



Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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RHINO POACHING

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

After the infamous 'Rhino Wars' of the 1980s and early 1990s, when the slaughter of rhinos for their horns was merciless, conservation efforts reduced poaching to impressively low levels. But it's on the rise again – South Africa alone is now losing about three rhinos every day. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that this is unsustainable.

WHO BUYS RHINO HORN?

Rich Vietnamese collect rhino horn carvings as a display of wealth, or an investment, and drink rhino horn wine ('the alcoholic drink of millionaires'). In Vietnam and China it is also used in traditional Chinese medicine, mainly to reduce fever, but also for everything from snakebite and hangovers to blurry vision and devil possession; some even claim it cures cancer.

DOES IT WORK?

No, it's made of keratin – a fibrous protein – which is also the main constituent of hair, fingernails, hooves and feathers. Tests in western laboratories find no evidence for its supposed medical properties – chewing your own fingernails would have as much medicinal value. The claim that it is used as an aphrodisiac is an urban myth.

WHY HAS THERE BEEN A SUDDEN RESURGENCE IN POACHING?

There is an insatiable appetite for rhino horn in Asia, with a potential market of 1.5 billion users. Political turmoil and civil unrest in Africa means

a breakdown in law and order and easy availability of guns; the Chinese are also increasingly involved in mining and road-building projects. Poaching has become more high-tech, and there is a failure of some countries to prosecute rhino poachers successfully.

HOW MANY ARE LEFT?

A century ago there were 500,000 rhinos roaming Africa and Asia. Now there are fewer than 30,000: 20,700 southern white, 5,000 black, 3,500 Asian one-horned, 100 Sumatran, 60 Javan and just three northern white rhinos.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO PROTECT THEM?

Conservation efforts have improved dramatically since the Rhino Wars. Major user countries, including Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Yemen, have implemented trade bans and successful awareness campaigns. More recently, China has started to tackle the problem and traditional medicine practitioners are increasingly promoting alternative ingredients (though the same can't be said of Vietnam). Meanwhile, anti-poaching efforts are more professional and widespread.

WHAT ABOUT THE ARGUMENT FOR LEGAL TRADE?

All international trade in rhino horn has been banned since 1977 (with a few exceptions). But South Africa and others



Demand for horn in Asian countries once again threatens rhinos.

are pushing for 'one-off' sales of their stockpiles (harvested from live rhinos and confiscated from poachers). Also, many of South Africa's rhinos are on private ranches and the farmers want an international market for their harvested horns. The argument is that legal trade would flood the market, thus reducing the incentive to poach, and would generate funds for conservation.

WOULD THIS WORK?

No. There is no way of distinguishing between legal and illegal horns, it would more likely cause an explosion in demand (which is what happened after one-off sales of elephant ivory) and it could even create new users, by removing the social stigma of buying illegally. With so many potential customers, it will never be possible for supply to outstrip demand and, of course, it would send out mixed messages – is rhino horn legal or not?

SO WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

There is no magic bullet. The only long-term solution is to eliminate demand but, meanwhile, anti-poaching operations are critical to keep rhinos alive. One thing is certain – if we don't up our game urgently, there will be none left to save.



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MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

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Rhino poaching statistics: <http://bit.ly/10Jw6uG>