

WHAT IS RHINO HORN?

Researchers at the University of Ohio in the USA have used computerised tomography, better known as a CT scan, to show that horns are comprised of calcium, melanin and keratin. Keratin is the same type of protein that makes up hair and fingernails.

Amongst the sea of campaigns, I take my hat off to a group of South African youths who have launched a campaign – collecting nail and hair cuttings from humans, packaging it and sending it to embassies of countries where there is a demand for rhino horn. Google them, Stop Poaching Our Rhino, and see their You Tube video. Stupid? Yes, of course, that's the point because it serves, so poignantly, to debunk the myth.

“ There has been a rise in the number of ‘hunters’ from non-traditional hunting countries. The majority (69%) of rhino hunts in 2009-2011 were carried out for Vietnamese clients. ”

What about the suppliers of illegal rhino horn? Has the increase in poaching been fuelled by greedy participants in South Africa, coupled with the apparent ease of poaching and sentences that are not harsh enough to be a deterrent? Some argue that fines meted out to those arrested don't touch sides compared to the profits made in this poaching business, and that jail terms should be enforced. If this were the case, who would be sitting behind bars? Those who take the rhinos down are only the first step in a long and bloody chain.

THE FACE OF A POACHER

Putting a face to poaching has come in the form of arrests. When professional hunter Christiaan van Wyk was found guilty of hunting a white rhino without a permit in Limpopo in January 2011 it contributed to changing perceptions around poachers. His fine - R30 000 or 1000 days in jail and a banning from obtaining a hunting permit in the Limpopo Province for three years. Then there have been pilots questioned for their involvement, and vets and game farmers arrested last year, again changing perceptions and even drawing gasps of shock.

It should come as no surprise that these are the types of people involved because wildlife crime is more often than not committed by people in the industry with the knowledge, contacts and relevant information. It goes without saying that these are the rogues in an industry where you will also find ethical and committed conservationists.

The equipment used by poachers smacks of military type

involvement because it includes sophisticated hi-tech equipment such as automatic weapons and silencers, night vision binoculars and of course air support. Criminal networks form a chain of distribution from community to the international end user. They infiltrate areas near reserves, stake out vulnerable rhinos and plan their kills.

There are broadly two types of on the ground ‘hits’. The first is where horns are removed roughly if not savagely with an axe. There's a growing number of cases of horns being removed while the animal is still alive, leading to unbelievable pain and trauma. Because of the lucrative amounts end-users will pay, poachers attempt to take the entire horn, chopping it out from the roots. These severely mutilated rhino die from shock or injury, or have to be euthanized – a task that has left experienced wildlife vets

traumatised themselves. A video depicting a tragically mutilated rhino can be seen on www.stoprhinopoaching.com. It is horrific but sadly this type of material needs to be aired because we have become desensitised to statistics.

The second type of ‘hit’ is where skilled hunters and possibly ex-military are involved. The rhino falls from a single shot and there's back-up support in the form of vehicles. Horns are removed with surgical precision, quickly and quietly. There has also been the use of helicopters to kill rhino - either by shooting, or immobilizing the rhino by darting the animal with a lethal overdose of drugs to avoid drawing attention from gunfire. People have been called on to report low flying or unusual aerial activity such as circling near reserves.

HUNTING – SHOULD IT BE BANNED OUTRIGHT?

Pseudo-hunting has deflected from the conservation benefits of legal hunting and a distinction needs to be drawn between the two. Pseudo-hunting is where supposed trophy hunters need to be told how to shoot or they leave the shooting to an accompanying hunter or land owner, a practice that is illegal in South Africa. The implication is that these so called hunters are abusing the legal system to obtain rhino horn for illegal sale. One person acquires several rhino hunting permits per year, under the guise of fake hunters.

There has been a rise in the number of ‘hunters’ from what has been termed non-traditional hunting countries. The majority, 69%, of rhino hunts in 2009-2011 were carried out for Vietnamese clients. Carte Blanche exposed examples of pseudo-hunters - young women from the Far East who didn't know how to hold a gun, who didn't shoot anything, but went on safari and



The cause advert on the right was conceptualised and designed by The Hardy Boys, Durban. We pay tribute to the advertising agencies for voluntarily contributing their time and talent to support the drive to stop rhino poaching.

 031 533 9023