

- Education and international awareness to end user markets of the heritage importance of rhino to South Africans and the unnecessary and brutal killing of an iconic species as an ineffective medicinal remedy.
- For South Africans of all walks of society to become involved in protecting a national asset of historic, conservation and tourism importance.

POISONING, DE-HORNING , LEGALISING TRADE IN RHINO HORN?

Desperate times call for desperate measures some might argue, as a variety of measures are being touted. Poisoning is one such measure. The Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve near Johannesburg refer to ectoparasiticides which “are not intended for consumption by humans, and are registered as such. Although not lethal in small quantities, they are extremely toxic, and symptoms of accidental ingestion may include, but are not limited to, severe nausea, vomiting, convulsions and/or nervous symptoms.” They go on to say that the ultimate goal is not to poison consumers of rhino horn, but to prevent poaching. (www.rhinorecueproject.com). However, the poisoning of rhino horns will never work says Kruger National Park spokesman, William Mabasa after the idea was put forward by the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve during discussions held in September this year.

It's been stated that it would be a criminal offence to poison horns which caused death. This begs the question: Would buyers of rhino horn sue sellers, and would they sue poachers who in turn would step forward and sue the land owner of the property from where they illegally killed the rhino and went on to illegally trade the horn? This is of course if it is at all possible to trace rhino horn powder to a specific rhino in the first instance. There are even questions if rhino horn powder purchased by consumers is in fact rhino horn powder.

From a criminality perspective it would probably whittle down to intent, and game farmers advocating poisoning are saying the intent is to prevent poaching, not harm humans. There have been ‘reports’ albeit most if not all of them bogus, of people in the Far East dying from poisoned rhino horn. Perhaps there are people who are throwing their own myths into the pot.

DEHORNING

Dehorning has attracted more serious debate. The legal implications of dehorning are that a person, without a valid permit, can't be in possession of rhino horn. Then there is the frightening prospect of the threat to the lives of people storing rhino horn. A number of armed robberies involving the theft of stockpiles have already occurred in South Africa. The targets include museums, national parks, taxidermist studios and private individuals.

Dehorning doesn't seem to be an effective measure because poachers are prepared to remove any vestige of horns, including the small growth nubs on rhino calves. Rhino horn does grow back provided the horn plate has not been damaged, so dehorning is not a once-off measure. Re-growth would need to be cut regularly. Zimbabwe reported that their dehorning effort was

successful, but only if used in conjunction with anti-poaching measures.

A rhino's horn is not fixed to the skull but is almost an extension of the skin and is similar to a person's fingernails. Horns can't be cut too close to the skull as this can cause injury to the animal, infection can set in and the animal can die. Horns must be removed by skilled veterinarians. There is insufficient research to determine the effects of de-horning on the animal in terms of social behaviour.

Costs associated with dehorning include veterinary expenses, drugs, labour and possible air support – particularly in dense habitats. A dehorning exercise can cost in excess of R8, 000 per animal and are not recoverable as the horns, once removed, may not be legally sold.

CONTROVERSIAL DEBATE ON LEGAL TRADE IN RHINO HORN

This measure has attracted the most serious debate and is highly controversial. Those in favour of legal, regulated trade in rhino horn say that the horn can be harvested without mutilating and or killing the animal, that lifting the ban would allow countries to manage rhino populations and plough funds raised into anti-poaching. There's also the view that the reduction in the world market price of rhino horn would reduce poaching.

Those opposed to lifting the ban on trade in rhino horn point out the burgeoning growth of the middle-class in China – from where the main demand stems. Do the math – 3 billion people - not enough rhinos. So would there be a reduction in the world market price? Considering there are some 4 500 rhinos on privately owned land, what if these owners chose not to participate in ‘rhino horn farming’? Their rhinos would still be targeted by poachers. There is also the possibility that if trade was legalised, it would be easy to push through rhino horn obtained illegally.

Governments do not have adequate resources to police the legal trade, so those opposed to it question how a legal trade would be policed.

SOLUTIONS

While the debate continues in concerned conservation circles, the decision to lift the ban on trade in rhino horn is not one that can be made by individual range states. Any decision to lift the ban on rhino horn trading would have to come from CITES.

Rynette Coetzee, Project Executant: Compliance and Enforcement Project, Law and Policy Programme at the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) says that unfortunately there is no silver bullet solution to the rhino poaching crisis.

“ Instead, the EWT recommends a multi-pronged approach, with a variety of interventions at each stage of the illegal wildlife trade chain, including: changing the current perception of poaching as a low risk/high reward opportunity by improving arrest and conviction rates with better trained and equipped anti-poaching units, as well as sensitised legal and law enforcement personnel skilled in dealing with wildlife crimes; improving the detection of wildlife contraband at our borders, thereby thwarting smugglers; and attempting to change attitudes in consumer countries”.