with theirs that night after inhaling all the aphrodisiac dust.

An antidote was administered to Willie's ear and within minutes the animal rose unsteadily to its feet and trotted off the privacy of his copse, where he stood in the shade and contemplated the fate of his kin. It is not a happy subject.

Before Europeans colonised Africa, animals like Willie could be seen from the shoreline of Morocco across the Sahara Desert and savannah of East Africa down as far south as the Orange River. His cousins, the black rhino, were found as far south as Table Mountain. Fossil records show that rhino occurred throughout prehistoric Africa and that the black and white had a common ancestor who roamed the continent some three or four million years ago.

So dense were the populations of southern Africa that a colonial hunter and adventurer, Captain William Cornwallis-Harris, was able to write the following description of the Limpopo Valley: ". . . specimens were so numerous that on arriving in the afternoon at our new ground, it was no uncommon thing to perceive a dozen or so horned snouts protruded at one end from the bushes in the immediate vicinity."

Adulphe Delagorgue, the French naturalist, describes in his memoirs a hunting expedition in the area of the present-day Umfolozi Game Reserve: "We met up again with our hunters who, in the space of three days, had killed three rhinoceros, four buffaloes and an elephant. They told wonderful stories of these hideous rhinoceroses, which they killed for the sole purpose of having them out of the way . . ."

Apart from being massacred for the sheer fun of it, Willie's brethren □



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APPL

This one will never run again: the South

African proposal argues that legalised trade would depress black market activity.

resources, but cover none of the costs of doing so. The North does not apply for trade bans on its own resources. For example, the depleted sturgeon (from which caviar is extracted) and cod are unprotected by CITES and are likely to remain so. By contrast, thriving seal populations in southern Africa are on Appendix 2 because the protection of these mammals is the foundation on which many animal rights groups have built their power base. Southern countries have accused the North of making Third World countries into natural history museums.

Some innovative thinking will have to take place between now and June. WWF is considering a scheme whereby Western countries will pay off or reduce the bilateral debts owed by African countries with ivory stockpiles, if these countries burn or destroy the stockpiles.

The SADC countries would need a lot of persuading. ■

consensus on the sustainable use of wildlife."

In these issues, as in others in the last decade, CITES has become a battle ground between the North and South. Northern countries seek to impose trade bans on Southern

were hunted by early explorers, hunters and adventurers because their thick skin could be used to make whips and their horns could be sold for the manufacture of knife handles, combs and as an ingredient in Eastern fever-reducing medicines (not an aphrodisiac, as Van Niekerk and his colleagues' jokes would have us believe).

By the end of the 19th century white and black rhino had all but disappeared from Africa. A relict group of between 50 and 100 southern white rhino was found between near the confluence of the Black and White Umfolozi Rivers – the historical hunting ground of Zulu King Shaka – and Natal's colonialists were galvanised into action.

In 1895, their efforts resulted in the creation of the Umfolozi, Hluhluwe and St Lucia Reserves. By 1953 the population in Umfolozi had increased to about 437. The Natal Parks Board began its famous Operation White Rhino in 1960 and since then more than 3 500 white rhino have been captured in Umfolozi, which is where Willie was born, and exported to game reserves, safari parks and zoos around the world.

Van Niekerk argues that the only way to keep Willie and the other rhinos who have survived the years of slaughter alive is for trade in the products of these animals to be legalised: effectively to create a rhino-farming industry in various parts of Africa.

"I could probably get \$30 000 for this horn in the Far East. That's more than R130 000, and it will grow back again in two years, when I can cut it again. That's not very different from growing mielies, except it's a way for more and more people to introduce these magnificent animals to their lands," he says.

"We (members of AROA) believe the best way to conserve rhino is for the ban on trading in horn to be lifted so that we can farm with these animals just like any other form of livestock. There's big money to be made out of rhinos, and then farmers will increase the amount of land they set aside for rhino. That's the best way to save them."

Some members of AROA argue against the common assumption that the trade in ivory is a very similar issue to the trade in rhino horn. They point out the consumption of ivory products in Western countries virtually ceased because of a well-organised campaign by animal rights groups based in those countries.

But the use of rhino in Eastern countries, for a range of ornamental and medicinal purposes, is a firmly established cultural "necessity". To impose an effective ban, as with ivory, would entail a much more difficult change in culture. This is highly unlikely now or in the future and, argues AROA, with the demand intact, the trade is likely to be pushed underground rather than be extinguished by international bans.

So back at the ranch near Cullinan, Van Niekerk asks, why not farm the animals for their horns?

Willie may be still be smarting from his headache and his mutilated face, but it may well be that his dehorning demonstrates an effective way to save him and the other survivors from the terrible fate that befell their ancestors in the 19th century.



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Keep the
RHINO
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HORN

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APRIL / MAY 1997
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