

RHINO RESCUE OR RIPOFF?

“Where do I donate to help protect the poor rhinos from extinction?”

The gentleman who asked this question certainly had the means to write a substantial check for the cause. He and his family have been on several upscale safaris that I have facilitated and he was undoubtedly interested in helping.

Unfortunately I had no ready answer.

“Let me get back to you on this,” I said.

Although I have read extensively and did intensive first-hand research on what some skeptics rather unkindly refer to as “the rhino rescue rip-off,” I was still not sure what the right course of action should be, let alone which non-profit is best suited to receive this kind of donation.

Don’t get me wrong. I am as concerned as anyone else about the senseless slaughter not only of rhinos but elephants, lions and even wild dogs by the world’s biggest killer: Man.

Listen to the multitude of “save the rhino” proponents and you soon realize that there is no unity of purpose on how accomplish this.

I found myself, so to speak, on the horns of a dilemma. Not surprisingly because that is what it is all about: Rhino horns.

Somehow there are those, especially in the Far East, who believe that rhino horn powder can cure anything from ingrown toenails to cancer. When Viagra and other likewise products superceded this horny product as a so-called aphrodisiac, the poachers pushed its qualities as a cure against hangovers. In Beijing or Hanoi a wealthy businessman might want to impress his guests by ordering a pinch of rhino horn powder in their after-dinner drink at the going rate of anything upwards from \$200 a pop.



White Rhino
Picture: Les de Villiers

“Imagine someone wanting to kill you for your hair,” the teacher told her class in a South African school in an effort to impress upon them the importance of protecting rhinos.

It would sound rather silly if it weren’t true. Rhino horn is basically keratin and akin to our hair. It grows back when cut.

It is easier to impress a third grade class with the ridiculous notion of killing someone for their hair than it is to dispel the notion in the Far East that rhino horn has magical curative powers. Like lion and tiger claws and bones, bear bile, and numerous other animal parts, rhino horn has featured as a sure cure with magical powers for more than two thousand years in traditional Chinese medicine.

One non-profit organization has set about on this re-education effort with the help of Chinese celebrities. Success is hard to measure but it seemed as if the Chinese government at least acted under pressure to discourage usage of horn powder, albeit very gently.

Others have concentrated on either removing the horns or making them less attractive to poachers. Sawing off the horns and leaving the rhinos with stumps, it is believed, will save them from the assassins. Others came up with the idea that dyeing the horns pink would do the trick. Ultimately there are those who resorted to injecting just enough poison into the horns to make the users of the product dastardly sick. A good friend

of mine who had lost several rhinos in recent years to poaching in his private park near Johannesburg, told me (perhaps in a moment of sheer desperation) that the poison should be lethal.

“Shoot to kill.”

That has become the battle cry of rangers who are faced with trying to apprehend the well-armed poachers delivered by helicopters and equipped with the latest in night vision and firepower. When the rangers manage to apprehend the poachers the courts might sentence them to a few years in prison and let them go free in less. (Keep in mind that in some instances officialdom is on the take as well).

Poachers are small-time local operators who do the dirty work at the behest of the major cartels abroad. One can even feel pity for them as the few hundred bucks that they earn by putting themselves at risk are mere crumbs compared the millions that their manipulators in the Far East stand to gain.

Indeed, that is what rhino horn, consisting of compacted hair, has come to be in terms of pricing. Rhino horn can fetch more than cocaine, gold or platinum on the black market.

Enter John Hume.

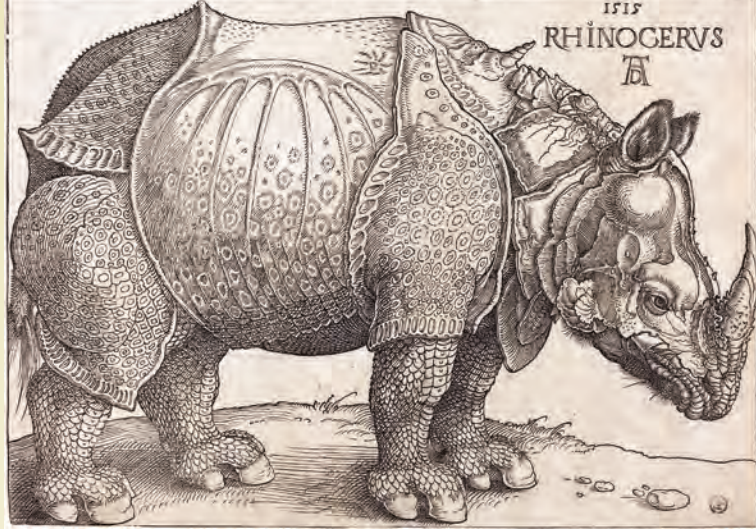
This South African millionaire is fighting a court battle with the South African government to be allowed to sell the five tons of rhino horns that he harvested



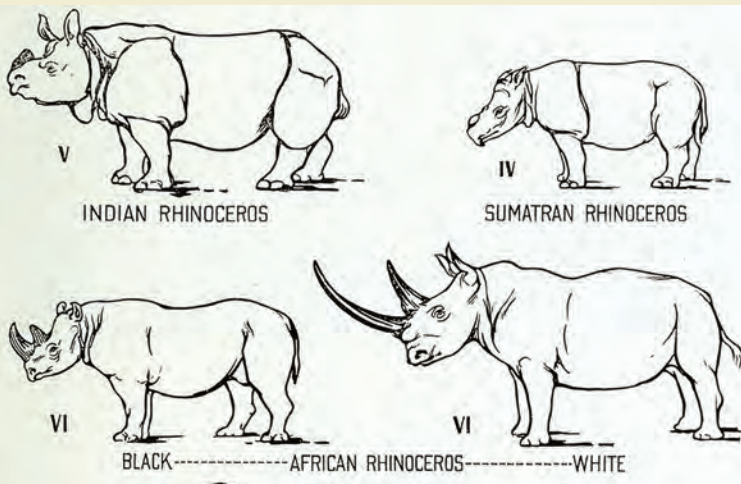
***Vultures on rhino carcass
Picture: Les de Villiers***

RHINOCEROS OR RHINOSAURUS?

1515
RHINOCERVS
A



Whether we will have to change the name from rhinoceros to rhinosauros all depends on whether we manage to stop the slaughter and prevent this endangered creature from joining the other long extinct ones. If we don't, this 1515 woodcut by German painter and print maker Albrecht Dürer will have to be filed away with the depiction of a dinosaur. Like the artists who drew images of extinct dinosaurs and all the other "saurs," Dürer never saw a rhinoceros either. His woodcut of this creature was based on a rough sketch by an unknown artist and supposed to represent an Indian rhinoceros shipped to the King of Portugal as a gift. This specimen never reached its destination as it perished in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy.



The word rhinoceros is derived through Latin from the Ancient Greek (*rhino* "nose") and (*keras* "horn"). The name has been in use since the 14th century but the creature itself dates back millions of years. The family *Rhinocerotidae* consists of four subspecies: *Rhinoceros* (Indian and Javan rhinoceros), *Dicerorhinus* (Sumatran rhinoceros), *Diceros* (Black rhinoceros), *Ceratotherium* (White rhinoceros). The main difference between black and white rhinos is the shape of their mouths. White rhinos have broad flat lips for grazing, whereas black rhinos have long pointed lips for eating foliage. ("Wyd" in Dutch was mistakenly interpreted to mean "white" by the English but actually means "wide.")



Today illegal hunting accounts for the vast majority of rhinoceros deaths and poaching throughout the Asian and African continents is largely spurred by demand from wealthy individuals in Asian nations eager to show off their financial success. But antique and gray market products of ambiguous age still thrive around the world as the price of rhino horn increases to more than \$60,000 per kilogram (\$1,700 per ounce).

The most recent thorough and comprehensive studies and census estimates suggest that there are roughly 20,700 white rhino and 4,885 black rhino in Africa, including their subspecies, but as of 2017 the actual number is likely much fewer. South Africa's Kruger National Park is home to between 7,000 and 8,300 of Africa's rhino as of 2016.

The three species of rhino in Asia are also threatened by the demand for rhino horn as a symbol of wealth or to be used as part of traditional oriental medicines. In the wild there are an estimated 3,333 greater one-horned rhino (Indian rhino), fewer than 100 Sumatran rhino, and only around 60 Javan rhino.

in the past five years from his growing rhino herd. Because trade in rhino horn was banned by *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)* and consequently outlawed by the South African government Hume's harvested product is gathering dust in bank vaults. (Ironically there are voices within South African park authorities in favor of pressuring CITES to lift the ban as it has collected 25 tons of rhino horn itself).

CITES is holding strong on its ban, relying instead on rather half-hearted attempts to shame China, Vietnam and other end-user countries into curtailing the illegal trade on their turf.

Hume believes that by putting enough "legally grown" product on the market one would help put the cartels, relying on poached product from slaughtered animals, out of business. His rhino herd grazing on a ranch near Johannesburg grows at a rate of 200 per year and currently numbers 1,260, making it the largest of its kind worldwide.

Hume insists that his is not a profit motive but a sincere effort to save the rhino from extinction. He points out that unless he manages to generate income from selling his homegrown rhino horns the farm will

not be able to sustain itself. Apart from feeding the animals, a substantial amount is needed for security.

Conservationists claim that Hume is at best naïve to think such a supply can keep up with demand and at worst greedy, seeking to exploit one of wildlife's biggest crises to sell his stockpiled horn and become one of the country's richest men.

Since the keratin horn grows back, Hume insists, his rhinos and those of other farmers can produce far more in their lifetime than one slaughtered by poachers ever could.

"It's not the demand for rhino horn that's killing our rhino, it's the way that demand is currently supplied," he told *The Telegraph* in a recent interview. "Up until 2008, we had no rhinos being poached in South Africa because demand was being supplied by legal sales from live rhino. Then they banned that trade and those sales were mirrored by rhino poaching deaths in Kruger National Park."

Recently I was invited to witness the translocation of a rhino from Kruger National Park to a privately owned park elsewhere in the country. Translocating



*Black rhino and calf
Picture: Les de Villiers*



The protectors and the protected near Livingstone, Zambia

Picturss: Les de Villiers

rhinos is seen as one more way of trying to ensure that the species survive. Despite beefed up security patrols Kruger National Park has experienced an alarming rate of killings of its rhino population by poachers. At 7,500 square miles, about the size of Wales, and with a long porous border with neighboring Mozambique, this park is difficult to patrol. Roughly 80 to 90 percent of poachers are from Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world.

The translocation process starts with a helicopter whirring above from where a sharpshooter darts the animal. Minutes later the rhino stumbles and sinks to its knees where rangers await to help it to lie down on its side. From tranquilizer darting to recovery takes less

than 10 minutes so the job of dehorning, drawing blood for testing and checking the condition of the animal has to be done in haste. When the rhino awakens it needs assistance to get back on its feet and guided towards the awaiting container, ready to be loaded on a truck.

Personally, what stuck in my mind's eye afterwards was the trembling of the creature's nostrils, its apparent vulnerability while its horn was cut with an electric saw and ultimately the twitching of its little tail as its was nudged into the steel bin.

Still, this was the lucky one. Just imagine all those unfortunate ones that were shot with bullets instead of darts by poachers to have their horns hacked off with part of their nose bone. Urgency on the part of poachers has nothing to do with working to finish before the animal wakes up but rather detection and apprehension by the authorities.

Not unlike orphans not all translocated rhinos find exciting lives elsewhere. One had to have sympathy for the rhino depicted in the picture above with his round-the-clock guards. Our host at Livingstone in Zambia insisted that we should come and see "their" rhino, freshly brought in from South Africa. Guards on shift stay with him 24/7 to prevent poachers from killing him. So there he was under constant protection snoring away.

The debate on the best way to combat the senseless killing of rhinos

Hornless on a journey from Kruger to a private park



will continue. There is obviously no clear and final answer or conclusion.

Deterring poaching by stepping up enforcement with extra drones, shoot-on-sight policies, and increased militarization of ranger patrols is one way. Like the War on Drugs these measure are, however, also bound to have limited success.

Conservationists agree that the demand for rhino horn must be reduced to bring poaching under control. It will, however, take years to change attitudes, beliefs, and practices in the end-user countries—time that rhinos don't have.

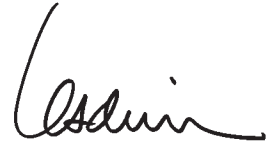
Hopefully we will soon develop more coherence in our efforts to save the rhino. Only then the little bird in the picture below will be able to tell the napping rhino that help is on the way!

In the meantime I am able to tell my safari guests that most everyone of the safari properties that I include in their upscale journeys into Africa devote part of their income to promote rhino conservation.

Obviously I cannot with a clear conscience advise my clients to respond in kind to every non-profit that

claims to promote rhino protection. In this area as with any other good cause there are the prophets and the profiteers. It is a matter of Donor Beware.

By all means support the cause but do your homework first as you would with any other non-profit. Let's all get to work and save these current day prehistoric creatures from joining the dinosaurs into extinction.



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(See my video of the Kruger National National Park translocation of a rhino by clicking on this link).



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Picture: Les de Villiers