

# no case for trade

It's one of the hottest questions arising from the rhino poaching crisis: should the trade in rhino horn be legalised? Few people feel ambivalent, and **Ian Michler** is certainly not among that minority. Why waste time, he asks, when we could be tackling the problem in more positive ways?



TIM JACKSON

**O**VER THE PAST FEW MONTHS THERE has been significant input into the debate about rhino horn that provides further compelling evidence against trade in this beleaguered wildlife commodity.

To begin with we had the release of two separate reports by international conservation agencies. The first, 'Making a Killing' (<http://www.ifaw.org/united-states/resource-centre/making-killing>), was compiled by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and investigates the full spectrum of China's ivory market. Initiated because of the massive upsurge in elephant poaching across Africa, the report concludes that 'Escalating ivory prices and the rising demand in China, [together] with an uncontrollable legal ivory market which provides cover for illegal trade, make a lethal combination that is decimating wild elephant populations.' We also know that the wild populations of species such as abalone, bears and lions have not benefited from trade or other commercial activities, so why should rhino populations be any different?

IFAW's report was followed by one from the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC ([www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic\\_species\\_mammals66.pdf](http://www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic_species_mammals66.pdf)). Entitled 'The South Africa-Viet Nam Rhino Horn Trade Nexus', this report presents an insightful body of information, not least because the latest revelations highlight how much we still do not know about what is driving the poaching crisis.

Until recently, China copped the blame for being the primary destination of horn, but according to the TRAFFIC report Vietnam is the real culprit. And while the Vietnamese still seem to esteem rhino horn for its alleged medicinal value, they put it to all kinds of other uses too. Most of these are based on 'indulgent, status-conscious consumption' and include 'giving expensive

gifts as a means to curry favour with socio-economic or political elites'.

The report came up with a host of recommendations for both countries, but promoting the legalisation of trade was not one of them. Instead, it focused primarily on building the capacity of regulatory mechanisms and political will; improving law enforcement, the DNA databank and prosecution processes; and, in Vietnam's case, promoting 'demand reduction activities'.

For readers with an avid interest in wildlife issues, a fascinating article entitled 'Ivory worship' appeared in the October issue of *National Geographic* (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/10/ivory/christy-text>) that echoes the conclusions of the IFAW

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report. It tells us many things about the trade in wildlife products, but the last section, 'Devils lurk in the details', delivers the gist. Here we see how horribly wrong resource economists can be with their models. The narrative also reveals that despite all China's assurances, the 2008 one-off ivory sale sanctioned by CITES served to fuel the current elephant poaching crisis.

And then came some admissions from South African officials. Fundisile Mketeni from the Department of Environmental Affairs acknowledged a few months ago that 'The rhino war cannot be won in South Africa. It must be won where the demand is.' He went on to add, 'The bottom line is, we need to work with so-called consumer countries like Vietnam and China.' To this end, Mketeni

How many more rhinos are likely to be killed in the decade that it will take before trade in their horn may – or may not – be legalised?

committed to signing a biodiversity protection and conservation agreement with Vietnam at COP 11, held in India in October 2012. This was followed, also in October, by what has been the most anticipated announcement on rhino issues this year. After months of speculation, the South African government revealed that it would not be making a submission to the CITES conference in March 2013 to change the current no-trade status of rhino horn.

When looked at collectively, it would seem that a strong case has again come from these independent quarters: the risky pro-trade option is a non-starter. This becomes even more evident when one considers that the next opportunity for the pro-trade lobby to initiate change will be in 2016. However, this is merely the date the process could be set in motion; years of work to meet onerous conditions set by CITES would have to follow.

In essence, we could be looking at anything between six years and a decade before trade may become a reality, and then it's only a maybe. Any ideological viewpoint aside, it's common sense – why waste another decade? Imagine what could be achieved in the meantime if everyone threw their support wholeheartedly behind the recommendations that TRAFFIC and other non-trade advocates have come up with.

