

# Rhino horn stockpiles to store or destroy?

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**M**any rhino horns in stockpiles come from natural mortalities. When dealing with a rhino carcass, the horns are immediately removed to prevent them being taken by poachers.

Government agencies have secure central storerooms in confidential locations. Private rhino owners may also have safes or strong-rooms. Storerooms may also contain horns recovered from poaching incidents and any removed during dehorning operations. Zoos and wildlife parks deal with the horns of deceased captive animals, and there are many antique rhino horns and trophy mounts across the world in museums, galleries and private collections.

These rhino horn stockpiles can't simply be locked up and forgotten about. Due to the high value of rhino horn and the risk of leakage onto the black market, there are several rules and checks done on rhino horn stockpiles. Managing a rhino horn stockpile involves scrupulous record-keeping and auditing procedures, including weighing, measuring and cataloguing each horn and taking DNA samples.

Since 2008, the demand for rhino horn has skyrocketed, presenting difficult challenges for those tasked with

protecting rhinos and their precious horns, whether still attached to the rhino or not. Individuals, organisations and governments now have to deal with a tricky issue: should rhino horns be stored securely or

destroyed? And if they are destroyed, should this be done in a high-profile burning or crushing demonstration?

Over the last year, governments including the US, France, China and the Philippines have organised public ivory stockpile destruction displays, leading many to question whether the same should be done with rhino horn stockpiles. Dvur Kralove Zoo also held a public burning of Czech and Slovak rhino horns on World Rhino Day 2014.

There are a number of arguments in favour of destroying rhino horn stockpiles. With the soaring value of rhino horn, stockpiles present a large target for thieves and substantial sums are needed to ensure adequate security of the strong room and to reduce the risk of danger to staff. For example, in April 2014, 112 horns were stolen during a night-time raid at South Africa's Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency.

In countries or on reserves where there are limited resources or concerns about corruption, it may be better to destroy horns immediately, thus eliminating the risk of leakage onto the black market. Those advocating destruction say that burning and crushing horns gains publicity and makes a political statement that rhino horn is worth nothing, and sends a strong signal to the criminal networks that the smuggling of rhino horn will not be tolerated.

Conversely, there are reasons why not to destroy rhino horn stockpiles. One reason why both private owners and state



agencies may be currently stockpiling horns in South Africa is the country's interest legalising the trade in rhino horn. If a proposal at the 2016 CITES meeting were successful, this would allow rhino owners to sell their rhino horns legally and use the profits to cover their spiralling security costs.

There are other reasons too. Historically, rhino horns have been stored for record-keeping purposes and geneticists can recover DNA from horns that can be traced back to individual animals. Storing genetic material like rhino horns maintains evidence that may be used in rhino-crime prosecutions.

Several zoos have announced plans to publicly destroy stockpiles. A planned burn in North Carolina Zoo in the USA had to be postponed while legal issues concerning the destruction of state property were examined. Another issue is that such publicity draws attention to the fact that zoos may be in possession of valuable horns.

What is the objective behind a public burn event? Is it a publicity stunt? Is a public burn the best use of time and money? Some have argued that the burn will result in reducing the demand for rhino horn amongst East Asian consumers. What is the message that will go to the criminal syndicates? There are real concerns that destroying rhino horns simply helps drive up the price of rhino horns, by making them even rarer and harder to buy illegally.

Our conclusion is that rhino horns should not be destroyed, unless there is a real concern about safeguarding their secure storage, in which case they should be destroyed in accordance with the laws of the country concerned, but with no publicity.



Above: rhino horns in a secure storeroom.  
Top: earlier this year China held a high profile destruction of confiscated ivory

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