



The debate on rhino horn trading

Africa's rhino population figures are at a critical all-time low. In 2015, CITES reported that only about 19 000 – 21 000 white rhinos and 5 000 – 5 500 black rhinos remain in Africa. Namibia and South Africa have the largest rhino populations, with a total of approximately 2 760 rhinos in Namibia and 20 300 rhinos in South Africa. Smaller rhino populations can be found in Kenya, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Between 2006 and 2015 there were 6 083 reported cases of rhino poaching in Africa.

Rhinos are killed mainly for their horns. According to *The Guardian*, rhino horn fetches up to US \$100,000 (approximately Nam\$1.2 million) per kilo on the black-market, making it worth more than its weight in platinum or gold. Most of the trade in illegal rhino horn makes its way to Asian markets where it is sold for medicinal purposes. In recent years, wildlife criminals have promoted rhino horn as a cure for cancer. In Vietnam, illegal rhino horn is touted as both a status symbol and a hangover cure. However, there is no scientific evidence that rhino horn has any medicinal value.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement between governments which Namibia has adopted. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Since 1977, international trade in rhino horn has been forbidden under the CITES agreement. The provisions of CITES are incorporated into Namibian national law by means of the Controlled Wildlife Products and Trade Act 9 of 2008.

Appendix I of CITES lists all species affected by international trade which are threatened with extinction. Both black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*) and white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) are listed in Appendix I. Species listed in Appendix I are subject to particularly strict regulation in an effort to ensure their survival; trade in these species can be authorized only in exceptional circumstances. For example, annual sport hunting quotas for up to five surplus males in the black rhino population have been approved in Namibia and South Africa, the two nations with the largest black rhino populations.

Whether rhino horn trade should be legalised or remain banned is still a fiercely debated topic. On the one hand, the pro-trade camp argues that legalising the rhino horn trade would put an end to poaching because flooding the market with “legal” horns would reduce the market price and reduce incentives for poachers. They also reason that demand for rhino horn might decrease once it is not so rare, as it will lose its function as a status symbol for the thriving middle-class of Vietnam. Even if demand does not decline, buyers might favour legal and certified rhino horns over illegal horns, thus making trade in illegally-obtained horns unprofitable. Legalising rhino horn trade might also generate funds for conservation efforts which could help to increase existing rhino populations, and it could make “rhino-farming” profitable.

On the other hand, the anti-trade camp argues that legalizing rhino horn trade will increase demand rather than decrease it. For example, more people may want to buy rhino horn once the stigma of buying illegal products is removed, and there is no guarantee that the flooding of the market will decrease the price of rhino horn in the long run. The anti-trade camp uses the example of legal sales of elephant ivory in 2008, after which elephant poaching and ivory trade boomed to the highest levels in history. They assert that prices for ivory spiked because the Chinese government hoarded elephant ivory and doled it out in small amounts at a time. Moreover, even if the price for legal rhino horn did fall, there might still be criminals ready to undercut the market price for their personal profit.

Furthermore, legalising and promoting rhino trade while current awareness campaigns are trying to dissuade people from purchasing and using rhino horn would send a mixed and inconsistent message to consumer groups.

Another argument against rhino horn trade is the lack of mechanisms in place for distinguishing “legal” horns from “illegal” horns. Consequently, without rigorous monitoring, a legal trade route could also facilitate illegal trading for poachers.

A related topic of debate concerns the wisdom of dehorning rhinos to prevent poaching, amidst concerns that this may undermine the wellbeing of the animals. Rhinos use their horns to defend their territories and calves from other predators, for maternal care and to dig for water. Removal of the horn may weaken the ability of a bull rhino to maintain territory or status. Dehorning might also decrease the value of rhinos for tourism.

The debate on the legalisation of rhino horn trade is based mainly on assumptions. Increases in poaching indicate that the 1977 international ban on rhino horn has become ineffective. Yet, when Swaziland submitted a proposal in 2016 to CITES to lift the ban on the trade in the horns of white rhinos, CITES members overwhelmingly rejected the proposal. The reason for the proposal’s rejection was arguably the realisation that no one can predict the impact of legalising rhino horn trade on the already critical numbers of rhino in Africa.

Without a doubt, the debate on rhino horn trade will continue, but in the interim, the most effective mechanisms to save the rhino species from extinction are a strong political commitment to do so, an effective law enforcement strategy against wildlife crime syndicates and of course, powerful campaigns raising awareness about the illegal trade in wildlife products, both here at home and abroad.

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