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China ranks as top rhino horn market, but smuggling networks weakened, report finds

- Beijing's crackdowns lead to drop in Chinese trafficking activities, though Vietnamese criminal groups have moved to fill the void, Wildlife Justice Commission says
- Demand for horns, prized as collectibles and medicine, 'shows no signs of abating'



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Only 27,000 rhinos remain in the wild, according to the WWF. Photo: EPA-EFE

China ranked as the top market for rhino horns over the past decade, but the country has taken steps to crack down on smugglers, according to a report from the Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC), a non-profit foundation based in The Hague.

From 2012 to 2021, nearly 9,600 rhinos were poached from across Africa and 7.5 tonnes (8.3 tons) of illegal horns were seized globally, the WJC said, citing its analysis of more than 670 seizures.

According to the report released on Thursday, “the demand for rhino horns as a criminal commodity shows no signs of abating”.

Around 27,000 rhinos remain in the wild, according to the WWF.

Most poached rhino horns are sourced from South Africa and destined for Vietnam and China, where they are prized as carvings and collectibles and for their perceived medicinal properties.

In 2018, China reversed a 25-year ban on the trade and use of rhino horns to allow for scientific and medical use. While doctors certified by authorities can prescribe rhino horns for medical purposes, illegally obtained carvings and other collectibles are subject to confiscation.

Rhino horns are prized for their use in medicine, carvings and collectibles. Photo: AP

In August, China’s National Forestry and Grassland Administration said a three-month operation earlier this year resulted in the confiscation of over a tonne of animal products, including more than 13,000 pieces of ivory, rhino horn, antelope horn and tiger and pangolin products.

The agency said it would ramp up cooperation with other departments, strengthen the monitoring of online trade and improve public education to combat the illegal wildlife trade.

The WJC said Beijing had cracked down on Chinese rhino horn trafficking networks.

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“Chinese court cases analysed by the WJC demonstrate China’s commitment to tackle transnational organised crime,” the report said.

It added that China’s strategy involved investigating entire criminal networks, including citizens who commit wildlife crimes abroad, and bringing them to justice through international cooperation.

At least 10 cases between 2019 and 2021 involved government officials who helped smugglers, accepted rhino horns as bribes or bought the products, according to the WJC.

However, as investigations targeting Chinese criminal networks took effect, criminal groups from other countries took advantage of the drop in Chinese trafficking, the report said.

“In Nigeria, [the Democratic Republic of the Congo], South Africa, Mozambique, Angola and Namibia, the WJC is finding that Vietnamese criminal networks are filling the void left by the removal of Chinese networks,” it said, adding that South Africa is the only country where Chinese networks still dominate the trade.

The report found Vietnam to be a crucial gateway for China’s rhino horn trade as a sizeable share of the rhino horn that entered the Southeast Asian country was smuggled overland into China.

“This direction of trade is also borne out in court case judgments from China, which show that rhino horn products are most frequently smuggled into mainland China using overland routes from Vietnam, or via transcontinental flights from Africa transiting through Hong Kong.”

Tiger ‘kindergarten’ planned in China to hone cubs’ natural instincts suppressed in captivity

It called for countries along the supply chain, including Malaysia, Mozambique, South Africa and Vietnam, to emulate China’s prosecution, sentencing and asset recovery efforts.

“Accompanying the success of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions in China is the heavy sentencing which seeks to address the higher tier of organised wildlife crime, rather than targeting lower-level players such as poachers or couriers, who are often easily replaced.”

Understanding and reducing consumer demand were key to ending the illegal killing of rhinos, the WJC said.

“There is an apparent gap in knowledge about the nature and scale of Chinese demand for rhino horn, and accordingly more research and investment are needed to improve insight into these markets, especially concerning the carving process, market distribution and the use of rhino horn as an investment product.”

