

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Horns of a dilemma

The plan to inject rhino horns with a dangerous chemical cocktail to make them worthless to poachers (Analysis, April 2012) is getting out of hand.

Sabi Sand Reserve, in South Africa, is the most recent advocate of this drastic measure. Its poison of choice, an ectoparasiticide normally used for the treatment of ticks, is not lethal in small quantities but will make anyone ingesting it in Traditional Chinese Medicine seriously ill.

I can understand the feeling of desperation. By early May, 292 rhinos had already been killed by poachers in South Africa alone this year, and Sabi Sand lies at the epicentre of rhino poaching – next to Kruger National Park and close to the border with Mozambique, where most poachers come from. So creating some kind of 'voodoo' around rhino horns may seem like a good idea.

But I'm not convinced that it's the answer.

For a start, not all rhinos can be treated in this way, so – far from putting an end to poaching – it is likely to displace it to other areas. Then there is the problem of retribution killings: many dehorned rhinos have been killed in the past as a matter of principle and to dissuade other reserves from following suit.

I have little sympathy with the consumers of rhino horn, but I do worry about them, too. Poisoning the horns is an accident waiting to happen – an unintended death would be tantamount to murder or manslaughter. Admittedly, the good people at Sabi have put up signs and informed local villagers to spread the word, and they are injecting a pink dye to warn potential consumers that the horn is dangerous. But who's to say that



Should rhino horns be poisoned?

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unscrupulous dealers won't simply 'bleach' the horn back to its normal colour?

The absurdity of it all, of course, is that rhino horn doesn't actually work: aspirin does the job of bringing down fevers much more effectively and cheaply.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.