

CITES and the international rhino horn trade

At this year's CITES CoP (Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species, Conference of the Parties – the international meeting about wildlife trade), Eswatini proposed that the ban on international trade in rhino horn should be lifted. This wasn't the first time that Eswatini had moved to legalise trade: the country had a similar proposal at the last CITES conference in 2016. Both times, the proposals were voted down by a clear majority: 100–26 votes in 2016, and 102–25 votes in 2019.

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But why does Eswatini want an international trade in the first place? There are 66 Southern white rhinos in Eswatini. The 2019 proposal stated that the country would be selling its rhino horn stockpile (approximately 330 kg) and up to 20 kg per year thereafter of harvested horn to retailers in the Far East, where demand for rhino horn is highest.

Selling rhino horn in this way would, Eswatini hoped, provide extra revenue for its two rhino-inhabited national parks, especially with rising security costs to deter poaching activity.

As the 2019 proposal was rejected, this trade will not be going ahead. But in recent years, many have debated the pros and cons of legalising the horn trade:

- Could it help raise more funds that are needed to protect rhinos from poaching?
- Would the demand in the Far East, mainly China and Vietnam, be fulfilled or would demand sky-rocket and fuel poaching in the least protected areas?
- Would enforcement agencies be able to differentiate between legal and illegal horn and stop poached horn leaking into a legal market?

As you may have guessed, there's no single, simple answer to all of the above, nor the many other questions that such trade would pose.

One of the key issues is how to effectively police any legal trade. During the last 12 months, South Africa, which already has a legal domestic trade in rhino horn, has had a number of major seizures of rhino horns destined for South East Asia. If legal horn is leaking onto the black market in one country where the trade is legal, it doesn't necessarily inspire confidence in other countries' abilities to ensure the successful DNA tracking, permit systems and import/export quotas that an international trade would require.



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While poaching has decreased since its peak in 2015, rhinos continue to need round-the-clock protection.

As it stands, a legal trade would not stop poaching overnight.

Furthermore, there are other issues to consider, including the impacts on local communities, rhino population management, and the changing messages from ongoing campaigns in Asia, which have worked to reduce demand for illegal horn.

Those advocating for a legal trade argue that without additional revenue they will not be able to keep rhinos, which could be detrimental for overall rhino populations. Unfortunately – and despite your best fundraising efforts – there is not currently enough funding to provide all the rhino conservancies and national parks with every resource and piece of equipment they need to reduce poaching to zero overnight.

There will always be different ideas regarding the future of rhino conservation and the best methods or approaches to save rhinos. These may not be mutually exclusive. Whichever side of the legal trade page someone is on, the outcome should be the same: a positive future for rhinos. Of course, it's not straightforward when the stakes – the survival or extinction of rhinos – are this high.