

Horns and Humans

Rhino horn has been in demand for more than 1,000 years by various people, including Africans, Europeans, Arabs, Chinese, and Indians. Although all rhino species face the threat of extinction in the wild, many people still covet their horns as status symbols, powerful medicines, and aphrodisiacs.

Only a few African tribes use rhino horns; they have mostly helped export them to different countries. In Kenya, one tribe shaped the horn into a club, while another used the horn as a mallet to flatten animal skins. The Zulus of South Africa still use the horn for many purposes. A man may carry a piece of rhino horn in his pocket as a good luck charm. A sip of water boiled with rhino horn may help cure coughs, chest pains, and snakebites.

Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians once used rhino horn cups for detecting poisons. They believed that a poisonous liquid poured into the cup would either bubble up or be rendered harmless by the special properties of the horn. Some scientists think that the cups may have succeeded occasionally in detecting strong alkaloid poisons, which would have reacted on contact with the keratin in the rhino horn.

Europe's affair with rhino horns began in the 19th century, when the tops of riding crops, walking sticks, and door handles were made from the exotic material. The rhino horn demand in Europe peaked in the 1920s, when hand grips for rifles and pistols

and interior panels of limousines were made. The desire for rhino horn products declined during the Depression, and never recovered its former fever pitch.

In Yemen, a country on the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, rich nobles have coveted rhino horn hilts for ceremonial daggers, known as *jambias*, for centuries. Today, rhino horn daggers still convey the high status of the owner. As the wealth of most Yemenis increased in the 1960s and 70s, so did the demand for rhino horn. Yemen imported three tons of rhino horns per year in the early 70s, which translated to about 1,000 dead rhinos a year. A ban on rhino horn imports in 1982 only resulted in high-priced bribes to get the horns through customs.

In 1986, an economic slump and international pressure contributed to the fall of rhino horn imports in Yemen to only 1,100 pounds of horn for that year. At the beginning of 1987, Yemeni ministers took steps to strengthen their rhino horn import ban by punishing those who sold horns and encouraging the use of water buffalo horn for hilts. Today, only about 330 pounds of rhino horn per year make it across the Yemeni border.

The flow of rhino horn products in China has not slowed yet, however. The Chinese have used rhino horns traditionally for ornamental, magical, and medicinal purposes. As far back as 600 A.D., Chinese aristocrats would present a carved rhino horn cup to the emperor each year on his birthday. These cups can be seen today in museums around the world. The Chinese also made rhino horn buttons, belt buckles, hair pins, combs, paperweights, and talismans.

Rhino horn has historically been

used for medical purposes in China as well as for detecting poison. The 16th-century pharmacist Li Shih Chen stated that the main ailments treatable with rhino horn included snakebites, hallucinations, typhoid, headaches, carbuncles, boils, fever, vomiting, food poisoning, and "devil possession." Li Shih Chen's 50-volume pharmacology work contains the classic text on preparation and use of the rhino horn, and many pharmacists still use his text when they prescribe it today. Although rhino horn tablets are available, most people want to see the pharmacist shave the rhino horn to ensure that they are getting the real thing.

Chinese pharmacists currently prescribe rhino horn primarily to reduce fever, and three researchers at the Chinese University at Hong Kong have shown that rhino horn does lower fever in rats. The same research revealed that saiga antelope horn and water buffalo horn also reduce fever in the animals, but the scientists suggest that further studies are needed to determine the effects of the different horns on humans.

Contrary to popular belief, the Chinese do not use rhino horn as an aphrodisiac, but a few Indians do. Because of the high price of rhino horn, Indian dealers can sell more abroad than they do locally, so use of the horn in India has become rare. Indian pharmacists grind the rhino horn into a powder and mix it with herbs to increase its powers. The customer takes it home and mixes the rhino powder with honey, cream, or butter and then swallows the mixture twice a day.

Conservation groups now realize that in order to stop poaching, they must reduce the demand for rhino horn that drives the price up to astronomical heights. Groups like the World Wildlife Fund are trying to persuade Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, and China to follow the example of Yemen by curbing their rhino product markets and penalizing trade in rhino horns. If conservation efforts succeed, the rhinos may survive well into the 21st century, horns and all.

—Melissa Blouin



Jambia with rhino horn hilt. (Esmond Bradley Martin/WWF)