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THE RHINOCEROS HORN TRADE: CONSIDERING LEGALIZATION

Kent Walker and Kara Kristof wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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It was December 2018 and with the new year around the corner, Simon Jones, chief executive officer (CEO) and founder of Helping Rhinos, considered all the major developments that had occurred in the “rhino world” over the past year. After repeated legal battles between the government and rhinoceros (rhino) horn farmers, the trade of rhino horn had become legal in South Africa. However, the farmers were not content: they wanted a global or multi-nation legalization of the trade.

Helping Rhinos, a non-governmental organization (NGO), was focused on spreading awareness and education about rhinos, or “rhinocation” as the organization called it. The organization was opposed to global or multi-nation legalization of the rhino horn trade, and it appeared that many people outside of South Africa agreed. However, the complexity of the rhino’s circumstances was constantly changing and with legalization of the trade, Jones felt he needed to update his opinion and determine whether legalization was now in the best interest of the rhinos. As it stood, while current efforts were making modest improvements, wild African rhinos were expected to be extinct by 2026 at the latest.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jones wanted to consider all the information from various stakeholders and recommend to the board of directors, consisting of Jones and three other members, whether the organization, in its efforts to help save the rhino from extinction, should continue opposing legalization or change its approach and advocate for multi-nation legalization. Such a shift would be significant, requiring changes to the organization’s education materials used in schools and a drastic change in its message to Western societies, focused primarily in the United Kingdom.

The Rhino-Killing Epidemic

Poaching was the illegal act of catching or hunting game or fish on land that was not one’s own or flouting official protection of that game or fish. Rhinos had become prime targets of poaching, killed to harvest their horns, which were highly desired on the international market. Consequently, the population of rhinos had dramatically decreased with three of the five species considered to be critically endangered and two species vulnerable to extinction if circumstances did not change imminently.[[2]](#endnote-2) The International Rhino Foundation reported, “At the start of the 20th century, 500,000 rhinos roamed the wild. By 1970, the worldwide population fell to 70,000. Today, only 29,500 rhinos survive in the wild.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The population of black rhinos, one of the critically endangered species, had decreased by 97 per cent just since 1960.[[4]](#endnote-4) Distressingly, it was estimated that four to five rhinos were killed each day for their horns.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Rhino poaching was a long-standing issue, but it had not been a significant problem before 1970. South Africa permitted rhino horn trade, but later in the 1970s, with awareness of the rapidly declining population of rhinos, the problem became so large that an international convention banned the trade of rhino horns in efforts to protect the species. In 2009, South Africa placed a moratorium on legalized trade within the country. The trade moved to the black market, prices for rhino horn increased, and a new and crushing wave of poaching was overwhelming anti-poaching efforts.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Factors that drove demand for rhino horns included Chinese medicinal beliefs, stemming from a 2,000-year-old Asian medical book, that rhino horn, ground into a powder, was an aphrodisiac and a curative, purportedly treating fever, hangovers, and even cancer. Modern medicine had confirmed that there were no medicinal benefits from the consumption of rhino horn; however, the stubborn belief in its medicinal benefits persisted. The rhino horn was also prized for carvings—its translucent, lustrous quality improved with age—and it became a socioeconomic status symbol in Vietnam and China.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Rhino horns were made of the protein keratin, found in hair, fingernails, and animal hooves. Uniquely, rhino horns did not have a bony core covered by keratin but were composed of keratin throughout the full horn. Thick deposits of calcium in the centre of the horn provided its strength; deposits of melanin protected the core from degradation by solar radiation.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Throughout the early 2000s, trade in rhino horns had become a topic of growing concern among governments, environmentalists, hunters, and scientists. Black-market demand for the horns had increased dramatically from year to year with prices on a per kilogram basis rising above the prices charged for cocaine, diamonds, gold, and platinum. In 2015, rhino horns sold for a reported US$60,000[[9]](#endnote-9) per pound ($27,216 per kilogram).[[10]](#endnote-10) The steady rise in price was mostly attributed to supply and demand; the relentless decrease in the number of rhinos paralleled an avaricious growth in worldwide demand, particularly in Vietnam. The demand and price for rhino horns even created an illegal fake horn industry where people learned how to cast fake rhino horns and sold them for the same price as authentic horns.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The epidemic of rhino poaching mirrored the previously dire situation of the South American vicuña. The animal’s wool was known as the finest in the world and was in demand by Italian fashion houses. This reputation made vicuña wool one of the most expensive materials in the world. Centuries before, vicuñas had been considered sacred, and their wool was harvested with harmless shearing, but modern poachers targeted the animals for their hides and threatened the people protecting the vicuñas. Sustainable shearing was abandoned due to the threats and the paltry financial return. The communities that worked directly with the animal were extremely poor and received scant profit from farming and sustainably shearing the wool.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The situation for the vicuñas changed dramatically, however, with legalization of the trade of vicuña wool, coupled with increased attention, conservation programs, and local, national, and international controls. After the vicuñas were identified as being critically endangered, a campaign began to “shear the vicuña to save the vicuña,” bringing attention to the nature of wool as a renewable resource. Local communities began to corral the vicuñas, shear them, and immediately release them back into their habitats. Income from sales went back into the communities and to conservation efforts. Legalization of the vicuña wool trade was a moderate success and had since become the prime example used by rhino horn conservationists in favour of legalizing the rhino horn trade. Similar to the rhinoceros horn trade, dwindling numbers of vicuñas and continuous poaching continued to result from the illegal trade of hides; the illegal market was fostered by penetrable borders, poorly trained customs officers (unable to tell vicuña wool from llama and alpaca wool), and the negligent prosecution of offenders.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The Nature of the Rhinoceros

Rhinos were divided into five main species. The Javan rhino was the rarest of the rhino species, found only in Ujung Kulon National Park in Indonesia. Javan rhinos were considered to be critically endangered. As of December 2018, only 67 of the species remained. These rhinos were very susceptible to natural disease and disasters. Also critically endangered, the Sumatran rhino was considered the most endangered due to its small and rapidly declining population. Increased poaching was causing a stark decline in its numbers, leaving small, fragmented populations found only in protected zones in Indonesia. Fewer than 80 Sumatran rhinos remained as of December 2018. Greater one-horned rhinos were more numerous, with more than 3,500 in India and Nepal as of December 2018. Their population was increasing from a low of 200 in 1900 as a result of intensive conservation efforts.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Black rhinos, which, in fact, were not black, had dramatically declined by 96 per cent over 20 years, dropping from an estimated 65,000 in Africa in 1970 to 2,300 in the wild by 1993. Intensive efforts to limit poaching and protect black rhinos were slowly increasing the black rhino population, but the threat of poaching remained great. Approximately 5,400 black rhinos existed in the wild across Africa as of December 2018. White rhinos, which were not white but had likely been named so due to a mispronunciation of the Afrikaan name for the species, had a population of around 20,000 in 2018—representing a huge recovery from only 100 white rhinos in the 1900s. White rhinos were considered the least threatened of the species; however, only one of the two subspecies of white rhinos—the southern white rhino—remained. The northern white rhino was extinct in the wild and only two females remained in captivity.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In the wild, a black rhino lived an average of 30–35 years,[[16]](#endnote-16) while a white rhino lived approximately 50 years.[[17]](#endnote-17) Female rhinos reproduced only every two-and-a-half to five years, typically producing only one calf with each gestation, though they did occasionally have twins. The young calves stayed with their mothers for two to four years,[[18]](#endnote-18) after which the young rhinos usually travelled alone, especially during the day. Some rhinos lived in extended family groups, called “crashes,” of up to six animals. Typically, the female rhinos and calves stayed together while bulls travelled alone.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Rhinos had a reputation for being ill-tempered and solitary, but scientists equipped with night vision cameras had recently discovered that rhinos were quite social at night, meeting in groups of up to 16 every night. The cameras observed the rhinos kissing, cuddling, and flirting with one another. An example of one of these recorded interactions showed a young male rhino picking up antelope horns with its own horns to impress a female. (In return for his chivalry, the female pretended to sleep.)[[20]](#endnote-20) This social interaction was not observed during the day. During the day, the only interactions seen were those between the rhino and oxpeckers, the tick-eating birds that rode on the backs of rhinos, providing the rhinos with pest control.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Simon Jones and Helping Rhinos[[22]](#endnote-22)

Jones had worked in the corporate world for 24 years and, despite a busy career, he had spent some of that time in Africa. In 2012, during a six-week conservation project at the Kariega Game Reserve in South Africa, Jones had witnessed a poaching attack that killed three of the reserve’s rhinos. The experience changed Jones’s life, and a six-week mission quickly turned into the organization Helping Rhinos and a lifelong conservation effort.

Jones founded Helping Rhinos in 2012. At that time, concern about rhino poaching was only starting to pick up, and Jones initially found it difficult to find people to help in his efforts. Since then, the poaching problem had grown to be a full-blown crisis, but it was still difficult to retain volunteers when they learned of the tasks required to truly help the rhinos. Conservation was not about cuddling a baby rhino; rather, it was about stopping poachers from shooting and killing the animals.

Fundraising was also a challenge. As the poaching crisis became more well known, donor fatigue set in. However, donations spiked as the result of dramatic media coverage, such as stories about rhinos being poached from European zoos for their horns. In 2018, the organization’s finances had grown to produce an annual surplus after expenses of approximately £250,000.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Jones believed it was crucial to consider how the organization operated. Relying on handouts was not an effective practice for the survival of either the rhinos or the organization. Instead, Jones treated Helping Rhinos as a business to try to create long-term viability and generate more surplus cash to help the rhinos. The organization also worked with local communities, offering them a role in conservation and involvement in the organization’s efforts.

Over the years, Jones developed a seven-part strategy called “Innovation in Conservation.” The “seven saviours” of the strategy included habitat, protection, community, education, research, political advocacy, and funding. For Helping Rhinos, *habitat* extended to preserving the land for wildlife and humans, locally and globally. *Protection* was addressed primarily through anti-poaching units. For *community*, the organization understood that working with and empowering people would galvanize greater community ownership and generate positive response to the overall effort. *Education* of the African population and throughout the world was crucial; to this end, Helping Rhinos distributed school materials in Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. *Research* was required to better understand which conservation models were effective. *Political advocacy* was necessary to lobby politicians, who could directly influence change through legislation. Finally, as an international NGO, a key role for Helping Rhinos was to secure *funding* to carry out the other six steps. Helping Rhinos was committed to a sustainable funding model that reduced reliance on traditional donor commitments.[[24]](#endnote-24)

*Rhinocation*, a program created by Helping Rhinos, focused on educating young people and their educators about the importance of rhinos. The program used an international education component to bring wildlife conservation alive in the classroom through education material, field trips, and art activities.[[25]](#endnote-25) The education program was a major part of Helping Rhinos’s outreach, and provided the perfect opportunity to educate why and why not the rhino horn trade might be legalized. In 2018, the organization’s materials focused on the reasons for not legalizing the trade. If Jones changed his stance and advocated for legalization, the materials would need substantial revisions.

Helping Rhinos practised innovation in conservation through many projects, but arguably the most notable project was the Black Mambas. The Black Mambas were an all-female, paramilitary-trained, anti-poaching team dedicated to rhino conservation.[[26]](#endnote-26) The team started with six women recruited from local South African communities and had grown to 42 women by April 2018. Overall, the Black Mambas were responsible for a 63 per cent reduction in all poaching—not just rhinos.

Jones felt this project was significant because the organization was able to work with women in Africa—in Jones’s opinion, the most underused, valuable resource in Africa. Helping Rhinos found that the work ethic among females was much higher than among men. The women themselves were unarmed and built relationships within communities, quickly becoming role models. The women would call on more traditional armed units to track poachers when needed.

Many people involved in the rhino effort simply wanted the poachers to be eliminated. However, Helping Rhinos did not agree with that mentality. Since poachers lived in the same communities that Helping Rhinos patrolled, killing poachers was not only morally wrong but would negatively impact the organization’s relationship with the communities and, therefore, its ability to involve communities; this outcome was not an option for the non-for-profit. Instead, mirroring the organization’s goals of education and encouraging a greater sense of community, the Black Mambas focused on engaging and empowering a community to be a part of the effort to save the rhinos.

One of Black Mambas’s successful community initiatives was the Bush Babies project. It involved the Black Mambas talking with schoolchildren about the value of rhinos and the atrocity of poaching. Research by Helping Rhinos had determined that the Bush Babies program resulted in far more positive community perspectives because schoolchildren who participated in the initiative talked about it with their parents. Areas where children were not attending school and were therefore not part of the Bush Babies program did not experience the same positive views and awareness.

By working with 250 rangers, Helping Rhinos claimed to have helped an estimated 6,000 rhinos in its area of operation, a space of 25,000 square kilometres of key wildlife habitat. Tens of thousands of community members were also benefiting, according to Jones.

Similar to most of the NGOs in the field, Jones and his organization were against legalizing the rhino horn trade. Jones articulated five reasons for his position. First, he believed that no scientific research was being done in markets such as China and Vietnam to determine the demand for rhino horn, whether sold illegally or legally. Second, Jones did not believe that current stockpiles from ongoing rhino farming operations would be enough to meet the demand for rhino horns; he believed that, whatever the demand was, if measured, it would be much greater than anyone anticipated. Third, many believed that wild rhino horns were more valuable than horns from farmed rhinos because of the wild rhino’s diet; therefore, even with legalization, the demand would continue for horns acquired outside of farms. Fourth, ongoing conservation efforts and community progress could be lost. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, Jones believed that even if rhino horn trade were legalized, the governments (particularly the African governments) were too corrupt to properly enforce the rules; and in some cases, government officials were making too much money on the illegal trade to have an incentive for legalization.

John Hume, a Rhino Farmer[[27]](#endnote-27)

John Hume was a retired millionaire, having made his fortune from a timeshare business.[[28]](#endnote-28) He retired in 1992 with a simple idea: he wanted to start his own game reserve as a hobby. He relocated to Bushfield, South Africa, and in the late 1990s, he began purchasing adjacent cattle farms and ranches. Eventually he had a massive 8,000-hectare property, which he initially populated with a $200,000 purchase of three pairs of endangered black rhinos. Soon after, he purchased other wildlife to breed and maintain, although he later decided to concentrate only on rhinos and turn his reserve into South Africa’s largest rhino farm.[[29]](#endnote-29)

In 2007, three of Hume’s rhinos were poached—an event that was a catalyst for Hume’s conservationist journey. He then dehorned all of his rhinos to reduce their allure for poachers.[[30]](#endnote-30) In 2012, after six more rhinos were poached for the stump that had remained after their dehorning, Hume moved inland with his rhinos to a hidden farm. He spent a vast amount on security to protect his rhinos. He estimated he was spending $150,000–$200,000 per month for extensive security: constantly patrolling security teams, twice-daily roll calls, a helicopter, infrared sensors, tracker dogs, aerial drones, and extensive electric fencing.[[31]](#endnote-31) Still, even after moving his herd, Hume lost 32 more rhinos to poaching.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Hume maintained 1,200–1,500 rhinos on his farm and bred just fewer than 200 a year.[[33]](#endnote-33) His goal, he said, was to breed rhinos out of extinction to protect the species.[[34]](#endnote-34) He employed a veterinarian to work year-round to anesthetize, then dehorn his rhinos to save them from being killed by trespassing poachers who managed to sneak past security and roam Hume’s vast property. The horn was removed to a certain level—if done correctly, a painless procedure akin to trimming horses’ hooves—to allow it to regrow over the next two years or so, when the horn would be trimmed again. Thus, Hume was sustainably harvesting the horn; however, he was doing so without a legal market to sell it. In 2016, Hume estimated he had about five tonnes of rhino horn secured in bank vaults and was harvesting another tonne each year.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Hume’s farm was a big production and he could not do it alone. In addition to the staff veterinarian, Hume employed a plethora of staff who helped him maintain the farm. Most of the 100 South Africans he employed were from the surrounding communities. These people held managerial, camp master, feeder, security, and dehorning positions. The lowest-earning employees received minimum wage, but were eligible for time and a half for overtime and double time on Sundays. In the end, most employees earned more than minimum wage because of the number of hours they worked.

Initially, Hume believed that the rhino farm would be a successful business; the investment opportunity would allow continuous return from a renewable resource. He was not alone in his enthusiasm: Hume reported that when his operations began to take off, South Africa had 500 rhino farmers.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, by 2015, that number had reduced to just over 300 rhino farmers, and almost every week a farmer would give up and sell the rhinos. Some tried to sell the rhinos to honest buyers, but if the farmers failed to find such buyers, they would sell the rhinos to someone prepared to kill the animals to sell the horn. In desperation, many farmers would kill their rhinos themselves and sell “harvested” horns on the black market.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Hume believed that overturning a moratorium on the domestic trade in rhino horns was key to minimizing poaching. It would also allow him to sell his harvested horns to finance the animals’ ongoing protection.[[38]](#endnote-38) After numerous legal battles and appeals, launched and sustained by Hume, it became legal in 2017 to sell rhino horns in South Africa. However, because the trade remained illegal in other countries—particularly in Vietnam and China where, by far, most illegal rhino horns were purchased—and because sellers in South Africa were required to be located in the country and to obtain permits for each sale, the legal market remained very limited. More than 200 rhino farmers went out of business after legalization.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Hume faced continued adversity. For example, when he had an auction approved through the South African courts, the government made every effort possible to stop it. The government failed to produce permits in time for the sale, which forced Hume to postpone the auction for two days, negatively impacting his profit. Another time, when Hume sold all his black rhinos to a game reserve in Swaziland, the South African government took more than one year to produce the necessary export permits; this setback delayed an important stream of revenue that would have helped pay for the ongoing operations of Hume’s reserve. Hume was able to sell 200 kilograms of rhino horns from his stockpile in early 2018. However, the revenue from this transaction allowed him to keep the farm going for only one month. He was unsure who had purchased the horns because the transaction started with his lawyer applying for government permits and ended with his managerial staff delivering the horns to the buyer.

Although Hume once believed he had more than enough money to run his operation, it had proven much more expensive than expected. Hume estimated he was spending at least R5 million[[40]](#endnote-40) ($400,000) per month on field protection, feeding, and veterinary expenses.[[41]](#endnote-41) Security was the highest cost of the project, accounting for half of the running costs. Maintenance of the rhinos was also costly, especially during the off-season when it became rainy for six to eight months. Ultimately, the cost of Hume’s conservation efforts far exceeded his original estimates. By 2018, he had spent more than $150 million, including interest, on the rhino farm. Hume claimed he received nothing in return; he believed rhinos were worth a lot of money and it was worth putting money into the effort, even if it meant not being able to put anything back into the bank.

At the beginning of his journey, Hume believed that he would breed rhinos to help the species for the rest of his life. Although he continued to be committed to the cause of helping the rhinos, Hume realized that he no longer had enough funds to continue. In 2018, he disclosed that he was able to survive from week to week only thanks to the donations of very wealthy people. Hume was confident that his business and the rhinos could survive only if the rhino horn trade was legalized internationally to allow for the sale of sustainably harvested horns.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Despite the roadblocks he experienced at the hands of the South African government, Hume identified money-collecting NGOs as the biggest challenge to successful rhino farming. He claimed that the organizations did not have the interest of the rhinos at heart and just wanted to make money. In his opinion, the NGOs did not want to save the rhinos because if the need for help was gone, so too were the NGO’s revenue source and its reason for existence. He claimed that the NGOs’ opposition to legalization and their influence of the South African government effectively kept the illegal horn market thriving. As a result, from the perspective of both Hume and the rhino farmers, preservation replaced conservation, and killing rhinos for their horns replaced a sustainable and humane practice of live harvesting.

Government

Multiple levels of government tried coordinating to quell poaching, but such efforts were ill-fated, and the agencies were sometimes found to be corrupt. Many of the poachers were men struggling to survive and feed their families; living off less than $1 per day, these individuals lived in extreme poverty. Kingpins, the leaders of the black-market demand, would buy horns for an average of R65,000[[43]](#endnote-43) ($4,500) and sell them on the international black market for $60,000 per pound ($27,216 per kilogram), with each horn averaging 1–3 kilograms.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Corruption across all stakeholders was also common, given the amount of money involved. Sympathetic to the poachers’ needs or seeking money for themselves, corrupt government officials would aid the poachers. High-ranking bureaucrats, police officers, veterinarians, and farmers were also often suspected of helping poachers. Military officials and personnel had been caught numerous times, either allowing the slaughter to take place or, in some documented cases, even cutting the horns themselves.[[45]](#endnote-45) Perhaps even more alarming, a veterinarian hired by the national parks to treat and care for the rhinos was prosecuted for selling tranquilizers and lethal drugs to poachers in Kruger National Park.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Making matters worse, the legal system proved to be unequipped to resolve, let alone handle, the problem. For example, courts frequently dismissed poachers with claims that there was little evidence to convict them. By and large, it was well known that South African courts would accept bribes for a lesser sentence or dismissal of a case.[[47]](#endnote-47)

In contrast, Hume, with his stockpile of five tonnes of rhino horn, fought a long and costly battle with the South African government to legalize the selling of rhino horns in South Africa.[[48]](#endnote-48) From 2009– 2017, the issue dragged through the courts, with the final ruling from the Constitutional Court of South Africa, the country’s highest court, in Hume’s favour. This final hurdle dismissed the government’s last option to appeal a previous decision in Hume’s favour and keep the ban on trade in place.[[49]](#endnote-49) It became legal again in South Africa to sell rhino horns, but the seller had to apply for a permit.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Integrated Strategic Management of Rhinoceros

With a position against legalization, the South African government had implemented the Integrated Strategic Management of Rhinoceros, a multi-departmental approach to controlling rhino poaching.[[51]](#endnote-51) This campaign used four approaches: compulsory interventions, managing rhino populations, long-term sustainability interventions, and national and international co-operation. Compulsory interventions included anti-poaching and anti-trafficking law enforcement, the use of improved intelligence, and responsive legislation to address the issue. New interventions introduced with the management plan included efforts to disrupt crime syndicates. Translocation was a long-standing effort, begun more than 50 years earlier to manage the rhino population, moving rhinos from high-risk to low-risk areas to expand the population. Long-term sustainability interventions included creating economic alternatives for the communities that depended on the rhino horn trade to survive. National and international collaboration was meant to address not only rhino poaching but also illegal trade in all wildlife.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The government’s strategy was having some effect. In 2016, the minister reported that 414 alleged poachers had been arrested in the first eight months of 2016; almost half of them were arrested in Kruger National Park, the hardest hit area of South Africa. Coordinated programs trained 1,400 field rangers across South Africa to conduct proper body and vehicle searches, make arrests, handle and process seized items, and fill the role of first responder to a crime scene. A monitoring program trained and deployed 1,460 environmental monitors across the country to work with and educate communities about the harms of poaching. On the international level, South Africa and Mozambique collaborated through special police units in attempts to disrupt and dismantle criminal groups involved in the illegal trade.[[53]](#endnote-53)

As a result of the government’s efforts, poaching rates (the percentage of live rhinos killed for their horns) decreased from 9.6 per cent in 2015 to 7.9 per cent in 2016. In raw numbers, the decrease in poaching meant 702 poached carcasses were found in the first eight months of 2016, compared with 796 carcasses found in the same period in 2015. Biological management had resulted in increases in rhino populations and the movement of rhinos to safer and more suitable habitats.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Gains made over the same period in 2017 included a further decline in the number of rhinos poached—529 rhino in 2017 compared with 542 in 2016. The most significant decrease was in Kruger National Park, where the rhinos were most vulnerable; however, rates outside the park increased slightly, and in the park, elephant poaching emerged as a new threat. The most notable progress had been with compulsory interventions: arrests were progressing to trial and convictions, and regulatory measures had been established for domestic trade.

Efforts toward international engagement continued, with Vietnam and China, among other countries, at least committing to discuss the problem and consider interventions.[[55]](#endnote-55) An article written in 2016 posited that if demand could be squashed in Vietnam, the overall worldwide demand for rhino horns would greatly decrease. In response, the Vietnamese government signed an agreement with the South African government to co-operate on the issue. Education campaigns were launched, and even Vietnamese celebrities became involved, speaking out publicly about the horn trade. However, the actions proved to be little more than words and rhetoric when it was found that one small village outside of Vietnam’s capital had sold rhino horns representing close to 579 rhinos.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

South Africa was a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), one of the oldest conservation agreements in existence, having been ratified in 1975. The multilateral treaty involving 183 countries regulated international trade of threatened animals and plants, and provided a framework for domestic legislation that would ensure that trade of wildlife specimens did not threaten the continued existence of the animals.[[57]](#endnote-57)

South Africa had been involved in CITES from the agreement’s earliest stages and considered itself a universal leader in wildlife conservation. According to South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs, evidence of its leadership in conservation included hosting the “most stable population of southern white rhinoceros in Africa,” having increased the numbers from a dire 10 survivors in 1900, to a still concerning 20 in 1920, 200 by 1933, approximately 1,000 in 1960, to more than 10,000 most recently.[[58]](#endnote-58)

In 2016, South Africa was both applauded and criticized for not putting forward a proposal to CITES to legalize international trade in rhino horns.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Moderated Success

Despite South Africa’s successes, the various levels of governments and agencies remained underfunded and unable to combat the poaching. For example, as the price of rhino horns increased, poachers adapted to the increased park ranger presence by increasing their own numbers. And when caught in the act, poachers often exchanged gunfire with the outnumbered officers, who usually worked in pairs.

The government tried to remove rhinos’ horns before poachers could get to them. Some information had shown that this horn removal helped decrease the rhino death rate. However, when the rhino horn was removed, only approximately 93 per cent was cut, and the remaining horn could still be salvaged by poachers who killed the rhino. Also, dehorning was not a risk-free procedure: as with all intrusive procedures, there was a risk of complications that could result in death. The risk increased with the frequency with which the animal was immobilized for dehorning.[[60]](#endnote-60) However, the veterinarian who worked with Hume since 2013 was quoted as saying she had conducted more than 6,000 dehorning procedures and had witnessed only one death, of an old rhino who had suffered a heart attack.[[61]](#endnote-61)

There had also been some success stories using dogs. Kruger National Park had more than 50 tracker dogs working alongside the rangers, and the dogs had been instrumental in a large number of poacher arrests in the park. For example, a Belgian Malinois named Killer had sniffed his way to 115 arrests over four years.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Scouts, Poachers, Dons, and Terrorists

Scouts were those who laid the traps for the rhinos, poisoned their water holes, or used military-grade equipment to kill them. The scouts could stay in the field for days or weeks, constantly reporting back to the poacher. The poachers, primarily from Mozambique, oversaw recruiting scouts who would do the labour required for the rhino killings. The poachers provided the scouts with the needed equipment, and the poachers would sometimes kill the rhinos themselves.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Rhino poachers were of four major types. The first was military: former military personnel, police officers, and game scouts who all had specialized training in tracking and shooting. Second, a small number of ranch owners, hunters, game capture operators, pilots, and veterinarians had also been found to be involved in poaching. Third, organized trophy hunters used trophy hunting as a cover for smuggling rhino horns to black markets. Finally, international crime syndicates were involved primarily in the organization of terrorism, trafficking, and the selling of rhino horns.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Africa was one of the poorest continents in the world; consequently, South African rhinos were nothing short of a gold mine to those in need. So-called benevolent poachers were building communities—a sign of hope that had not been seen by those most impoverished in many decades, rendering a legitimacy to the poaching trade. Money acquired from poaching created jobs and helped the local economy with poacher-built houses and poacher-bought cars. Isolated communities gained the ability to transport their sick citizens to the hospital. While poachers, scouts, and dons were often demonized in the West, at home they were perceived as heroes within their communities. In fact, some poachers were easily identifiable because they flaunted their newfound wealth—poor one day, then driving a luxury vehicle the next. Most poachers, however, were very poor, and engaged in an illegal activity only because they had no other options.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Dons, also known as kingpins, were mainly from Asia. They headed criminal organizations and made decisions, such as the price to be charged for purchasing rhino horn and the amount to be paid to the poachers in Africa. There were two common types of don within a poaching network. One type lived away from Africa, primarily in Asia, and ran the entire operation. The second type lived in Africa, organized the poaching expeditions, and discussed with the Asian don the price for the horn and the money to be paid to everyone involved in the poaching and trafficking efforts for a specific load. Couriers, also mainly from Asia, were agents of the dons, who sent the couriers to Africa to pick up the horns.[[66]](#endnote-66)

A clear example of the lavish lifestyle of these dons was Arno Smit, an American don. According to Simon Espley, CEO of Africa Geographic, Smit was known to own fancy cars and private airplanes, and to host black-tie events. After charges for numerous fraudulent business propositions, Smit faced 318 charges for the slaughter and defacement of 24 rhinos and for stealing 84 horns. However, despite the severity of his crimes, many believed that a conviction was unlikely because Smit had extensive corrupt connections with government officials.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Rhino poaching was an epidemic, in the sense that it not only was hurting the animals and the balance of African ecosystems but also had become a major threat to the security of people around the world. Criminal gangs were known to have been a major part of the poaching scene for many years, and the groups that were trafficking the horns earned billions of dollars annually. According to the United States International Conservation Caucus Foundation, rhino poaching had also been specifically funding terrorist groups, including Al-Shabaab, a Somali terrorist group affiliated with al Qaeda and most known for being responsible for the killing of 67 people in the Kenyan Westgate shopping mall on September 21, 2013. The Elephant Action League found that 40 per cent of Al-Shabaab’s violent business was funded by illegal trafficking in Kenya. Other groups, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army and Darfur’s Janjaweed, were also known to be funding their operations with illegal wildlife trade.[[68]](#endnote-68) For these groups, illegal wildlife trade was a relatively low-risk source of funding; governments provided very small budgets for fighting illegal wildlife trade in contrast to their allocations to combat drug trade and terrorism.

CONCLUSION

Although progress had been made to reduce the number of deaths of African rhinos, at the rate they were being killed, wild African rhinos were expected to be extinct by 2026 at the latest.[[69]](#endnote-69) Because the situation involved many stakeholders, levels of poverty, misinformation, and a lack of coordination across multiple agencies and different governments, any solution would need to be not only multi-faceted but also practical and holistic. The fate of a species that had existed for 40 million years was at stake, and so too were the lives of Africans who relied on the rhinos for tourism and the interest of people all over the world who hoped to see the species in the wild.

Currently, Jones was opposed to legalizing the rhino horn trade; however, the complexity of the rhinos’ circumstances seemed to constantly amplify, and the domestic rhino horn trade had been legalized. As an organization, Helping Rhinos needed to choose the best path forward, by considering not only the perspectives of all stakeholders but also the clear priority of saving the rhino from extinction. Jones prepared to face the board of directors and present them with his final decision on whether the organization should continue opposing legalization or change its approach and advocate for multi-nation legalization.

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