

by Michael Schwartz

# Will Keeping The Rhino Horn Trade Illegal Kill More Rhinos?

Many conservationists are lauding South Africa's recent decision not to propose the reintroduction of trade in rhino horn, citing concerns that legitimizing it could reignite consumer demand. Other conservationists, however, fear that keeping the ban in place will paradoxically lead to an increase in the killing of rhinos throughout Africa. Michael Schwartz is a conservation journalist and African wildlife researcher. Published with the author's permission.

**Pro-Trade Rationale:** South Africa's private rhino owners host roughly 33% of the country's black and white rhinos, while remaining free-ranging rhinos live in state-run national parks. With the resurgence in rhino poaching over the past decade, trade proponents maintain that a legal market of regulated supply would reduce black market prices, thereby discouraging the incentive to illegally harvest horn. Furthermore, they assert that profits made from a renewable supply—horn from natural rhino mortality and the sheering off of horn portions from live specimens—could be reinvested into anti-poaching and rural community endeavors. Both ideas stem from the notion that the trade moratorium has not successfully upended rhinoceros poaching. To wit, a continued embargo would only encourage more illicit activity.

**South Africa Backs Down from Trade Proposal:** Private rhino owners and a number of state conservation institutions were hoping that South Africa would propose an end to the international trade in rhino horn at this year's 67th meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Recently, however, the Committee of Inquiry, a branch of South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), recommended that government not move ahead with such a proposal. It was eventually decided that the pursuit of legalizing international trade in rhino horn was not in South Africa's best interest. RhinoAlive, an awareness campaign composed of private rhino owners and conservationists, condemned the government's decision. "The only people who will be celebrating will be poachers and ill-informed, misguided animal rightists," vice-president of Wildlife Ranching South Africa, Dr. Peter Oberem, said in RhinoAlive's news release. "This will be the end of the rhino population as we know it. Game ranchers cannot possibly continue to foot the bill for the security of one third to one half of the world's remaining rhino population." Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners Association and member of the Committee of Inquiry, expressed similar disappointment: "Government's cowardly capitulation will have a detrimental effect on both private sector and rural conservation communities—and the ultimate price will be paid by the rhino itself."

**Evidence Supporting the Ban:** Trade advocates point to 1977, the year that CITES listed all rhino subspecies on Appendix I—a motion paired with the moratorium on the international trade in rhinos and their products—as a grave turning point for the species. However, trade skeptics observe that the ban was initially put in place to halt rhino killing that had already taken a devastating toll on populations across Africa and Asia. Anti-traders also posit that the increase in public awareness and Asia's domestic bans helped drive down poaching rates during that time period; so much so that Southern Africa didn't

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see much rhino killing until 2008, around the same time when unfounded assertions that horn carried medicinal properties renewed consumer interest.

Moreover, anti-trade proponents observe that South Africa already had permission to sustainably utilize rhino in the form of legal hunting after the southern white rhino was downlisted

to Appendix II in 1994. The caveat is that no trophy can be gifted to anyone but the hunter, nor are any rhino trophies permitted for medicinal use.

**Pseudo-Hunting:** A 2014 report issued by the DEA states that, “many of the rhino horns sold with legal permits before 2009 were subsequently smuggled out of the country, meaning that the traders that bought the horn did so with dishonest intentions at the outset.” The report goes on to mention that poaching began picking up again through, “the legal internal permitting system, either directly from private rhino owners or indirectly through intermediaries...”

Of particular concern is an illegal method of hunting the DEA referred to as pseudo-hunting. Loosely defined, pseudo-hunting is the hunting of a rhinoceros for reasons other than obtaining a trophy—a method that allegedly started when Asian clients and certain hunting proprietors began circumventing regulatory measures to illegally obtain horn. In 2014, the U.S. authorities brought indictment charges against Dawie and Janneman Groenewald, two South African brothers allegedly involved in pseudo-hunting and rhino horn trafficking.

**Undermining Public Awareness:** One of the biggest concerns with the notion of legal trade is that it could undermine efforts in educating the public about rhino horn’s virtual uselessness as a homeopathic cure-all, not to mention the cost incurred should trade potentially reignite an unsustainable volume of consumer demand.

Some view the 2008 sanctioned one-off sales of elephant ivory as an example of ostensibly increasing such demand, though there are conflicting reports arguing that what actually escalated elephant poaching was the nine year ban placed on future sales the previous year.

While some might admit that it is theoretically possible to minimize poaching through a tightly controlled system of legally supplied horn, they ultimately do not believe it could ever be adequately enforced. Even if a legal framework were set in place, some suspect that it would not stop corrupt administrators, private rhino owners with less than noble intentions, and low-level poachers from circumventing the system to enhance personal enrichment.

Similarly, skeptics argue that in spite of promises, profits obtained from legal sales might not necessarily be reinvested back into rhino conservation efforts. Most surmise that if rhino farmers ever get their way, they would not only have to financially compete with black market traders, but also continue perpetuating the myth that rhino horn has medicinal value.

**The DEA’s Conclusions:** The DEA report concluded that while both arguments carry the potential to negatively impact South Africa’s remaining rhino population, lifting the ban is not in the best interest of

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the species at this junction. Yet it still conceded that the moratorium has not effectively relieved poaching rates, even suggesting that, "restrictions created by the local trade ban may be exacerbating the poaching problem." Ultimately, they did agree that private owners from the ranching industry need to have a better incentive to continue conserving rhinos. Still, the assessment still leaves some unresolved questions.

Do any private rhino owners have duplicitous agendas? What would a hypothetical legal market look like? And who will buy horn if trade is only relegated to South Africa? Ultimately, will trade be good for rhinos, or will it all but seal their fate?