

Wishful thinking and Rhino Conservation

Karl Ammann



is a wildlife photographer and film-maker who lives in Nanyuki, Kenya. He has used his skills to campaign for cheetahs, apes, rhinos and against the bushmeat business. His books, with Dale Peterson, include *Eating Apes* and *Consuming Nature*. He has received world-wide recognition, notably as one of Time Magazine's Heroes of the Environment in 2007. You can read more about his work on: www.karlammann.com

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Finally some good news on rhino poaching, I thought. A press release dated Oct. 20, 2014 says: ***Interest in rhino horn drops in vietnam.***

The story goes on to describe how a survey was conducted amongst 1000 rhino horn consumers, firstly in 2013 and then in 2014 by visiting the same respondents. The conclusion was that demand for rhinoceros horn in Vietnam has declined by 38%.

When I read this I had just come back from a lengthy filming trip in Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and China and while

rhino horn trading was not top of the list in our research we did come across some very new and very worrisome demand characteristics which do not bear out the above assessment.

I wrote to the head of the organisation that carried out the research and asked for clarification as to who was interviewed for this survey. Below is our correspondence:

The slogan "health to wealth" became fashionable in describing the evolution of the demand characteristics for products such as rhino horn. During our earlier investigative work we – like everybody else – concentrated on examining the use of rhino horn within the Traditional Chinese Medicine market in Vietnam and China. We found that most TCM consumers were buying roughly cut horn pieces or powdered horn in small quantities. DNA analysis of many of these samples demonstrated that 90% of these products were counterfeit and were derived from water buffalo horn or other commonly

The Response:

The premise of our work in Viet Nam is that rhino horn is used as medicine or to improve health. Therefore, we did not ask respondents anything about the issues you raise below. That said, we could add them to our next survey, which will be conducted in August 2015!

With thanks,
Teresa

occurring species. It is relatively easy to tell real horn from fake horn when one has a whole horn to examine or large pieces of horn with the outer core intact. But within the TCM market, where the horn is cut into small slabs or only the tip is present, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the real product and a counterfeit. We filmed in workshops in Vietnam where a dozen workers produce thousands of fake rhino horns a year – all shipped to China and all a far cry from the real thing.

However what we were seeing on the last two trips was a completely different version of the markets and demand outlined above: wealthy tourists visiting from China to spend big money on a range of newly introduced rhino horn artifacts and jewelry. Their tour guide takes them to the retail outlets in question and assures them that they are going to buy the real thing. They can see the workshops where rhino horn and lots of ivory are being worked on. They are shown whole bloody horns or big chunks of genuine ivory. They can even buy the left over shavings from the workshop floors before they are given

Dear Teresa,

Thanks for getting back to me. Yes it would be good to have some more of the demographics of the 1000 consumers interviewed:

- How many were consumers of traditional TCM products (powder)
- How many were speculative investors buying horns as a medium or long term investment - locking it in a safe
- How many were lifestyle/status investors having it on a shelf behind or on their desk?
- How many were gift buyers buying to hand out as gifts or bribes
- How many were buyers of rhino horn jewelry or artifacts
- How many were Chinese visitors on a short stay in Vietnam

Once there is more detail on the above it will allow me to draw more of a conclusion.

Regards,
Karl

demonstrations on how to tell real from fake horn.

The photograph below shows in the center a rhino horn byproduct. After a bead for a karma bracelet has been carved from it, this is what remains.

The interesting aspect to this commerce was the corresponding price. The bracelet weighed 40 grams and was priced at \$4000 or \$100 per gram - a drastic price increase from our previous investigations two years earlier when the price of one kilo of horn was \$65,000. The off cuts on the floor of the workshop went for \$40 per gram – the left overs probably ending up in the TCM market.

A book on China's "Super Consumers" tells us that 25% of all luxury branded items today is being bought by Chinese

consumers. Sixty percent of these purchases are made on trips abroad. I believe the same is now true for rhino horn products or whole horns being bought as investments or gifts. The manufacturers/dealers in Vietnam are happy to take a 50% deposit and collect the remainder of their money on delivery

in China, which they offer to clients. They do not seem to be at all concerned about transport logistics or any kind of customs control. International demand that China outlaws all domestic sale of ivory would without doubt further fuel this ivory and rhino horn tourism. As long as the countries that share a border with China, such as Myanmar and Laos, are relaxing their domestic rules and regulations when it comes to trading



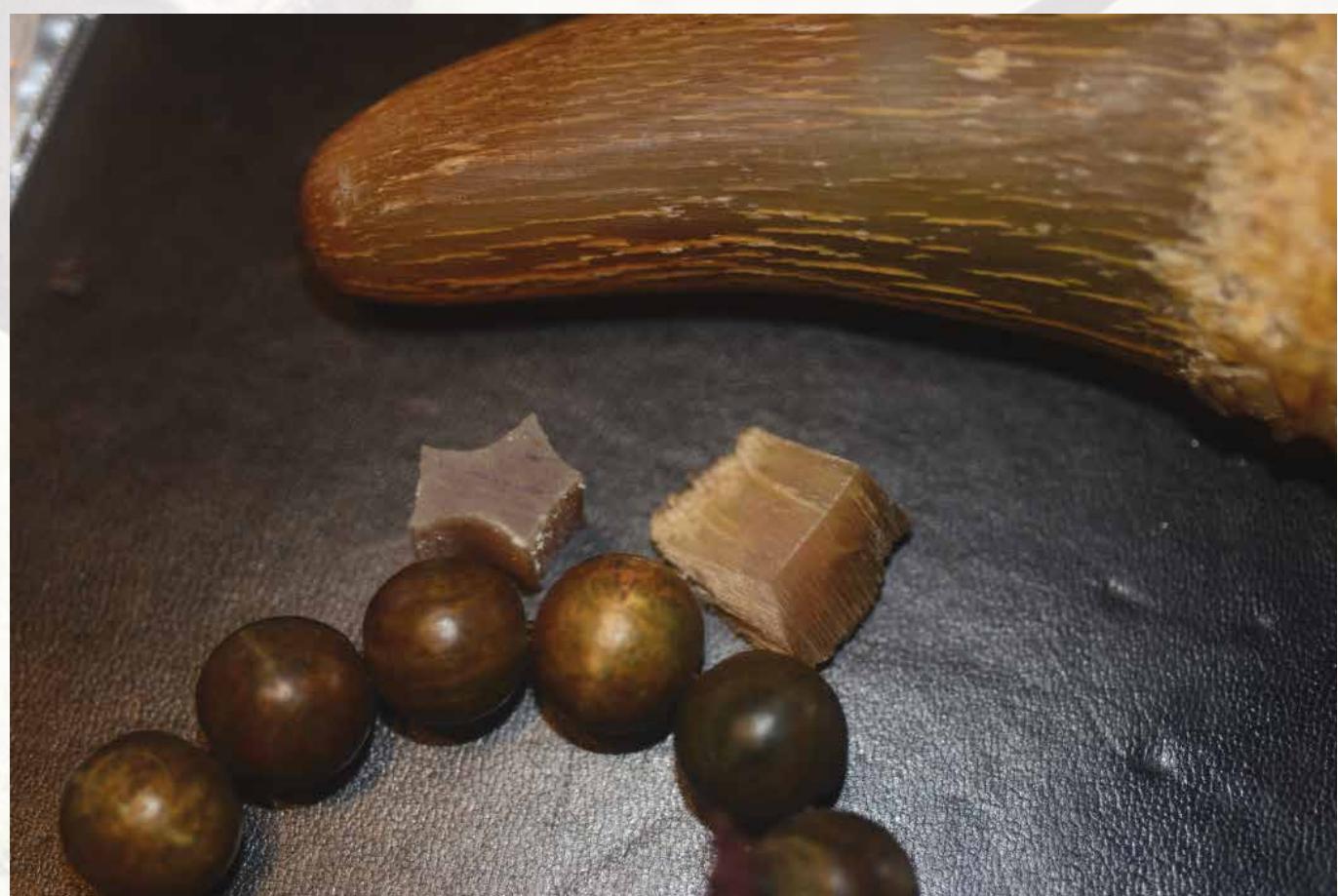
PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMAN

Top: The real thing recorded for sale on a hidden camera.

Below: A karma bracelet out of wood very similar to the rhino horn bracelets that are marketed.

illegal wildlife products, a reduction in supply to China itself might have little impact in terms of overall demand.

For China to truly reduce demand by its people for ivory, China would also have to become serious about border controls on wildlife trafficking. This would mean well-trained sniffer dogs and honest customs officials at all the key entry points. At the moment many of these crossings are a free for all: The two pictures below show on the left an





PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMAN



official border crossing from Myanmar into China with all the uniformed immigration and custom officials in attendance, while on the right just a few hundred yards away there is a large gap in a rusty fence which is used daily by hundreds of Chinese to cross back and forth without any aspect of control.

Of course it's not just the Chinese consumers having to worry about enforcement activities, there are also plenty of Vietnamese buyers of genuine rhino horn and they are now buying these illicit products for the same reasons - status and investment. Both nations have a culture and long history

Top: The official border crossing.
Below: The unofficial way of entering the country.

of giving gifts and this is exacerbating the problem. Bottles of tiger bone wine (or in the case of Vietnam, tiger cake), rhino horns and ivory carvings are part of what illegal wildlife traders have started packaging as special gift/bribe items. If the Chinese Head of State decided to expand his anti-corruption campaign and would decree that no government official will in future be allowed to accept any rhino horn, tiger bone wine or ivory carving as a bribe/gift, that would send a very strong message reflecting some real political will.

On our last film shoot my local investigators came back from shops in two different countries with close up footage of containers on display with rhino horn rings stacked up. They were clearly too big to be buffalo horn. They had all the characteristics of being the real thing. The inner core of these rings had been cut out to allow smooth carving. On several occasions they were



Top Left: How the inner working ofn the horn would have fitted.

Top Right: The outer ring of horn, on display in a shop in Myanmar.

Below: A faux "traditional" libation cup supposedly made from rhino horn on display in an up market store.

filmed in close proximity to the kind of cups made from rhino horn, which, in the old days, was one of the key demand sources for Asian and African horn.

In a 2012 Internet article about the trade of antique rhino horn, a WWF expert went on record stating:

"Demand for fresh rhinoceros horns does not come from the antiques world nor is it driven by press reports about antique carvings (real antique libation cups have sold at auctions for U\$ 1 million). This is because rhinoceros carvings are an ancient art that is simply not practiced any longer therefore modern artisans have no desire for fresh rhinoceros horn."

I hope WWF is not underestimating the business and market acumen of some of the key wildlife dealers creating new products and markets.

Reading through literature on the history of these artifacts it becomes clear that they were a status symbol going back some 2000 years and were reserved for the Imperial household in China. Maybe the new carvers and traders have concluded that there is a very fast growing "new Imperial class". Not in terms of bloodline and heritage, but in terms of bank accounts - individuals looking for traditional but at the same time modern day status symbols.

This goes beyond rhino horn and ivory products. I have read a feasibility study for a new Chinese tiger farm and tiger wine production facility and it

outlines in terrifying detail how new markets and new consumers can and will be targeted. It talks about how tiger wine can be presented as offering all the good feelings associated with getting drunk but still being able to market the corresponding hangover as 'having improved one's health and potency.'

My local investigators were not fluent enough in Mandarin and did not look the part to be able to ask the necessary questions relating to the raw rhino horn rings and the origin of the array of cups on sale, and the relationship



between the two was not conclusively established. I did however manage to buy some very small pieces of the rings which I have been sent for DNA analysis to establish if we are dealing with the real thing or not. Of course it would be impossible to get anybody to cut off a small piece of a new libation cup but I did buy a fake one, featured in the above illustration.

The image below illustrates my hypothesis on the reasons for these rhino horn rings entering the market in a range of locations. I believe that there were unscrupulous dealers in antiquities who tried to sell supposedly antique libations cups with price tags up to \$1 million. They got caught when auctioneers decided to use sophisticated methods to determine age.

I would not be surprised if the next step was the conclusion to continue to make and market these bowls no longer

pretending they are antique. They may reason that: "We still have pretty good carvers, they have been practicing on ivory for a long time, let them create a new status symbol, new cups and we can still make good money at \$100,000 to \$200,000 pitching them to the new imperial class".

I will further test this theory on upcoming trips and film shoots and you might want to watch this space for further updates from the rhino horn market front line.

In the meantime I strongly feel that the many concerned individuals and organisations in South Africa and other parts of the world who are trying desperately to counteract the poaching pressure should spend a lot more time and energy learning about and trying to understand Chinese and Vietnamese histories and cultures, the demand for 'face' and status, as well as some of the

more materialistic dynamics which seem to govern this market.

Where there is a demand there will be a supply and the demand appears to be increasing.

As for the window dressing and lip service in terms of enforcement – starting with CITES officials in Geneva and at the consumer end – maybe some policy makers in South Africa could be persuaded to push for renegotiating the various MOUs signed with rhino horn consumer countries and include independent third party auditing of enforcement efforts as an appendix. Maybe even Vietnamese officials could go on patrol with rangers in Kruger National Park, and South African Hawks could do some undercover shopping for rhino horn in Vietnam. I would love to see such an endeavor documented on camera and interview the participants at both ends. ●

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Another cup surrounded by other illicit wildlife goods for sale.