

Poaching for luxury products

Generally speaking, the horn from rhinos killed in East Africa tends to end up in the Yemen, where it is made into ornamental handles for daggers (jambiyas) while horn from rhinos poached in southern Africa (as well as from those poached in Asia) makes its way to the Far East where it is used in traditional medicine.

Although jambiyas can have handles made of a range of substances, such as precious metals, buffalo or plastic, and can be decorated with gemstones, those made of rhino horn are regarded as the "Rolex" or 'Porsche" versions.

Poaching of rhinos for use for jambiyas first became a major problem in the 1970s, when OPEC pushed up oil prices in Saudi Arabia, increasing demand for Yemeni workers, who remitted huge amounts of money back to Yemen, some of which was spent on buying expensive jambiyas. Demand for rhino horn surged, resulting in a major crash in rhino populations. After a few years of some remission in the late 1990s, rhino poaching has again intensified in both Africa and Asia. In Eastern and Central Africa, poaching of both black and southern white (the latter an introduced subspecies) saw a resurgence in Kenya from 2001 and has virtually or actually exterminated the Northern white rhino in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Since 1978 Esmond Martin has studied the illegal trade in rhino horn between East Africa and the Yemen; since 1983 with his colleague Lucy Vigne. Making trips every two years or so, they have monitored the black market in rhino horn, the supply chains, the illegal workshops and the buyers of the finished jambiyas.

Their most recent trip was in 2002 and their findings are summarised below:

Almost all rhino horn that entered the Yemen from 1998-2002 originated from rhinos killed in Kenya, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the late 1990s there was little recorded poaching in eastern Africa, but in 2002 Kenya experienced the worst poaching for over 12 years. An estimated minimum of 46 rhinos was killed between 1998 and 2002 in these three countries. From this figure, Esmond estimates that the potential weight of rhino horn that may have reached the Yemen to be an average of 29 kilograms per annum.

Poaching methods are mainly snaring and shooting by rifles. Most horns are smuggled to Djibouti and then by dhow to the Yemeni coast amongst consignments of consumer goods, which are illicitly moved to Sanaa. The price of horn has increased from US \$519-650 per kilo when exported from Kenya, to US \$750 when it arrives in Djibouti, and US \$1,200 per kilo when it reaches Sanaa (2002 figures). The Sanaa US dollar price for horn has remained the same since around 1985.

In 2002 the number of workshops, where rhino horns are made into traditional dagger (jambiya) handles, was 70 and the number of craftsmen 102. This has increased since 1985 as the population grows. Nearly all handles however are made of water buffalo horn, while the number of new rhino horn handles being made has fallen significantly. This is mainly due to the shortage of rhino horn on the market.

In 2002 the Yemeni government brought in proper legislation to implement CITES' ban on the rhino horn trade, and has expanded its staff involved in wildlife conservation at the upgraded Environment Protection Agency.

Rhinos are not the only animals poached for products that are regarded as luxury items. Elephants are killed for their ivory; gorillas for their hands which are used to make grotesque ashtrays; snow leopards for their skins; birds of paradise for their plumes. These are just some of the many, many examples.

(With thanks to Esmond Martin and Lucy Vigne for their supporting information.)

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