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Could legalising the trade in rhino horn save the species?



Sustainable horn harvesting could ensure rhino are worth more alive than dead
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Biography

Adam Hart FRSB is professor of science communication at the University of Gloucestershire

Like the leopard, lion and elephant, white and black rhinos are part of Africa's 'big five' and are under increasing threat. They are hunted illegally for their horn, which is sold through criminal syndicates to customers mainly in Vietnam and China. Horn is used in traditional medicine or as a 'luxury' consumable – a keratin Cristal for the urban rich. The other three rhino species, from India, Java and Sumatra, are also poached for their horn.

International trade in such goods has been illegal since 1977 and the number of rhino had been increasing. However, since around 2009, there have been year-on-year increases in poaching, with more than 1,200 animals killed last year from a population of roughly 20,000 white and 4,500 black rhino.

There is no easy solution: demand-reduction programmes may be having some impact (especially in Vietnam), but they are neither working well enough nor quickly enough. Protection on the ground is increasingly paramilitary in operation and eye-wateringly expensive. It is effective in smaller reserves, but most rhino roam in the Kruger National Park, a vast area with a long and unsecured border with Mozambique, where poverty makes poaching an attractive career.

Headline-grabbing initiatives such as colouring or poisoning horn to make it unattractive to poachers are also problematic. They are expensive and unfeasible on a large scale, and mean poisoned horn could be bought by desperate parents to give to a sick child.

One solution proposed by some is to make the trade in horn legal. This is not to flood the market and drive down prices, but seeks to develop long-term sustainable income from horn. Rhino range states have huge stockpiles of horn and the ability to gather horn from natural losses.

There is a clear demand for horn, and people will pay excessively for it – at end-user level, it rivals gold in value. What's more, horn is a harvestable resource from living rhino.

You can dehorn a rhino quite humanely and painlessly, although the procedure does involve anaesthetising the animal, which is not without risk. The horn grows back at a rate of more than a kilogram per year. With around a quarter of rhino belonging to private owners in South Africa, who spend up to 60% of their income on security, legal trade is seen by some as a lifeline against the onslaught of heavily armed and violent poachers. Some favouring trade even suggest that community-owned rhino, with horn harvested on an annual basis, could bring people out of poverty in certain regions.

Those opposed to trade are often idealistically opposed to any utilisation of wildlife beyond tourism. Anti-traders are also concerned that trade focused in South Africa, as it inevitably would be, could secure rhino there, but shift poaching to other range states and threaten Asian species. Some studies have suggested that criminals would always be able to undercut the market and that legalising trade would increase demand, but here opinion is firmly divided.

No one knows for sure what would happen if the ban was lifted, and a proposal submitted by Swaziland to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) this year was not supported. As a consequence, there is no possibility of legal trade until the next CITES meeting in two years.

The stark reality is that rhino continue to be poached at a high rate and will continue to be killed in the foreseeable future – there is just too much money to be made from illegally hunted rhino horn. In terms of cold hard cash, right now rhino are worth far more dead, as horn on the streets of Vietnam, than alive in the African bush or the forests of Asia. We must find realistic, workable ways to change this if we are to reverse the current poaching crisis.