

The Vietnamese and Rhino horn - a dealer speaks



By Karl Ammann

I recently read a feature in *Africa Geographic* entitled: *From Crisis to Tragedy: Outlining The Rhino Poaching Epidemic Affecting Southern and Eastern Africa*.

The feature concluded by stating: "To do this effectively (educate the public), we need to know who is using the horn and why, and this requires extensive user profile research. IUCN and CITES, where are you?"

In the last six months, I have visited Vietnam three times to research and film a documentary on the trade in reptile skins. Any study of the wildlife trade in that part of the world involves confronting all kinds of issues, including, in the Vietnamese context, the traditional medicine component as well as a very pronounced trade in bushmeat.

After talking to various players, it soon became clear that most of these trade activities are pretty much out of control and enforcement of national and international laws is not a priority. When the authorities do clamp down, it tends to affect the little guys involved. The well connected main actors are not worried about getting caught and prosecuted. Clearly what a foreign investigator can do is limited and the key to

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TOP: Often horn is sold in this type of slabs. In this case with a weight of 87.6 grams. In this form it is hard to tell rhino horn from the buffalo fabrication.

MIDDLE: Besides rhino horn some of these dealers sell all kind of other horns but mostly as trophies. There must be African exporters of all kinds of antelope horn from Kudu, to Impala to Oryx and waterbuck which all end up in such shops and are then mounted on cow skulls.

BOTTOM LEFT: When offered in a shop as a cut off piece it still looks and feels pretty real.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Water buffalo horn in the process of being 'adapted' to look like the tip of a rhino horn with the lower grooves being filed down to a smooth surface.





ALL PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN

This dealer illustrates the difference between a fake (water buffalo) and real horn.

getting solid information is to find a local guide/translator who is interested in the subject matter.

I have been lucky and have somebody now who follows up on leads on his own, mainly because he is also fascinated by what he is learning. On my first visit, we spent an afternoon scouring the traditional medicine shops in Hanoi. We were offered bits and pieces of what was described as rhino horn. After some hard negotiations, we were given prices that were clearly well below the quotes we had for Asian and African horns (generally \$40,000 per kg for the Asian horns still coming in, mostly from India via Burma and Laos; and \$20,000 per kg for African horns, which are easier to find.) On a busy street in Chinatown, one Traditional Chinese Medicine dealer's wife chopped off a piece of a horn she claimed to be from a rhino. The pieces flew all over the place and it became clear that a lot of fake horn products are in circulation and that the naïve and inexperienced

\$40,000

Price per kg of Asian horns coming mostly from India via Burma and Laos.

\$20,000

Price per kg of African horns.

consumer is often taken for a ride. I did buy two samples - assuming they were fake - and had them DNA-tested. Both were from Water buffalo and had undergone a special adaption/fabrication process.

On the next trip, I sent my investigator ahead with a hidden

camera to confront some of the dealers about the DNA results. They freely admitted that they had sold us fake horn products. We then went to visit a factory where the fake horns were manufactured and we were shown the production process, which we filmed. They also offered us a tiger skin as well as small pieces of horn that they said were real. (DNA evidence has in the meantime confirmed that this sample was from a White Rhino)

I concluded that a very large percentage of the 'rhino horn' on the market in Vietnam comes from Water buffalo (and we were told that some of the Chinese horns were even better fakes). So we have the well-established fact that rhino horn seems to have no medicinal value, combined with the fact that possibly 90% of the rhino horn products offered to consumers are fake.

As such there must be more than one way to educate the public in some of these main consumer countries. However, the nice signs at airports

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reading “Do not buy trouble” are often within sight of souvenir shops selling wildlife products (mostly reptile skin accessories), which cannot be legally exported without import and export permits.

What is beyond doubt to me is that consumers pay thousands of dollars for 100 grams of horn, or a kilo if the buyer is a reasonably aware society player who can afford to take care of himself. As an aside, recent tales of demand spiking because some government minister was quoted in the local media saying he had been cured of lung cancer seem to be largely myths. Of all the dealers we spoke to, only one had heard this story, which involved an assistant minister. Several told us quite frankly that rhino horn did

not have any kind of healing effect when it came to cancer treatment but that it generally cleanses the body. It is considered effective in treating symptoms that can accompany the new lifestyle expectations of the rich – a lot of drinking, eating and drugs, which create body heat and which some believe can be eradicated by consuming rhino horn powder (mixed with rice wine).

Rhino horn also makes an ideal present or bribe for big bosses who need to overcome symptoms of excessive consumption. It is a status symbol like Ferrari or Bentley which are now quiet common in urban centers like Hanoi, for some \$ 300000. Other ways of impressing

friends and say thank you to officials include the occasional banquet offering what hotels describe as “Forest Food”, which includes reptile meat, porcupine, wild boar, Muntjac deer, Civet cat etc. Washing all this down with glasses of tiger or rhino horn wine offers the nouveau riche a way to show off. My investigator met a very interesting trader in one of the provincial capitals and recorded the meeting on a hidden camera. The translation is very revealing of ‘demand characteristics’ and of how the trade is conducted. The original includes a range of names and geographic locations, which I removed to protect our investigator who, in this case, played the part of a potential buyer:

Could you find me rhino horn? I want to buy some. I would like to buy real horn not fake. I have been cheated several times because all horn I bought before is fake.

I bought one horn of 1.6 kilos at the price of 1.8 billion Vietnamese Dong (VND) (\$ 90,000) recently.

Is this a whole horn or just a part of it?

A: The whole horn.

Why was it so small? I thought minimum weight is often four kilos or more?

It depends.

Is it African rhino horn or Asian?

It is African horn, Asian is really hard to find now.

How much for Asian horn and how much for African one?

Asian horn is 30 million VND (\$ 1,500) more expensive than African horn. African horn is 65 million VND per 100 grams. Asian horn is 95 million VND per 100 grams.

Do you have any horn now?

Sorry, I have not got any left.

Can you get me one (whole horn that) weighs

more than four kilos?

Yeah, I can.

I have a friend and his father now has cancer so he does need to buy rhino horn to cure the disease?

You are dreaming. Rhino horn can never cure cancer. People buy it maybe as a last resort... I always maintain a good business reputation. I never sell fakes. My clients are mainly the province leaders (local governors). Frankly speaking, how could I sell my stuff to farmers and the poor? They do not have the money to buy.

What port does rhino horn arrive from when it comes to Vietnam?

When rhino horns arrive, a dealer will inform me. Sometimes they have a container of horn

A container?

Yeah, but then most of that is sent on to China. Sometimes VIPs call me to go to check horns for them. They buy horns to give their partners as gifts.

Are there more fake horns than real ones?

All rhino horn from China is fake... People who want to buy real horn never buy in China.

So they buy real horn in Vietnam, then they make fake horn to send to back to Vietnam to sell?

Yeah they are experts in making fake horn.

How can they make that horn by using buffalo horn because buffalo horn normally weighs not more than a kilo?

They make fake horn by using a lot of buffalo horns. They create a mould, then melt the horn with special chemicals, then pour them into a mould.

So how can you recognise the difference between that kind of fake horn and a real one?

For a person like me who has seen many real horns, I have a lot of experience so I can recognise a fake horn from a real one.

Do you have any news about the next shipment of rhino horn to Vietnam?

They normally do not inform me in advance. They will inform me as soon as the stuff arrives, then bring them here for me to check. If I think they are ok, I will negotiate the price then decide to give them the address of a client who is willing to buy.

Do you have any pieces of horn left? I would like to buy to send for my partner in China to test?

Sorry I have not got any left. I have not traded horn for two months. I had the last piece, which weighed 12 grams, but some policemen from the drug trafficking prevention unit visited me. I ground some and then offered it to them. Then they took the rest when they left. They said they will give me money later.

What is rhino horn good for?

It is good if you eat poisonous or bad food or when you have drunk too much. It will help you to recover easily.

How about cancer?

It does not help much with cancer. If somebody gets cancer, bear's gall (bladder) does really help.



A typical display in a TCM (traditional Chinese Medicine) store.

In the same interview, this dealer confirmed that he had boiled down the bones of some 100 tigers into glue in the last two decades. The estimate for the remaining tiger population in neighbouring Laos is now down to about 20 cats. The same number is estimated for the remaining tiger population in Vietnam. When discussing tigers, it is all done based on the kg of bone a specific size (male/female) is meant to yield. There are 10kg tigers up to 18kg tigers (which relates to the bone weight).

This classification system seems to have now been extended to rhino horn hunted legally in South Africa, where 'hunters' arrive from Vietnam and Thailand and buy their trophy animal based on the weight to the horn. (See Mike Knight in this issue). The hunting trophies are meant to be exported as such and to remain private property, hanging on a wall. In reality, they all end up being sold for consumption.

My message to the author of the Africa Geographic piece would be: do not count on IUCN or CITES. The answer, once again, can be found on the enforcement front and these institutions have little to offer in this context. ●

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