

What's going on with Viet Nam?



Viet Nam is a key consumer country driving the demand for rhino horn, linked to its economic growth and increasing levels of disposable income creating a demand for wildlife products.

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International pressure has increasingly focused on Viet Nam to take strong measures to mitigate this problem. Viet Nam is a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and has made a series of obligations to tackle the illegal trade in rhino horn. The Vietnamese government has indicated at international meetings and to the press that it is fully committed to clamping down on the trade in and consumption of rhino horn.

In December 2012, the governments of South Africa and Viet Nam signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at promoting co-operation between the two countries in conserving and protecting biodiversity, law enforcement and compliance with CITES. Early in 2014, the Vietnamese Prime Minister issued a top-level Directive prioritising enforcement to combat poaching and trafficking of ivory and rhino horn. The same year, Viet Nam also signed the London Declaration requiring countries to treat 'illegal wildlife trade' as a serious crime and enforce strong legislation. The country also took part in the follow up conference in early 2015 in Kasane.

However, the Vietnamese government has a long way to go; current laws are not strong deterrents for environmental crimes. There is a lack of clarity and guidance from the government on current wildlife laws, which has led to a delay in prosecutions. There is also a large knowledge gap of wildlife crime law by many in the judiciary and prosecution service.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has supported the Vietnamese government in the review and revision of the national Penal Code addressing wildlife crime. It is expected that the new Code will be passed in November 2015. In the meantime law enforcement officers must use the existing Code. Education for Nature Vietnam (ENV) explains that this lack of guidance means the police are often only able to log a criminal case (for further investigation) and are still awaiting advice from Central Government before pursuing them further.



There have been media reports of law enforcement agencies making arrests and seizures, however it is difficult to quantify how many arrests and prosecutions have been made, and the level, i.e. are these kingpins or people lower down the chain?

To understand the motivations of rhino horn consumers, a handful of consumer surveys were completed between 2013–15, organised by TRAFFIC and the Humane Society International (HSI). Each survey had a small sample size so the results are not conclusive, but are a useful guide when designing campaigns. Results suggest that only a small number of people in Viet Nam consume rhino horn, however many more would buy it if they could afford to.

TRAFFIC's consumer research identified elite, powerful businessmen as one of the key consumers of rhino horn, who use it as a status symbol to demonstrate their wealth. It is also used for non-traditional purposes such as a miracle cancer cure or a body detoxifier following excessive consumption of alcohol or rich food.

There have been many demand reduction campaigns in Viet Nam, with different approaches and predominately led by the NGO community. There are two types of campaigns – general awareness campaigns and targeted behaviour-change campaigns – with varying messages reaching different people. Save the Rhino has partnered with ENV and TRAFFIC on campaigns since 2013.

There are signs that demand reduction campaigns are having some success, but it will take a lot more to ultimately change the behaviour of rhino horn consumers. Behaviour change is incredibly difficult to measure, especially when small numbers of individuals are involved and it is an illegal activity.

Viet Nam is due to host the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference in 2016, with world leaders and the international press attending. This will be an opportunity for Viet Nam to demonstrate whether it is capable of and is committed to effectively tackling the problem of illegal wildlife trade.