

# Is the Darknet a haven for rhino horn traffickers?

In June 2017, the International Police Organisation (INTERPOL) published a report, *The Illegal Wildlife Trade in the Darknet*, concluding that this emerging trend has the potential to grow: "Criminals will always seek to identify new areas to make a profit from their illicit activities and the dark net is no exception." Other early research into the Darknet and wildlife crime suggests that illegal wildlife products are appearing for sale on the Darknet, though it is not easy to identify whether they are fake products or the real deal. To what extent is the internet—whether Darknet or open—supporting the sale of illegal rhino horn?

Katherine Johnston | Former Communications Manager

Most trade in rhino horn is concentrated in China and Viet Nam, the illegal trade's two biggest markets. In this region, illegal wildlife products more broadly can often be sold and bought with impunity. In May of this year, TRAFFIC, the wildlife trafficking monitoring network, published its report, *Wildlife Crime in China: E-Commerce and Social Media Monitoring in 2016*. TRAFFIC's researchers were monitoring publicly accessible websites from the open, or surface, web, i.e. easily searchable websites via google and other indexed browsers.

According to TRAFFIC's findings, between 2012 and 2016, rhino horn products were the second-most advertised illegal wildlife product – 18.1% of the total and second only to ivory – on Chinese websites. Researchers identified the most active website for illegal wildlife products was an 'antiques' online trader site registered in Shanghai: rhino horn trading in plain sight, through the guise of pre-1947 items approved for sale by the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). However, as China's enforcement agencies and large online marketplaces have cracked down on the trade since the resurgent poaching crisis, there are signs that the black market is increasingly moving onto social media networks that are "invitation only" and harder to monitor.

In China, Facebook is blacklisted by the government, but many people continue to access the platform using the Darknet. Both Facebook and WeChat, a Chinese-equivalent social networking site, are used by traders to advertise wildlife products and payments can even be sent via its WeChat Wallet service.

There is growing evidence that social media has helped link up traffickers, wholesalers, and traders across South East Asia, facilitating not just sales to the end users, but rather

the entire trafficking chain. In August 2016, the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC), a Hague-based organisation, released the first details of its year-long investigation into Viet Nam's infamous Nhi Khe Village, identified as a long-standing global hub for the illegal wildlife trade and frequently visited by Chinese tourists. Throughout the course of a year, undercover observers directly recorded US\$42 million in rhino horn (from up to 573 rhinos) for sale. During the same timeframe, the WJC team saw Nhi Khe develop as a transnational trading hub via social media, identifying the use of Facebook, WeChat and WhatsApp. Traders might advertise using more traditional methods such as via a shop front, or online marketing, but then seal the deal on WhatsApp, making use of its encryption services to protect both trader and customer. The investigators also noted that the platforms were useful for cross-border trade as they offer instant voice messaging; removing the tricky issue of using Chinese characters.

Matthew Usher, a Senior Investigator for the Endangered Species Protection Agency (ESPA), says: "I consider it highly probable that we will see a significant increase in the illegal wildlife trade on the dark web, combined with the use of crypto-currencies to facilitate payment on both the open web and hidden services. Promoting awareness amongst the conservation sector will enable us to identify and tackle these issues early."