



RHINO JEWELLERY THE LATEST ASIAN FASHION FAD

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Your Ferrari is parked conspicuously outside the top five-star hotel in the capital. You are meeting friends for a drink and since it is pleasantly warm you wear a short-sleeved shirt so they won't miss the gold Rolex on your left wrist – they will know it is the real thing. But what about your right arm? Maybe a rhino horn bangle worth the same as the

watch (about USD15,000) would make a good conversation piece; not yet on the must-have list of most of your friends. Not yet.

The feeling when travelling through the key urban centres of Vietnam and China is that wealth is only really accepted when it can be presented in a conspicuous way. Status symbols and lifestyle products are what it is all about and rhino horn jewelry and ivory have become part of this demand characteristic.

We have now visited a household which also serves as a store and workshop on three different occasions. It is about an hour's drive from Hanoi City center. On all three occasions we saw and documented with hidden camera large amounts of raw and semi worked ivory including end-product souvenir and jewelry items and rhino horn products. Even on our first visit, in 2011, we were offered a rhino horn prayer bead bracelet. We watched the demonstration by the owner shining



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN



Top: Rhino with horns cut off on the run
Middle: A Ferrari parked in the streets of Hanoi.
Bottom: Group of Chinese people buying ivory.



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Clockwise from top left: Shining light through beads; Ivory packed in cardboard box; Using calipers to measure ivory ornaments; Marking horn for cutting; A photo of a rhino horn on an Iphone.

Below: Horn bracelet with its center piece.

a torch through one of the beads and explaining how we could ensure it was the genuine article. Pushing open a door in the basement of the house, we entered a bedroom with a wide range of ivory pieces in cardboard boxes. Some of the ivory was already worked into finished bracelets. Since we had arrived during a local holiday the workshop upstairs was closed, however we managed to film a group of Chinese

tourists being brought in by their tour guide buying chop stick sets as well as bracelets. All items were carefully measured with calipers which, together with a digital scale, were part of the paraphernalia for each transaction. When we asked to see some raw rhino horn an Iphone containing images of various horns was pushed into our hands.

On our second visit to the shop earlier this year the story was pretty much the same. This time there were Chinese clients buying the bottom half of a very large rhino horn. They gave their instructions on how to cut it, marking it first with pencil lines which were then followed with a band saw. They explained that these cuts would result in the highest yield of bangles. The inner core would be worked into the beads for prayer bracelets.

We asked where the horn came from and were told Mozambique (the chance being high that it was a Kruger rhino) via Kenya. This was not very surprising with Mozambique having lost its last rhino earlier in the year and this trade route being well established. We were



CONSERVATION



Top Left: Chinese woman looking at painted Ivory.

Middle: Chinese men comparing bangles.

Right: Woman looking at cut horn in a Vietnamese shop.

Below: Carving Ivory



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also told which towns in China the shop owners could deliver to, so Chinese buyers did not have to risk taking the illegal items across an international border. The carvers also pointed out the best land border where it would be easy to cross back into China with their prohibited merchandise.

We also managed to go upstairs to a workshop where they were filing raw ivory into bracelets. We were told that the same machinery would be used to work the rhino horn pieces.

Back downstairs we ended up in the main sales and display room again, looking at various pieces of worked ivory, chop sticks and bangles. There

were a few cardboard boxes half open and when I reached in I pulled out some cylindrical objects painted dark brown with a New Year's wish written on the side in Vietnamese.

The objects were too heavy to be wood and when I asked, it was explained to me that it was ivory disguised as wood to transport it without problem. Not surprisingly, a few months later two Vietnamese travelers were arrested at Jomo Kenyatta airport with exactly

these 'wooden' souvenir items. The story of the minimal sentences they received was well documented in the Kenyan press. I was now convinced the owners of this home and shop were indeed key players in the rhino horn and ivory trade business, not just middlemen and women, but had their own couriers importing for them.

I sent back a local contact with a hidden camera and he met another group of Chinese tourists negotiating to buy items. There was a large chunk of rhino horn with tell-tale pieces cut out of it. My investigator asked if this was the same horn as last time: "No, No. We go through several horns a week and we can no longer keep up with the demand for bangles, selling hundreds of them at about USD 10-15,000 a pop - depending on weight".

All these discussions were recorded and the price remained constant whichever rhino horn items were being discussed. USD 45,000 per kg was the basis for all calculations. Ivory was USD 1,200 per kg. Our man was told that some Chinese buyers purchase up to 10 bracelets in one go and then resell them back home. Considering that rhino horn in a neighbouring village was USD





PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN



Top Left: Photo of provenance in Chinese horn shop.

Right: Fake rhino horn in China.

Below Left: Horn tip signature seals.

Below Right: Tiger claw necklace

20,000 per kg some three years ago, clearly there was and is considerable potential to make a nice profit from an appreciating asset.

We have already established that - at the retail level - approximately 90% of the small pieces of rhino horn sold in the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) shops are fake. In Guangzhou, China, we filmed a shop which had on display more rhino horns than are removed from Africa in a whole year. All of them were fake but advertised as the real thing. Combine these facts with this latest fashion trend and we have

a scenario where all current economic theories on demand and supply of rhino horn go out of the window.

If 90% of the retail market is already fake, then the overall demand is a multiple of the horns coming out of Africa. How will this affect the now heated discussions around legalising the trade? Where might demand level out and how many horns would it take to stabilise prices or bring them down?

These new fashion accessories appear to have become a major source of demand nobody thought of a year or two ago. As further evidence of this diversifying market we also found horn tip signature seals just like the ivory Hankos in Japan. Ivory Hankos historically represented a major demand source for raw ivory and were often cut to the right dimensions at source - in Africa - before being transported

to Japan. What we saw was fake, but again being sold as the real thing. The question is what will come next? The drinking cups and tea sets are already on display in some places. Where and when will it stop?

It seems extinction is the answer, as is happening fast with the tiger, for which similar demand characteristics are in place -- from the tooth or claw set in gold hanging on a yuppie's neck to the popular tiger glue cake which is sold as TCM throughout Vietnam to the pelt making a trophy which one does not have to hide.

I guess the only hope left is in law enforcement at the demand end. In Africa dozens of poachers are already killed annually to protect rhinos and elephants and behind each dead poacher a dozen new and eager candidates seem to line up. This is unlikely to change with prices still on the increase. On the Asian side, current law enforcement efforts are mostly about lip service and window dressing. None of the players we interacted with seemed to be in any way worried about any enforcement official putting them in handcuffs. Clearly the buyers of these rhino horn bangles will not want to hide them in a jewelry box. They have to be worn or the status symbol aspect goes out the window. Showing off these items at the same time says: I am above the law. It seems that showing off an ILLEGAL lifestyle product of this nature gives it even more prestige.

Will the visits to Africa of a Chinese basketball star or a famous Chinese actress get through to the players spending USD 15,000 on a rhino horn

bracelet? Will there be enough time to change this outlook through education?

I discussed this with an established Chinese conservationist in South Africa. She pointed out that the Shatoush shawls from the protected Chiru antelopes had for some time been a status symbol in the West and had contributed to the decline of the wild population. I responded that probably few buyers in India or Nepal had any idea where exactly the wool came from and what the status of the Chiru was. I then went on to tell her that I remember reading a story in Vanity Fair of the US Fish and Wildlife Service actually raiding the homes of socialites to confiscate these shawls and take the owners to court for illegal import or possession.

I suggested we have yet to see this happening to the wealthy consumer in China or Vietnam. Plus, of course, a few hundred wealthy individuals in the West wanting such a shawl did not compare with the tens of thousands of nouveaux-riche in China wanting to show off their wealth. Re-reading the 1999 Vanity Fair story it turned out that the key supplier was a Hong Kong outfit shipping these goods for charity and society auctions in New York.

Top Left: Vanity Fair article

Below: Tiger claws and tiger cake displayed in a hotel shop.



In the overall context though, she had a point. Creating awareness clearly needs to be a key priority. If an awareness campaign is not combined with serious enforcement measures on the ground, however, the effects might be too slow to save our rhinos and

elephants. Maybe raiding a few society homes and getting the story in the Chinese equivalent of Vanity Fair could be a major step in the right direction.

Imagine the scenario with our guy waiting at the bar for his friends, desperate to show off his new acquisition. It would be a major let down if instead of his friends, he is surrounded by police. His expensive rhino horn bracelet and golden Rolex are replaced with metal handcuffs as he's arrested and dragged out past his Ferrari. Eventually his mug shot is exposed to other socialites in the Chinese equivalent of Vanity Fair. At least we can dream...

The documented evidence of our visits to this workshop and sales outlet outside Hanoi has now gone to various international enforcement agencies. Let's see what happens.

More dreaming would be my guess..... ●



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