



They Sell Rhino Horns, Don't They?

Over 40 kg of rhino horns, worth over US\$ 1.2 million in the black market, is stacked away in a couple of storerooms in Chitwan amidst heavy security. How long should this day-night vigil continue?



Strong-room at Gaida Gasti, Chitwan.

become an expensive nuisance.

"We aren't able to store them properly, and we can't get rid of them either," says one official who asked not to be named. A government task force that submitted its

findings in late May reported that the condition of the stored material is poor: the hides stink, furs have disintegrated beyond recognition, and the rhino horns are under constant onslaught from parasites. The highly volatile musk kept in pouches have

the stockpile of horns, bones, skin and musk has increased over the last five years of democracy, the problem has become critical enough to demand a procedure to deal with these highly 'sensitive' products.

Says one of the Nepali wildlife specialists, none of whom want to be named because of what they propose is radical, "Selling the accumulated contraband would provide a massive one-time infusion of funds for conservation in Nepal, whose disbursement would be decided by Nepali specialists themselves

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In an interesting turn of events, some Nepali wildlife scientists now propose that these rhino horns, as well as other seized wildlife contraband such as musk and tiger bones, be sold in the open market for all they are worth, and utilise the income towards the protection and conservation of the very species whose body parts are being sold.

CITES, the international convention governing the trade in wild animals and plants, prohibits the commercial sale of any product from the rhino, which is listed as an endangered species. But Nepali wildlife experts and government officials alike are increasingly concerned over the growing stockpile of animal parts which have

lost much of their mass. While some of the stored cache is from natural animal deaths, most were confiscated from poachers and smugglers.

The task force wrote to the CITES secretariat in Switzerland early this year seeking assistance in deciding the fate of the stockpile. It also sought clear policy guidelines on what to do with future catches. CITES has not responded with satisfactory answers, and the matter hangs in limbo even as the contraband rots further.

Prior to the collapse of the Panchayat system in 1990, all confiscated animal contraband used to find its way to the Royal Palace. Asked as to what happened thereafter, government officials are evasive. As

rather than under the direction of donor agencies."

According to this lobby, the international community should not for the sake of philosophical purity ignore the plight of poor countries like Nepal, which should be allowed to explore every opportunity to boost its under-funded and ailing conservation efforts. "These were Nepali animals that were killed by poachers, and it is logical to use the income so that their death was not in vain," was the view of one expert. "The alternative is to destroy these valuable products on the altar of foreign sensitivities."

Pralad Yonzon, a wildlife biologist who recently returned

from a stint as advisor in Vietnam, when asked to comment on the proposal, concedes that the issue is problematic. "There is no easy answer. As long as demand exists in Indo-China for tiger bones and rhino horn, poaching will continue. So, legalizing the movement of the rhino horn being held by the Nepali authorities is one answer, as long as the trade is carried out by an authorised body under strict international supervision."

Yonzon admits that there is risk attached to any policy deviation: "If Nepal somehow devises a policy and secures international market for its horns, India is going to raise

hell. Tomorrow, every horn seized in Taiwan will be reported to have Nepali origin. Besides, we cannot say that decisions taken in Kathmandu will not affect the well-being of the surviving rhino population from India to Indonesia."

Of the hundreds of rhino species that once roamed the earth only five species survive: the white and black African rhinos; the two-horned Sumatran rhino; the lesser one-horned Javan rhino; and the greater one-horned Indian rhino, of whom 1500 remain with about 400 in Nepal.

While from an economic and nationalistic standpoint, the sale of accumulated contraband might be an

appealing idea, the diplomatic, political and public relations challenges of such a policy put on the Nepali government are enormous. "Getting cash in return for the stockpile would be tantamount to commercial use of the rhino horn," says Shyam Bajimaya at the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, leader of the task force. "A better bargain would be sending some of our stocks to Western museums to be used for educational purposes in return for funds for our conservation projects which urgently require support."

It is not even that CITES has been totally rigid about the disposal of illegal animal

products, and there is a precedent to which the Nepali experts can point to. In 1994, succumbing to pressure from some member states, CITES did allow the disposal of contraband under certain conditions: that disposal should not adversely affect the status of the species in question; it should discourage the unregulated and illegal trade; and such a transaction should be devoid of commercial benefits.

These conditions are stringent, and Nepal would face an uphill task convincing other member states as well as donor agencies (which have a lot of clout in Kathmandu corridors) that there will be no negative fallout if it were to sell off its cache. The international resistance to any such move would be immediate and enormous.

Some African countries, which together have much more clout than Nepal, once had harboured hopes of commercially exploiting their vast stockpiles of ivory. However, they were cold-shouldered in a 1992 CITES general meeting that was held in Kyodo, and the ivory remains shelved.

Yonzon feels that there is no harm for Nepal to at least float the idea of sale or exchange. A controversy would certainly erupt, but the need for change is pressing. "It may give us a bad name initially. But if we do our homework well we may even offer a new model to the world."

It is unlikely, however, that the officials of Nepal's wildlife bureaucracy will find the strength to stand up against the world, even for one point two million dollars.

-Akhilesh Upadhyay