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African states step up efforts to fight rhino poaching



By Paul Udoto*

Rhino experts from across Africa have been jolted by the escalating poaching crisis into speaking with one voice about the plight of the iconic wild species.

Drawn from different African states, the experts grappled with issues such as the identity of poachers and who pays them; whether they are organized into gangs or were opportunistic; how emerging technologies can be leveraged to curb rhino conservation, and how the demand for rhino

horns can be suppressed through public awareness campaigns.

The delegates agreed to undertake the following measures in order to address the rhino poaching menace in the continent:

- Assist rhino surveillance and anti-poaching units on the ground with new strategies, tools and resources, including, but not limited to, more advanced communication technology, more vehicles and possibly helicopters;
- Strengthen law enforcement and coordination at both local and national

levels. This would include instituting harsher penalties and fines; improved detection, such as through the use of sniffer dogs at airports, and tougher law enforcement measures;

- Curb demand for rhino horn and illegal trade, through the use of public awareness campaigns on wildlife trade issues in both consumer and source states; and,
- Endeavour to influence policy makers, financiers, and government officials at the highest appropriate levels.

Held in early April 2012, the Summit was hosted by the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) in Nairobi. In attendance were representatives of wildlife authorities from Africa's rhino range states, scientists, owners of private rhino reserves, rhino trade and security experts, and international conservation organizations. The Summit was also attended by government officials and other representatives from Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, the United States, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

According to experts, if the current poaching trend continues, more rhinos will be poached than born by 2016, sending the world's population into an irreversible decline.

South Africa a poaching epicentre

In the past three years, more than 900 rhinos have been killed across the continent. Much of the poaching has taken place in South Africa where as many as 448 rhinos were killed in 2011 -a 33 percent increase in a single year. Among the rhinos killed in the rainbow state were 19 critically endangered black rhinos, of which fewer than 5,000 remain in the wild. In 2010, 333 South African rhinos were killed by poachers, nearly three times the number

killed in 2009. With a population of 20,000 white rhinos, South Africa is home to most of world's rhinos.

"South Africans are angry," said Dr Sam Ferreira, a large mammal ecologist from South African National Parks. Reports show that South African law enforcement officials arrested 232 suspected poachers in 2011, compared to 165 the previous year.

Kenya not spared

Kenya has not been spared. Since the beginning of this year, the country has lost four rhinos to poachers. During the last six months alone, 13 poachers have been killed in gunfights with Kenya Wildlife Service's (KWS) rangers while five rangers have paid the ultimate price while protecting wildlife.

Illegal wildlife trade is a serious, transnational organized crime with devastating effects on the environment. It represents one of the most serious threats to global biodiversity.

Besides a belief in South-East Asia that rhino horns have medicinal and aphrodisiac value, a 'newer' yarn is being peddled that they can cure cancer too. But though scientists have proven that rhino horn has little or no medicinal value — and that it is actually made of keratin, the same protein

found in human hair and fingernails — these myths, combined with surging Asian economies, have put rhino horns in high demand.

Many Vietnamese nationals believe the horn has miracle healing properties, a thing that has become one of the main drivers of global demand. In Vietnam, the horn is ground into a powder that is believed to treat fevers, retain youthfulness and even cure cancer.

And because of the high prices the horns fetch in the black market, a number of sophisticated criminal syndicates have risen to capitalize on the demand. This has given poachers access to tremendous resources and sophisticated gadgets and equipments -from night-vision goggles and veterinary medicines to helicopters.

The African Black rhino is currently listed as "critically endangered" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List while the White rhino is listed as "near threatened".

In 1976, the global trade in rhino horn was banned under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). This drove it underground, pushing up prices and spawning international crime syndicates ready to snap it up wherever it

could be found.

That the rhino faces imminent danger of extinction is underscored by the fact that countries like Zambia have lost their entire populations. "In 1980, we had 2,750 rhinos, but by 1998, the species was declared locally exterminated by IUCN" said Edwin Matokwani, Zambia's Wildlife Authority Director General. Matokwani added that Zambia has been trying to re-introduce the animals in the country. "Though this has been a success so far, we are worried about the rate of poaching in the region."

In addition to a comprehensive plan for combating rhino poaching in Africa, participants developed a course of action for each organization. They also agreed that there was a need for collaboration over the long term so as to reach consensus among the key range states.

"This is our heritage, a part of our culture. What right does anyone have to steal our continent's assets?" posed Pelham Jones, chair of the Private Rhino Owners Association in South Africa.

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