

Rhinos and daggers: a major conservation problem

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North Yemen still imports rhino horn to make dagger handles, despite the government ban in 1982. As rhino numbers continue on their precipitous decline, it is imperative that conservationists act now. Protection of rhinos *in situ* is failing as poachers take more and more risks for greater financial gain. The author proposes urgent action, which includes exerting pressure on the appropriate governments.

Since 1970, there has been a decline of approximately 80 per cent in African rhino numbers, due primarily to poaching. The number of northern white rhinos has fallen from many hundreds to fewer than 50, while that of black rhinos has decreased from 65,000 to 8800 (Western and Vigne, 1984; Martin and Martin, 1985).

In recent years, the supply of rhino horn to South-East Asia, traditionally the major market, has been severely cut, thanks to stricter controls on the trade and a decrease in the demand for it as a fever-reducing drug. Now, about half of all the rhino horn sold annually is going to one country—North Yemen. There are no official statistics, and some traders dealing in rhino horn refuse to discuss their imports to North Yemen, but it is highly probable that over 1.25 tonnes of rhino horn have entered the country annually since 1980.

Thus, the single most serious problem confronting rhino conservation today is the illegal trade of the horn to North Yemen. It is indeed time for conservation organizations to make a major effort to stop this. To date, much of the money poured into tropical Africa to try to help protect rhinos *in situ* has accomplished little. This is because 198

poachers and middlemen are willing to take more and more risks in supplying rhino horn to North Yemen, since the demand is so great and the financial return is so profitable.

In August 1982, importing rhino horn to North Yemen became illegal but the law was not enforced (Martin, 1984). Customs officials at the airport in Sanaa, the capital, paid no attention to rhino horn and simply let it pass by. However, by 1983, the sum handed over to an intermediary to clear a 50-kg consignment of rhino horn through Customs was US\$130. On my most recent trip to North Yemen in late 1984, I discovered that, earlier that year, 60 kg of rhino horn left Mombasa by dhow for Djibouti; from there, a Somali took it in metal boxes as personal luggage on a flight to Sanaa, and the Customs authorities at the airport seized it. The trader who told me this said that, when he found out about it, he contacted a 'friend' who got the rhino horn for him from Customs by paying 7000 rials (US\$1230). Then, he sold it to a prominent dagger maker in the Sanaa souk for US\$705 per kg, slightly lower in price than rhino horn cost in North Yemen in 1983 due to the approximate 20 per cent devaluation of the rial. Nevertheless, it cost eight times as much to clear the consignment through Customs, and this indicates that the authorities are beginning to recognize rhino horn as an illegal commodity and are putting some pressure on the importers.

During 1984, the North Yemen Government was far more successful than in previous years in cutting back the vast quantities of consumer goods, fuel and vehicles that illegally entered the country without taxation. In putting more effort

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into law enforcement, there is reason to believe that the authorities could make rhino horn imports considerably more difficult and expensive.

The above mentioned 60-kg rhino horn consignment was of good quality; the horns weighed between 0.75 kg and 3.5 kg each, had come from recently killed rhinos and had not been damaged by insects. Large rhino horns are more economic for carving into dagger handles, but even the small pieces and shavings left over from carving can be resold. Merchants in Sanaa export them to eastern Asia for medicinal purposes, and there is no law in North Yemen against the re-export of rhino horn. There should be one; if enforced, it would further reduce profit-making from dealing in rhino horn.

Although less than 10 per cent of the daggers made in North Yemen have handles of rhino horn (Martin, 1984), these are the kind that are in greatest demand, and the retailers say they could sell twice as many. It is therefore imperative that the daggers with cow or water buffalo horn handles should be made more attractive to buyers. This could be done by fitting better quality blades and adding more elaborate and expensive decoration. If all import duties and taxes were eliminated on cow and water buffalo horns, artisans would be encouraged to use them exclusively, but there would also have to be greater constraints against using any rhino horn. This might be achieved by passing a new law forbidding the possession of raw rhino horn. In order to enforce it, government officers would have to visit the dagger makers' premises, but, since the majority of these are located in one section of the Sanaa souk, this would be relatively easy to do. It should also be explained to the craftsmen why they should not use rhino horn; few of them know anything at all about rhinos. Although cynics might say that the craftsmen probably do not care, co-operation is usually gained more readily if people understand the reason behind legislation.

Most buyers of daggers with rhino horn handles are wealthy men living in Sanaa. In the next largest cities, Hodeidah and Taiz, the majority of the male population does not wear any kind of dagger in daily dress; the men are more modern

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The main entrance to the Sanaa souk is through this imposing gate called the Bab al Yemen (Esmond Bradley Martin).

in their outlook, perhaps because they have had greater exposure to the outside world. The demand for daggers with rhino horn handles is traditional and tribal, and it is most evident in the northern half of the country. In Sanaa, where the demand is greatest, the people who can afford such daggers usually have radios and television in their homes. Propaganda programmes against rhino horn would reach them, and anthropologists working in North Yemen would probably be able to suggest how these could be made most successful.

These and other strategies are feasible means of tackling North Yemen's rhino horn trade, but they cannot be initiated without the active



Daggers are sold in open air stalls inside the walls of the Sanaa souk (Esmond Bradley Martin).



support of the Government. The African Wildlife Foundation in Washington DC strongly lobbied the North Yemen Government to persuade it to declare rhino horn imports illegal, further backed by help from the American Ambassador in Sanaa, who discussed the issue with most of the Government's senior officials. A similar approach is now needed to have that law more strictly enforced and to try to discourage the demand for daggers with rhino horn handles.

In negotiating with the North Yemen Government, it is extremely important to emphasize that, unlike ivory carvers in Asia, the North Yemeni artisans working with rhino horn will not lose their livelihood or lower their incomes if they stop using it because so few daggers are made with rhino horn handles. Also, the importers do not survive
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solely on the trade in rhino horn, but have other sources of income.

Along with reducing imports of rhino horn to North Yemen, more effort needs to be placed on stopping the trade from source countries in Africa. In the middle and late 1970s the majority of the rhino horn that entered North Yemen originated from East Africa. Around 1980 Zambia and the Sudan also became important suppliers. In 1983 most of the horn came from Khartoum traders who had purchased it from middlemen who, in turn, had obtained it from southern Sudan, Tanzania and probably Zambia. By the end of 1983, however, the 'Khartoum Connection' became less significant because the Sudanese Government cracked down on the illicit exports from their capital city. In fact, two businessmen in

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Left: A North Yemeni craftsman chews a wad of qat while carving a piece of rhino horn into a dagger handle (Esmond Bradley Martin).

Right: Most men in the northern part of North Yemen wear daggers as part of their daily dress. The sheaths and belts holding them are often finely decorated (Esmond Bradley Martin).



Sanaa complained to me that it was becoming extremely difficult to move rhino horn out of the Khartoum airport. In the last few months of 1983 and in the first half of 1984, according to one prominent trader in Sanaa, the majority of the horn was coming from Djibouti (by air and by dhow) and Europe, having originated mostly from East Africa, Zambia and the Central African Republic. In 1983 one kg of rhino horn cost about US\$390 in Djibouti, considerably less than in Khartoum, but by 1984 the price in Djibouti had risen to US\$450.

Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Zambia and the Central African Republic are members of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), which prohibits commercial trade in rhino products; however, Djibouti is not a signatory to this international convention. As Djibouti is the major entrepôt for rhino horn destined for the North Yemen market, the conservation community should exert influence to stop this commerce by approaching Djibouti Government officials and requesting assistance from the merchants based there. If such efforts fail, then it might be worth-
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while mounting an international media campaign to embarrass the officials for allowing such trade to continue.

During the past 15 years, the decline of the rhino has probably been more acute than that of any other large mammal in Asia or Africa. It is almost ironic that international conservation organizations have, in this same period, spent very large sums to help control the ivory trade. There are at least 750,000 elephants in Africa as compared to 12,800 rhinos, and trade in rhino horn, most particularly that to North Yemen, is the greatest threat to the survival of this animal. When will the international conservation organizations respond to this major wildlife challenge?

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