

HUNTING the UNICORN

RHINO POACHING CRISIS IN AFRICA

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When Marco Polo passed through Indonesia in the 13th century he believed he had finally discovered the illusive one horned animal of European legend...the unicorn.

But unlike the luminous creatures popular in art and folklore, Polo was surprised to find that his unicorn had “hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant, and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick”. Of course today we know Marco Polo was speaking not of a mythical unicorn, but of the rhinoceros. He was most likely describing the Javan Rhino, once widespread over Asia, India, and China. Currently there are less than 40 alive in the world, sad evidence of what conservation groups are calling the worst poaching crisis in decades.

With an ounce-for-ounce value equal to gold on the black market, Rhino horn is an unfortunate ingredient of traditional Chinese medicine, touted as a cure for everything from colds to cancer. Not one of these claims has ever been supported by scientific evidence, and in fact the horns are mainly made up of keratin, the same material as human hair and nails. South Afri-

ca and neighboring Zimbabwe are responsible for 95 percent of the poaching trade. Another receptive market for poachers is Yemen, where rhino horn is used for decorative dagger handles. But the most notable increase in demand may be in Vietnam, where experts believe only 3 to 5 of Marco Polo’s discovery, the Javan Rhino, are left in the entire country. Rhino horn can fetch up to \$40,000 per kilogram in Vietnam and up to \$60,000 in China.

According to South African national park officials, an all time high of 333 rhinos were illegally killed there last year. This includes 10 animals on the “critically endangered” list, and is nearly triple 2009. South African is home to more rhinos than any country in the world, approximately 21,000, and they constitute a major tourist attraction. The largest population exists in Kruger National Park, a popular safari destination bordered by Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Although considered the benchmark of South African conservation, the park lost 146 of the rhinos killed last year.

The devastating losses in Africa have prompted conservationists to urge greater international cooperation. At the beginning of March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service met with rhino experts from around the world in South Africa to address strategies to combat the crisis. Attendees included the World Wildlife Fund, and Save the Rhino International. Discussions ranged from stronger penalties for rhino-related crimes to an increase in funding to develop new technologies in the fight against poachers.

A common misconception is the image of a poacher as a bushman with a wooden spear. In fact, today’s poachers are part of sophisticated criminal organizations that use night-vision equipment, silencers, assault rifles, and helicopters to hunt rhinos at night while



avoiding detection by park rangers. Nothing points more to the lucrative reality of the trade – this is equipment African wildlife officials can’t even afford. “This is not typical poaching,” says Dr. Joseph Okori, World Wildlife Fund African Rhino Program Manager. “The criminal syndicates operating in South Africa are highly organized and use advanced technologies. They are very well coordinated.” Foot soldiers, recruited from local communities, are drawn in by the promise of endless riches for hunting down the rhinos – when in reality it is only the ringleaders who profit.

Experts have suggested another devastating reason for the exponential increase in rhino poaching over the past year: crime syndicates are stockpiling horns in anticipation of the species’ extinction. However, even in the face of this troubling and ultimately disheartening reality, local and national governments are fighting back.

In Nepal, the government has sanctioned a multi-million dollar budget to stop the targeting of rhinos in Chitwan National Park. It involves increased army presence in the park and “shoot on sight” permission against poachers. The park will also be training their rangers in the use of GPS devices to modernize tracking of the animals, and displaying “My Horn is Not Medicine” posters in key areas. 2011 started off with the arrest of a notorious gang responsible for killing at least 6 rhinos in the park. They are expected to receive strong sentences in the coming months.

Efforts in Kenya include expansion of an electric fence that after 21 years of construction, now encircles the entire Aberdare mountain range. Stretching 8,000 miles and built mainly of recycled plastic, it is the longest and most technologically advanced fence being used to resolve wildlife conflict in Africa. The enclosed area is now con-

sidered the most secure ecosystem in the entire country, and stands as a monument to Kenya’s efforts to combat poaching.

In Kruger National Park itself, the South African military has started paroling the borders. So far this year 64 poachers have been arrested, while 2010 only saw the arrest of 162 the entire year. Starting this month the South African National Defense Force will be lending much-needed surveillance equipment to the rangers.

So, what can we do, thousands of miles away from the bloodshed? Be aware, and give what you can. You’d be surprised the difference a few dollars makes towards supporting the rangers who risk their lives every day to protect threatened wildlife. Many of the park rangers in Africa have blogs, and they are simply awe-inspiring. I urge you to check out the following sites for more information and personal stories straight from the rangers: MaraTriangle.org (Kenya), Wildlifedirect.org, and Gorillacd.org (Congo).*

RHINO CONSERVATION
www.rhinoconservation.org

INTERNATIONAL RHINO FOUNDATION
www.rhinos-irf.org