

Understanding, not judging, demand is key to saving rhinos

The current rhino poaching crisis is being driven by the demand for rhino horn in consumer markets such as Viet Nam, where unprecedented social, cultural and economic evolution is taking place.

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For the past decade Viet Nam has achieved an impressive 7% or more annual increase in GNP and new wealth has created high levels of disposable income and thus many new opportunities for status-driven spending, including the purchase of rhino horn, despite this being illegal.

While there's little doubt that direct action to identify and apprehend the poachers and organised traffickers of horns is at the frontline of stemming such activities, without a complementary effort to address the persistent market demand that drives this trade, such efforts will be in vain.

But constantly rebuking those who buy and use horn will achieve little. Experience has taught us that consumers simply don't react to being told what they are doing is wrong. Rather, a concerted approach is needed to try and understand what motivates horn consumers; we need to gain real insights into the hopes, fears, attitudes, beliefs and desires

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driving people's consumption of wildlife products; understand the emotional, spiritual or physical needs and aspirations that consumption fulfils, and the occasions during which it is expected, prompted or triggered. In short, we need to understand in order to change minds and behaviour: knowledge is power.

To begin the understanding process, in November 2011, TRAFFIC convened a meeting of 'Creative Experts' from academia, industry, non-governmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations, and other stakeholders. It confirmed the potential for sophisticated, targeted communication materials and messaging in shifting consumption patterns and informed the development of a five-step demand reduction Strategy. This Strategy has now been endorsed in relation to rhinos through a process led by CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), and work to implement it in Viet Nam has recently begun.

Underpinning the process has been social market research commissioned by TRAFFIC, involving interviews with 600 randomly identified Vietnamese people in two major cities. Only 5% admitted rhino horn consumption or purchase; an additional 80 consumers (identified through further

sampling techniques) were then interviewed to ascertain their motivations for consuming rhino horn.

The results provide our first real glimpse into the world of illegal wildlife consumption in Viet Nam: the typical user is a man over 40 years of age, who is educated, successful and influential in society. He purchases horn in the belief that it is a badge of wealth, power, social status and hard work. The association of rhino horn with 'social status' has reached new dimensions in the country: habitual users routinely consume rhino horn casually and conspicuously, as a means of demonstrating wealth, status and social connections.

Most revealing, and of considerable concern, was the finding that 16%

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Vietnamese consumers often use serrated bowls to grind rhino horn to a powder, which is mixed with rice wine or water and drunk

Left: Confiscated rhino horns in Vietnam

of respondents who were not currently using rhino horn desired to buy or consume it in the future as a means of demonstrating elevated social standing and affluence.

These and other findings put us in a strong position to identify messaging that will appeal to the head and the heart of actual or would-be consumers. It will enable us to identify who best to carry the message that rhino horn is no longer cool: the key influencers of the target user group. Our knowledge is helping us design and refine a suite of interventions that will become the 'agents of change' and ultimately undermine the factors driving serious organised wildlife crime.

Grants

We gave £1,130 to Education for Nature Vietnam, towards the costs of a press conference of a Vietnamese celebrity visit to South Africa to raise awareness of the poaching crisis