



A conservation success?²

I have been lucky enough to have witnessed first-hand the amazing wild animals of Africa but I am now deeply concerned about some of their long-term survival. For instance, up until recent times rhinos roamed in their millions across large areas of the African savannah - but in the nineteenth century due to excessive hunting and loss of habitat due to agriculture and urban development they suffered severe population declines.³

African White Rhinos are the Earth's second largest land mammal. Adult males can reach 1.85m in height and weigh as much as 3.6 tonnes. Females are smaller – but can still weigh up to 1.7 tonnes.⁴ Each White Rhino has two nasal horns formed of compacted hair.⁵ The front horn averages 600mm but can occasionally reach up to 1500mm in length.⁴ It is this – the rhino's most characteristic feature - that may yet prove to be the downfall of the species.

“Iconic species that have valuable assets, such as horns or pelts, suffer greatly from persecution.

African mega-herbivores epitomise threats posed by such human persecution.”⁶

The Southern White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*)⁷ was once widespread in the bushveld areas of southern Africa² but was hunted nearly to oblivion in the colonial period.⁵ It is estimated that there were only 20-50 animals remaining in 1895. These were concentrated in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park in South Africa. The species was rescued from extinction by the establishment of protected areas on state and private land.² Imfolozi was designated as one of Africa's first game reserves in part to conserve the last few remaining White Rhino.



Effective field protection, habitat preservation, and biological management were critical to conservation success.²

By 2015 after decades of protection and translocation the Southern White Rhino had become the most numerous of the rhino taxa with some 20,375 animals in the wild and semi-wild.⁴ Until recently this had been claimed as a “major conservation success story”.⁴ However since 2007 there has been an upsurge in black market prices for rhino horn and a consequential increase in poaching.²

In 2007 some 13 individuals were killed by poaching - by 2015 this number had risen to an unsustainable 1175.² This increased poaching poses a real threat to this subspecies² which are now categorised Near Threatened – that is close to qualifying for a threatened category in the near future - on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List.⁷



“Over the past decade and a half, rhino horn has become a party drug, health supplement, and a hangover cure – a luxury product conspicuously consumed by new wealthy elites.”⁸

Historically rhino horn has been used as a traditional medicine in countries such as China. More recently though it has become a luxury cure for hangovers and a status symbol in Vietnam.² This medicinal and recreational use of rhino horn has created the black-market demand and high value which has triggered widespread poaching and resulted in recent declines in rhino populations in southern African countries⁹ and now threatens the species with extinction.⁸

Rhino horn is also a highly sought after material for making carved handles for ceremonial daggers, called *jambiyas*, in some Middle-Eastern countries, particularly Yemen.¹⁰ This ornamental use of rhino horn has also had a devastating effect on rhino populations.⁸

“Poaching of white rhino has increased dramatically since 2006 – most likely fuelled by the recent increase in the value of rhino horn.”⁶
“On the black-market it is reputedly worth more than its weight in gold.”¹¹

Over recent years poaching levels have increased in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Swaziland as a response to significant increases in the value of rhino horn.¹⁰ In 2012 prices peaked at about \$65,000 a kilogram¹¹ - though it is thought to have declined since then.

“Increasing black market prices for rhino horn, and increased poaching of rhino and involvement of criminal syndicates in recent years pose a significant threat to rhino populations.”¹⁰

Thus, there is a pressing need to reduce poaching through effective action to reduce demand.⁶ Changing market demand in countries like China and Vietnam is reversible through the use of education and marketing campaigns that attempt to make such consumption socially unacceptable.⁸

“We should focus on reducing demand through social marketing, education campaigns, lobbying and intergovernmental co-operation.”²

Urgent efforts are now required to stop the illegal poaching and end the illegal trade in rhino horn before this charismatic mammal is lost to the Earth forever.⁴



Don

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