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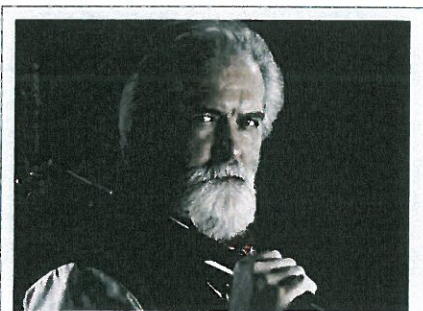
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SLAUGHTER ON THE SAVANNA

Greed and the enduring power of myth are fueling an appalling increase in rhino poaching. Is legalizing the horn trade the answer?



Protecting rhinos from poachers is getting increasingly more difficult as prices for horns on the black market have skyrocketed.



Shane Mahoney

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.

Rhino horn is now worth more than cocaine or gold. A single horn can sell for half a million dollars if delivered to the right customers—usually in Southeast Asia, though increasingly to a wider range of countries. Not surprisingly, the illegal killing of these animals has escalated ferociously in the last number of years, and horrific images of the great brutes disfigured by chainsaws now appear frequently in news reports. Indeed, as though to test both human credulity and the limits of our greed and cruelty toward animals, some have their faces sliced open while still alive, either having been anesthetized or critically wounded but not immediately killed.

Indeed, an unfortunate few of these animals survive for short periods of time in agony that can only be imagined, their mangled faces appearing as grotesque, infected masks. Their disfigurement reflects with brutal poignancy the capacity for human demand, corruption, and greed to imperil wildlife. In the case of rhinos, it is neither food, nor the thrill of pursuit, nor the capture of beauty that underlies the demand for their horn. Rather, it is the enduring power of myth, and as prices

escalate, the seduction of status conveyed by conspicuous consumption of a rare and costly commodity.

Since ancient times, this remarkable animal has been imbued with mystical properties and its horn valued as the symbol of its power. Sought in Yemen and Oman for dagger handles and in China especially as a traditional cure for human ailments including diminished libido and even cancer, the horn has more recently become fashionable as a party drug mixed with wine and as a hangover cure for the *nouveau riche* in places like Vietnam. Never mind that the horn is composed, like human fingernails, of keratin, and has no known medicinal properties or that a single shot of the “cure” for a night’s overindulgence in alcohol can cost up to \$400—the market is insatiable. As Southeast Asian economies expand and wealth accumulates, demand can only increase.

A sophisticated network of criminal elements ranging from speculators to corrupt customs officials now work to provide middlemen and consumers with the product they demand. As with elephant ivory, as rhino horn prices escalate, paramilitary groups have also become involved, using profits from rhino horn sales to finance their campaigns of terror and human destruction. This new criminal sophistication is making the job of protecting rhinos much more difficult and dangerous. No longer having to deal only with bands of poorly equipped locals, game wardens now face the hardened elements of organized crime syndicates capable of financing cross-border raids between countries, such as the well-known incursions of poachers from Mozambique into South Africa’s Kruger National Park.

Keeping ahead of the demand for rhino horn and its ever-expanding cartel of peddlers has been a constant challenge. In Europe, far from Africa’s killing fields,

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criminal elements like Ireland's so-called Rathkeale Rovers have emerged to either steal existing horns or mounted rhino specimens from museums and private collections or take advantage of potential loopholes in the law by acquiring legally sold trophy mounts from auction houses and then exporting the horn as part of the illicit trade.

In Africa, two species of rhino exist, the black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*), numbering approximately 5,000 animals, and the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simium*), numbering around 20,000 or slightly more. The majority of both species (about 98 percent) exist in four range states: South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. South Africa alone harbors about 83 percent of all Africa's rhinos, making it by far the most important rhino stronghold on the continent. In the case of both species of rhinos, their numbers today are a far cry from historic levels, although—and this is an important point—much improved over circumstances of only a few decades ago. Although colonial

settlement and agricultural expansion as well as early sport hunting reduced rhino numbers to some degree historically, there is no doubt that poaching has been the overwhelming factor influencing rhino population declines over the last half century. Certainly, as well, poverty, civil unrest, and the flow of weapons and the shadow of war have all, at various times, assisted in the illegal trade.


Thus, in this sense, the current crisis is nothing new. Indeed it was the dramatic increase in rhino poaching and declines in rhino numbers in the 1970s that led CITES, the Committee for the International Trade in Endangered Species, to enact a ban on the trade of all rhino products worldwide. The value of this initiative in deterring rhino poaching is much debated. Regardless, it was almost certainly the aggressive conservation and relocation efforts undertaken by a consortium of NGOs, government agencies, and private landowners in the 1980s that made the greatest difference in arresting further declines and which even-

tually led to an increase in rhino numbers. These efforts were directed at placing rhinos in private and government-run sanctuaries where funds and personnel for protection could be effectively concentrated.



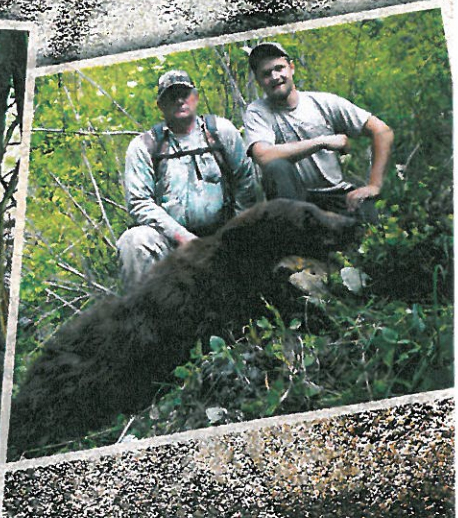
In the 1990s, further efforts were made to assist the rhino populations and deter illegal killing and trade, including dehorning programs to render animals less attractive to poachers and considerable biological research to better monitor populations as well as efforts to include local communities in conservation efforts. While these conservation programs assisted African rhino populations and led to increases almost every year since 1991, illegal killing of rhinos has exploded in recent years, lowering significantly the rate of increase in their still-low numbers. The renewed fervor for rhino horn is easy to explain. While rhino horn sold for perhaps \$2,100 per pound in 1993, it now sells for as much as \$30,000 per pound, making it one of the most valuable commodities in

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the world—more than gold (approximately \$20,000 per pound).

While it is difficult to obtain exact totals, a reasonable estimate would place the number of rhinos poached across Africa since 2006 at perhaps 2,400 animals. While this may not seem a huge number, it must be considered in light of an entire population of no more than 25,000 animals and the increasing levels of poaching that are now evident. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), rhino poaching in Africa increased by about 43 percent between 2011 and 2012 alone and in the latter year, 745 rhinos were reported poached! Early indications are that 2013 may be even worse. Not surprisingly, it is in their stronghold of South Africa where the poaching of rhinos has increased most dramatically. By 2010, the poaching rate there had exceeded one rhino killed illegally *per day*. By 2012, this number had almost doubled.

The effect of this illegal take has been to slow significantly the population growth of both rhino species to some of their lowest levels since the mid-1990s. If these trends continue, some experts predict that rhinos could be extinct in the wild within twenty years. This has led many to argue that we should legalize the sale of rhino horn, essentially farming the species and humanely shaving the horns of living animals. Proponents of legalization point out that the current ban on trade has not worked and that the demand for rhino horn is not likely to decrease. Legalization, they argue, would limit the power of criminal elements, make monitoring more transparent, and further, would require greater areas of land to be set aside for rhino farming, thus benefitting other wildlife species. Such an approach has worked remarkably well in the case of crocodiles where legalization of the sale of skins rescued the species from near extinction.

Others argue differently, however, saying we are incapable of controlling the

trade when it is illegal and that we would be just as ineffective at preventing any legal trade from laundering illegally taken horn. Poachers, they attest, would always undersell the legal supply. After all, with so few rhinos in the wild today, it would take a long time indeed to satisfy the demand through farming.

Such are the dilemmas we face in modern wildlife management. The issues are becoming ever more complex; our choices ever more stark. For those of us in the hunting world, there can be no safe haven, no option to avoid engaging such debates. After all, the future of hunting is tied inevitably to such decisions. So, where do we stand? Explaining that revenues from our limited number of trophy hunts can assist rhino conservation is surely worthwhile, but is surely not enough. What say you? Should we farm the great beasts or not? One way or another, the slaughter will continue until we alter the course of events.



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